

Určeno pouze pro studijní účely

Part II

Aggression, Destruction,
and Being Mean

Určeno pouze pro studijní účely

Chapter 15

Aggression in Girls

“I don’t want to be sweet and nice.”

—Naomi Campbell, Black supermodel of the nineties, in an interview with Barbara Walters on 20/20, a newsmagazine television show

Discovered at fifteen, Naomi Campbell was the first Black model on the cover of the French *Vogue*. Widely known for being a “bitch,” she’s even been to rehab clinics to deal with her anger. Her trips to the clinic came after she was brought up on assault charges by a former assistant in 1998. Though Naomi claims she threw a phone at her assistant, her assistant insists that Naomi also grabbed her by the throat. When asked by Barbara Walters why she acted “this way”—Walters demurring from using the b-word—Naomi said, “If I don’t, they’re going to walk all over me.”

This belief, that if you’re not tough people will walk all over you, is absolutely the fear of many girls and women who are aggressive and act aggressive openly. They are the girls who, like Campbell, grew up in tough neighborhoods filled with gangs, drugs, and disrespect, places where girls are more vulnerable to harm because they are on the streets and where no one has time to watch over these girls. Girls who grow up in such environments wear their aggression with pride, while in a different context they still may refer to themselves as “good girls” and brag that they please the teacher and do their homework. Whether they are good or bad, aggression is a part of their life, but not just theirs—everyone’s.

In middle-class neighborhoods, however, white, Black, and Latina girls consider aggression wrong and bad. They see it as making them more male and less female. When they are aggressive they have deep, long-lasting feelings of guilt about even their smallest acts of meanness.

In the chapters to come I spell out the differences in girls' lives that lead to different relationships to their own aggression. The potential for acting aggressively is latent in all of us, in girls as well as boys. Though both should use acts of force with restraint, it is important that girls as well as boys understand their own impulses toward aggression as something that is a part of life, even normal, and not something to fear.

Today aggression is permitted among those girls in our society for whom we don't care much, whose development and futures are of little concern. But adults rein in middle-class girls' lives so that the smallest slip of aggression tends to haunt them into adulthood. Society ignores and accepts the aggression in girls from low-income neighborhoods because their images don't matter. In fact, because Americans deem aggression in women inappropriate, this expectation keeps low-income women down, in impoverished neighborhoods where it is both acceptable and necessary. If Naomi Campbell were not a supermodel, no one would be concerned enough about her aggression and her anger to help her enroll in a rehab clinic; her friends and family might see this anger as appropriate and even natural. Some of it would indeed be appropriate, a kind of righteous anger about what other kids have. Only when aggression takes place in a middle-class setting does it become a cause of concern.

Our culture does a disservice to both kinds of girls: to the girls who need to hide their aggressive impulses, who rein them in so tightly that they find release in the unexpected, strangely hostile act that they claim came totally out of nowhere; and to the girls who are left to fight it out alone on the streets, to survive the pecking order of who is the toughest. Neither can survive well in these two opposing environments.

For middle-class girls, the message that aggression is inappropriate shackles them with feelings of guilt for acts that if performed by male children would be dismissed with a simple "boys will be boys." Research shows that mothers increasingly punish girls between the ages of four and six for aggression and decreasingly punish boys. American culture further indicts girls for their so-called sneaky aggression, the way they use social exclusion, gossip, and cattiness to punish and hurt. It is often said that "girls can be much meaner than boys" because they manipulate their social groups in

aggressive ways. Few remark that girls are not permitted a physical expression of anger that might allow them to confront the other person with whom they are mad in a different way.

Girls' aggression comes out in other forms when it is reined in physically, but not just through purported cattiness. Girls turn it against themselves: through eating disorders, self-mutilation, hypercriticism about their talents and bodies, and depression. Girls aggress against themselves. Society's recent attention to these self-destructive acts seeks to empower girls by addressing them through self-esteem exercises and encouraging self-understanding, but smart psychotherapists know that the girl who can acknowledge her anger and feelings of aggression toward others is on the right track to health. Girls who own their aggression—even feel entitled to it—have a source of energy and creativity that will do them well in the lives ahead of them.

The world can be a tough place for poorer as well as middle-class girls. Teaching both to fight, and to fight aggressively, may not be first choice in coping mechanisms. But if girls learn to accept their anger and their feelings of aggression, they can tap into this potential and transform it, sometimes in creative and positive ways. The ways an urban girl chooses to be aggressive aren't so much wrong as they are ineffectual; she doesn't usually have the means to turn the aggression into a socially important act such as standing up against injustice or expressing such rage through writing or art. The middle-class girl also can learn to tap into those feelings to fight injustice or contribute to society through the arts. Both can use such aggression to fight their way to the top in our competitive society and withstand the prejudice they might encounter when they try to enter mostly male businesses or professions.

This is not to say that empathy is not an important quality in girls as well as boys. Caring and concern are aspects of being human that help to tame raw aggression. Parents and society have done so well at socializing the middle-class girl in empathy that they most likely fear that a girl who gets fighting mad will no longer care or be empathic toward her victims. But it's not a zero sum equation. Being a full human being means having the capacity for both compassion and anger and frustration. Along with the former comes the ability to care; with the latter the ability to act aggressively and be angry.

We supposedly teach children that it's okay to feel angry but it's not okay to act aggressively when one feels that way. Much research has shown, however, that for middle-class girls it is not okay to feel angry and

that adults teach girls from a very young age to mask their anger so that, after time, it is even unrecognizable to themselves.

Anger in adult women is also made problematic by American culture. An angry woman is someone who needs help, who is sick. But, as Carol Tavris said in her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, a woman's anger is only a problem because she is likely to be in a position subordinate to the person she is angry at.

Physical expressions of aggression are even more problematic than expressions of anger in girls. In this culture adults closely identify aggression with masculinity and believe that it is a biological imperative. Many Americans assume that men are more violent than women because they have more testosterone and because of an evolutionary history as hunters. According to this biological model, it is only acceptable for women to be aggressive when it comes to their children, when they become like fierce mother bears protecting their cubs. By decontextualizing a hodgepodge of biological and anthropological guesses about the past, we simply reinforce notions of acceptable feminine behavior, of "woman's place."

Whether biologically based or not, many today think that there is nothing good to be said about aggression. Indeed, the prevailing dialogue about youth culture suggests that children are exposed to TV and computer game violence too early, and that in some cases such exposure leads to school shootings like the ones in Littleton, Colorado, and Jonesboro, Arkansas. But when the media talks about exposure to violence they are primarily talking about boys. The increase in youth violence that the media cites is also typically based on boys' behavior, not that of girls. Certainly boys, more often than girls, get encouragement, support, and training in acts of violence that generally aim at desensitizing them to human suffering and lure them to the excitement of gore and guns. But just because boys may be too attracted to aggression, developing fewer alternative skills for negotiating interpersonal relationships, does it mean that girls will do the same?

Anthropologist Victoria Burbank argues that in some circumstances "aggression can be a positive, enhancing act." She adds that when we deny women "aggressive possibilities, we potentially diminish their being." Her claims come from years of work in an Australian Aboriginal community where anger and aggression are almost one and the same and where fighting stories are common among men and women. One of the ways women in this community use aggression is as a showy display that safeguards them from more private, hostile aggression that might occur one-on-one. These

women believe that Western women have made themselves more vulnerable to aggression from men because they neither fight nor make displays of their aggressive potential. In a similar way, psychologist and author Janice Haaken collaborated with West African women to envision a battered women's shelter quite unlike the secret, hidden sanctuaries of the United States. There, burly women with Uzis would guard the periphery, making a display of strength rather than hiding in supposed weakness.

One of the only venues in which we support aggression in girls in our culture is in sports. Those who coach women's sports praise the girl who can be aggressive on the soccer field or on the tennis court. They see the usefulness of aggression and aggressive displays in terms of showing a team's or an individual's strengths. Still, many argue that the tacit acceptance, even encouragement, of girls' aggression comes not from any real progress in American culture but because sports have been a male domain for decades.

Others suggest girls' aggression in sports is simply "borrowed" or influenced by male/male aggression. Feminists of the seventies and eighties saw aggression as a patriarchal power tool and claimed that women's use of aggression was a sign of how much they had been influenced by patriarchal forms of interaction. Each of these responses to female aggression categorizes it as a tool of domination, in which case the ultimate source of aggression must be male. But is aggression only a tool of domination? Perhaps it has other uses.

Dana Jack, in her book *Behind the Mask*, argues that anger and aggression in women and girls are fundamentally about connection and loss of connection, and not about domination. Burbank acknowledges that much of women's aggression occurs in relationships, but she prefers to call it a form of communication. While I agree that aggression can be about connection and preserving relationships, it is also about power and respect. By allowing female aggression to be about more than connecting or protecting, we can see more clearly the sometimes complex ways that it plays out in girls' and women's lives. Their aggression can be used to connect or to destroy, to hold on to or to push away; it's not just about mama bear and her beleaguered cubs.

In the chapters that follow I take a closer look at both anger and aggression in girls. These are the secret stories that rarely get heard in the public discourse. By necessity, I interpret them in the context of the culture in which aggression erupts, and look at it in terms of the different expectations that each community (racial, ethnic, religious, and class) has

for its children. To set the stage, I examine the girls' ideas of what a good girl is, as well as their perceptions of their communities' expectations of them. What follows are stories of aggression and a discussion of how parents might approach their daughters' aggressive potential—when they have cause for worry and when they can even encourage it as their little girls grow up.

Chapter 16

A Good Girl Doesn't Do That

"I used to pray every night that God would show me the difference between right and wrong because I always wanted to be with the 'good girls.'"

—Arlene, African American, 56

There is no question that girls, women, men, and parents today in the United States understand girls to be more caring and sensitive than boys. But this notion of girls as caring and sensitive in contrast to boys also creates a burden on girls that plays into a larger myth that "girls are good." The "tyranny of the nice and kind," a phrase coined by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, forces girls to express in public those aspects of girlhood that people expect. Because this vision of girlhood targets white middle-class girls in particular, it serves to exclude and handicap entire groups of girls who don't meet the standard.

Nevertheless, most girls measure themselves against this ideal of the good girl, though ultimately it hurts them. Because ideals of goodness often are confused with real or possible behavior, living, breathing girls cannot live up to the image and find themselves demoralized from trying. Not only does the ideal shut out girls from low-income neighborhoods whose lives don't match up, it rejects middle-class girls who know in their hearts that they are not as good as they should be. Girls know that their claims to goodness are never secure. On some level, she still feels she is phony, that deep down she is indeed lustful, angry, and

rebellious. The very women researchers and psychologists who have done so much to bring attention to girls and their problems have also, in some ways, played into a myth that keeps girls from developing in a more complex and profound way, acknowledging all these aspects of being human.

Thus, in this age of “girl power” and “girls rule,” it is important to re-examine good girl ideals to see how much leeway they leave for “real girls.” During the course of my study, I asked girls what they think of when I say the words “good girl,” who they imagine, and whether they think there is such a thing as a good girl. As one might expect, girls talked about being nice and caring—not mean. But one theme that recurred in many of the middle-class girls’ descriptions of what a good girl is was perfection. In the following examples, girls describe goodness in absolutes, using words like “perfect” and “never.” This ideal of perfection creates a burden and makes them feel both overwhelmed by the expectations and resentful.

I’m never like really bad. I never call my mom names and stuff. I never really did anything like breaking something on purpose. I never really got mad at her on purpose. (Serena, white, 8)

In Serena’s comments, you hear not only the striving for perfection but the idea that good girls never get angry. Nora, age eleven, said: “A goody-two-shoes *never* does anything really bad or like wrong, *never* is mean to anyone.”

Miranda, age eleven also, said: “There is like this good girl who is *perfect* to all the teachers and all, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

You can hear the resentment in Miranda’s voice while she mimics the good girl for being a “yes” girl. Kelly, a ten-year-old Asian-American girl, said that being called a good girl “means nothing. They just say ‘Oh you’re a good girl, good girl.’ But they don’t really know you.”

When I asked her what a good girl might be like, Kelly answered:

She would go to a private school, wear glasses, braces, ugly little clothes, braids in her hair. She would act perfectly. She would raise her hand and say please and thank you.

Others confirmed her assessment:

Someone who is nice to mostly everyone; doesn’t hate anyone and makes that clear. (Maya, 11)

Never does anything bad; always really, really good. (Kiely, 10)

Chrystal, a white teenager growing up in the projects, addressed her sensible response to the idea of perfection:

I believe every girl has somewhere a fault. They may try to hide it as much as they can but somewhere there is a fault.

This perfection was not something that most of the low-income white, African-American, and Latina girls and teens seemed to aspire to. Bev, my assistant, and I noted, after our interviews, that these girls seemed to have more trouble answering the question “What is a good girl?” than others, and even appeared resentful that we were using words such as “good girl.” Several felt they had to teach us that there was no such thing:

My mama might consider myself a good girl, but she knows that I’m not exactly good. She knows I’m not an angel.

When pushed to come up with something, their responses pointed to things other than perfection. Tanisha focused on happiness and care: “Happy all the time; caring and loving.”

Rashonda, age eight, even said a girl didn’t have to be perfect; she gave the good girl a lot of elbow room: “She don’t pick on *that* many people.”

Kezia, who is eleven, self-assured, and chatty, defined a good girl, and then told me how she both is and isn’t one:

She doesn’t do bad things; she has a good education; she’s nice and caring. Gentle and just wonderful—I’m nice and caring. I have a good education, a full scholarship! . . . I’m bad too. I yell at people and I’m pushy. I push and I’m very bossy.

Rather than suggesting she doesn’t fit the mold, LaShauna also exuded self-confidence:

I’d describe me. A person who loves doing the things that she do from like day till night. A person who thinks of others before she thinks of herself . . . a person who is all about education, a person who is all about people.

The African-American girls from low-income neighborhoods were particularly confident in their answers as well as in offering themselves as

prime examples of goodness. Researchers over the past decade have wondered why African-American adolescents seem to succumb much less frequently to anorexia and bulimia. Some have proposed that because the mainstream ideals of beauty are not attainable or relevant to them, they are immune to the media's deleterious influence.

The African-American girls I spoke to seemed to be not as burdened by the idea of perfection in their judgments of what makes a good girl. In contrast, middle-class girls resent girls they imagine as good or perfect, and to achieve the ideal they hide parts of themselves from others and even from themselves. Furthermore, in describing their aggressive behaviors, they significantly othered it. They described their behavior as something coming from outside of themselves, not truly a part of them. Dana Jack, author of *Behind the Mask*, observes that all kinds of women, when they get angry or aggressive, often describe themselves as being in "unfamiliar territory" or say that their anger took them totally by surprise as if it "came out of nowhere." Jack also remarks that both girls and women are taught to disguise their anger so that they often "act nice and feel mean."

While girls and women are critical of themselves for the duplicitous nature of their anger, they shouldn't take all the blame. The culture at large supports the suppression and masking of anger. We don't want to see it in little girls, so much so that we're blind to it. Despite my own interest in this phenomenon, I missed it in Veronica, who projected the ever elusive ideal of the perfect good girl.

Behind her Mask

Perhaps since I don't have a daughter, I fell in love with Veronica during the interview we had in her bedroom, both of us under the canopy of her big bed in a suburb of Philadelphia. Her face was so open, her eyes wide, and even her voice seemed eager to tell everything to help me with my book. Most of all, I was touched by the way her eyes teared up when I asked about her relationship with her mother.

She is like my number one best friend in the whole world. She is really there every time, and if you knew her I'm sure you'd really like her . . . and I think that's so special to just live with someone that is so special like her.

To understand what made her mother so great, I asked Veronica to elaborate.

She's just her! You know, she does—she's kind in the morning; she gets you up and says, "Did you have a nice sleep?" And she says all these kind things, and it's just—she's so nice! . . . If I could have anybody in the world for a mother, I'd just want her. She's just perfect.

Perfect! She saw her mother as perfect. To me, Veronica seemed to be the essential good girl. The kind whom teachers admire and parents are thankful for. She is above all appreciative. She is easy to talk to and open with her feelings. She is reasonable and adultlike, despite a childlike innocence, resembling Alice in Wonderland with her long blonde hair and her wide blue eyes. She does well in school. She listens to her mother. She understands others who might be having a hard time and offers them help. Of all the girls I interviewed, she seemed closest to the much ballyhooed ideal that girls often strive for.

But after my interview marathon of girls in this upper-middle-class neighborhood of Philadelphia, I reviewed the day with my dear friend who arranged the interviews. I was exhausted, so we drank some tea and chatted. Then she asked me whether I had enjoyed the interview with the girl who was having so much trouble in school. I said I wasn't quite sure who she meant; I thought all the girls I had interviewed seemed to be doing quite well. She then described how one of the girls I had interviewed had been writing obscene graffiti on the bathroom walls and toilet stalls. This girl would excuse herself from class and write, in my friend's words, the "filthiest, vilest things," mostly "fucking this or fuck that." She said that even the girls' friends were concerned about her. Though they had caught her in the act and she had admitted it to school professionals, her friends still didn't know what to say to her about it. Nobody knew what to do about it. This girl, of course, was Veronica.

If a boy had written this graffiti all over the walls we would probably characterize him as a bad kid, or someone who needed more discipline. But it was strange to everyone involved that Veronica—so good and loving in her presentation—would act in such an unexpected way. Because the girl and the graffiti didn't seem to fit the image Veronica projected, many of us wondered whether there was something seriously wrong with her. When girls act bad or angry, and they don't seem to us to

be bad girls or fresh-mouthed or bored and angry, we wonder about their sanity.

Was there some sign of this earlier in the interview that I had missed? During the interview, Veronica had struggled with her description of goodness.

I know that nobody is perfect. That nobody can go through all their life just being perfect, but I think about people at my school and how they are all different from me. . . . One girl, Caitlyn, she's perfect, perfect teeth, perfect friends, perfect everything. I always think of the bad things I do, like maybe doing something wrong.

Not only does Veronica already invest in the absolutisms of goodness, in the following story she goes on to invest Caitlyn, a friend, with all the attributes of the ideal.

Like one time—this is a secret—one time me and my brother—oh, it's not really a secret to my mom, but we were sitting, we have a big driveway and the road is right there. We were sitting playing marbles, and one of them went out into the road, and it was across the road, so I went to go get it, and a car came by when I was on the other side, and I went to go walk across and my foot hit a rock and the rock went flinging up and hit the car, and it made a huge dent and I just looked, Oh, my God! And I thought, Caitlyn would never have done something horrible as that.

When I asked Veronica why, if it was an accident, it is such a huge secret, she whispered that

I think I feel so guilty, and it's kind of embarrassing, you know? I mean just, you know? . . . I really, I really don't think I did that, but I feel really guilty. I definitely didn't touch it with my hand. But my foot had hit it and it went flying up . . . (but) I don't think that it's possible to kick it and make such a big dent. I mean, you have to be throwing it really hard.

She is in agony over this small act. She may actually have thrown the rock, but knowing that she had done that would be so absolutely horrible, she could never admit it, not even to herself.

The interview gave me pause about interviewing girls and the secrets they keep. The restrictions around being a good girl made it difficult for most of them to tell me the things they felt most guilty about. Luckily I had many adult women to reflect back and share, to look from a distance. These women could confess their secrets with less fear of rejection.

Still, I wasn't sure about how I should interpret Veronica's presentation to me. Perhaps I was bamboozled and she presented a persona, not her "true self"; however, I doubt that Veronica's experience of being interviewed was one of feeling as if she had made herself up for my benefit. I don't think she felt at the time that she was lying when she claimed she did nothing bad ever, nothing aggressive or sneaky, or when she told me that she didn't like to swear. She certainly was leaving things out. But I'm not sure that she knew at the time that she was lying.

Instead, she was constructing herself, as girls do daily, leaving things out, aspects of the self that are unacceptable to the culture at large—aggressive parts, sexual thoughts, vicious feelings, angry words, erotic imagery. And, I wondered, what happens to the curse word denied one day? It may appear on the bathroom wall the next.

And I had fallen in love with such a creation. This was hard to admit. I had played a part, as we all do, in creating the good girl, in forcing the real girl to conform to our expectations of what is good. Even I, the interviewer who came to celebrate the secret lives of girls, re-created a situation conducive to the big lie about girls. I fault myself for falling in love with the vision rather than the real girl, whoever she may be. But I fault the culture for making it so hard that even within an interview that is especially designed to give all sorts of signs that aggressive behavior is understandable at times, it is so hard to see these secret parts of girls' lives. My interview and interviewing skills were not enough to always overcome the implicit rules that keep girls reined in: Keep your anger under wraps, your curse words hidden. These rules tell them that if it should slip out, deny it, distance yourself from it, throw it away, but don't ever accept it as part of yourself. My experience with Veronica serves as a warning to parents about how hard it is to undo these restrictions about being a good girl, even when we want to see beyond them.

No wonder that with so little help from adults, girls experience enormous guilt for letting aggression show. Boys in our culture have greater freedom to engage in transgressive activities. Within certain limits they are free to explore, rage, and experiment; they are free to be sexual, ravenous, outrageous, and plain mean. They're restricted in other ways that are

most likely equally damaging, yet they are allowed their anger, their aggression. The guilt that girls feel when they do these perfectly human acts is so powerful that it forces them to construct themselves in a way that leaves out crucial parts of their experience. They as much as boys need to break the rules sometimes, get rowdy, throw their weight around, and feel their sensuality—none of these are antithetical to goodness, and we should make a point in telling girls so.

Zeroing In On: Tomboys

I know I'm a girl, but I would act like a boy, and I thought that was bad in a way. I thought I was a bad girl because I wouldn't do girly things.
(Aidee, Puerto Rican, 17)

American culture has an outlet for girls who refuse to conform to the stereotypical ways in which girls are supposed to behave: It's called being a "tomboy." The fact that almost half of all adult women remember themselves as tomboys speaks to how important such an outlet is. I call it an outlet, or an "out," because it's a term that's used to allow girls the freedom that boys have without the condemnation girls normally get for such behaviors. Tomboys are allowed to be aggressive, to play rough, to hang with the boys, to explore the neighborhood more thoroughly, and to get dirty. They can swear without fear of punishment. They can squabble and run and throw. And they quite consciously see what they are doing as a form of resistance to being a "girly" girl.

Being a tomboy, as opposed to being a sissy boy, has a positive slant to it. It's not only that male activities are more valued in our culture, but tomboyishness is associated with fun, adventure, and courage. It's interesting, is it not, that to have fun, adventure, and courage a girl has to come to see herself as identified with a boy? Still, while being a tomboy is generally accepted in our culture, almost all the girls who were tomboys, whether middle class or low income, white, black, or Latina, were pressured at some time to be more like a girl. This was true of the women that C. Lynn Carr,

a sociologist at Rutgers University, interviewed in her study of tomboys. All these women had rather positive memories to share, but almost all had been pressured to conform to more stereotypical images of girlhood as they approached adolescence.

Sometimes being a tomboy means not only taking on more boyish activities but actively rejecting “girly” things. It’s interesting that even in the eighties and nineties, long after Title IX had its effect in bringing girls into sports, girls still associate being involved in sports as a male activity. Jody, for example, called herself a tomboy because she played all kinds of sports. She also “always related better to guys; girls were kind of stupid.” She devalues girls and girls’ activities as if she were a boy.

It’s interesting how having a brother sometimes gave girls permission to do the more male activities they craved. Jessie saw herself as a “goody-two-shoes” who “liked the dangerous stuff.” With her older brother she set fires, “blew stuff up,” shot ants out of caps and then took notes, like a scientist, on how many of their legs had fallen off in the trauma. She also sat there for hours burning bugs and thinking, “Cool.” Jessie had an older sister who she said was a “nice lady, but she tried to curl my hair and buy really girly things for me”; still, she craved the activities her older brother led her into.

The freedom and bravery of tomboys stands out in Julia, a Puerto Rican, who used to “run with the boys” on the streets of New York. There is pride in her voice as she describes herself playing “forest hunters.” She would sneak out in the middle of the night and be back home before her mother woke up. One would think that that kind of fun would be dangerous for a girl. But the fun she was having as a tomboy wasn’t dangerous; in fact, simply being a girl and walking down the street to do an errand was. A gang of teenage boys attacked her when she was ten and tore her clothes off. She fought them off and escaped before she was raped.

Although we usually think of tomboys as spirited and wonderfully adventurous, there is a defensive nature to it also. We don’t know if Julia was a tomboy before this attack or in response to it, as a sort of protection. This doesn’t mean it was effective protection, but girls who are abused or treated as sexual objects early can sometimes defend against this by constructing a boyish, hostile, or withdrawn exterior that says “stay away from me.”

Denitra, who had been abused by her mother’s boyfriend from the age of nine, was one such tomboy. She had no friends, no family member she could trust. Alone she would fight with the teachers, act aggressively to-

ward her peers, and dress like a boy. This was true until she was eighteen and met a man who was interested in her. He started telling her to dress like a woman, would take her out and buy her things, even bought her her first dress. But was this encouragement for her or for him? Denitra said, “So I grew into dressing more girly and acting more girly, and then when I got pregnant [by this man], I just grew up.” Her story is complicated because there was not much joy in her acting like a boy; rather, it was a form of protection so that no one would see her vulnerability. But dressing like a girl did not bring her pleasure either—first it brought her attention, and then a pregnancy from a man who left her.

Aidee used her tomboyishness as a form of protection also. She excused herself from kissing and other preteen activities by saying out loud that she couldn’t kiss a boy because she was a tomboy. As a tomboy she was able to resist doing some of the chores she associated with being a girl. Playing and running around outside with the boys, she avoided the washing and cleaning her mother demanded of her when she was inside the house. Nevertheless, Aidee was not entirely happy as a tomboy. Although she had wild adventures (like the time the boys dared her to pull the tail of a wild pig), her mother thought of her as a “devil child.” Aidee said she was “really confused about how I should act.”

Being a tomboy, in Carr’s study, afforded some girls the opportunity to be closer to distant dads. Maura called herself a tomboy. Her dad flew planes, and she was his “flying buddy.” She had “lots of freedom,” played baseball, football, army, and boxing. She remembered wrestling with her brother, pinning him, letting a spitball slide out of her mouth to almost touch him, and then suck it up. But she also was the one who began a sexual relationship with a fifteen-year-old when she was ten. On the other hand, Maura saw herself as an equal partner in this relationship, never the victim. Was her adventuresome tomboy spirit the thing that led her into this early mutually exploratory relationship? Or did boys have easier access to her because she was a tomboy?

Why do so many adult women claim that they were tomboys when they were younger? It’s a way of valuing their childhood in terms of what the culture values: independence, freedom, and authority. But it’s also a way of reconfirming the stereotypes of what a girl was supposed to do and what a boy was supposed to do. Looking back, women remember fondly their mischief and adventures, and because these adventures don’t fit with a cultural image of the good girl who stays home with her dolls, they call what they did tomboy behavior. But if so many girls do these kinds of

things, maybe we should instead start talking about the wild adventures of “girly girls” and claim a little space for this activity in their own gender. When someone asks, “What kind of little girl were you?” they can answer, “I was a free, wild, independent, mischievous, hard-playing little girl,” and not, “I was a tomboy.”

Eighty percent of female executives of Fortune 500 companies self-identify as having been tomboys. Do girls who run with the boys have a better chance at working with the boys later, of dealing with the issues of competition and hierarchy because of early training? Yes.

Chapter 17

Dear Diary, I Hate Her! *Secret Anger in Girls*

“anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret.”

—Audré Lorde

Abbie sat at her desk quietly, as little girls often do, looking like the perfect girl student, attentive to the teacher, keeping her hands to herself, and getting her work done. But while she posed as a good girl for the classroom, she used to imagine that her toes were guns and that she could shoot people with them. Little boys around her had “permission” to turn their fingers into .45s, point, and shoot at whomever whenever, but hers was a secret pleasure.

Because middle-class girls in our culture are not permitted to be angry, they go to great pains to deny, suppress, mask, or hide it. Patricia Pearson, author of *When She Was Bad*, writes that girls are masters of indirection when it comes to anger. Psychologist and educator Dana Jack writes that among women and girls “attempts to hurt, to oppose, or to express anger go underground to reach others through hidden channels, while surface behaviors mask the intent.”

This masking behavior seems to come from socialization practices. Researchers show that at an early age, girls more than boys learn to mask anger in their facial expressions. In experiments where researchers disappoint children, preschool girls contain themselves more in the presence of an adult. Researchers who study communication and language acquisition

have shown that mothers avoid talking about anger with their daughters, while they do not avoid subjects like fear and sadness. The reverse is true of mothers speaking to their sons.

When girls do not deny or mask anger, it emerges in ways that elicit strong cultural disapproval. Pearson calls it social manipulation on the playground. Researchers Crick and Grotpeter show that girls' "relational aggression" includes gossiping, excluding, and withdrawal. These are usually indirect forms of expressing anger and earn girls the culturewide label of being "catty" or even "meaner" than boys. Teachers who spend a great deal of time with grade-school girls often claim that they think that girls are "even meaner" than boys, because they've witnessed the cruelty of a malicious rumor or cold shoulder.

But are girls really meaner? Or is it just more surprising because we expect girls not to get angry and not to express it when they do? Dana Jack argues that the culture cannot accept female anger. She suggests that this is because women are supposed to be the nurturers; in a profound way it is upsetting when mothers, and mother figures, show their capacity for anger. When women are angry, normal hierarchies with men in control are overturned, threatening the status quo and men's easier access to advantage and power.

So women feel there is something wrong with them if they are angry. This feeling does not come out of thin air. Deborah Cox, Sally Stabb, and Karin Bruckner interviewed girls and women about their anger for their book, *Women's Anger*, and found that the girls were treated badly by those around them when they were angry. Some research that looks at emotions has found that parents show greater acceptance of anger in boys and greater acceptance of fear in girls, and girls show more fear, boys more anger.

Acceptance of anger in women varies by ethnicity too. Within Latina cultures, stereotypes of *marianisma* (acting like the Virgin Mary) require martyrdom and quiet suffering rather than anger. However, in immigrant communities being able to stand up for oneself is also a source of pride. The middle-class white and stereotyped view of Latina women's anger is that it is acceptable because "Spanish" women are supposed to be "hot-blooded." African-American women, on the other hand, are not given such leeway but are seen by whites as "uppity" or dangerous when they get angry. African-American women's assertiveness is often labeled as anger by whites because of this stereotype.

Within psychiatry, women's anger in general gets converted into diag-

noses that are seen as "women's diagnoses." For example, Dana Becker, in her book *Through the Looking Glass* points out that disorders such as borderline personality disorder have emerged and been constructed around the image of the angry, demanding woman gone to extremes. Becker has shown why women more frequently than men are diagnosed with BPD; there is a bias in mental health professionals to call women "borderline" instead of describing them as having post-traumatic stress disorder. Given the same symptomatology, clinicians will describe men as experiencing PTSD and women as being BPD.

When anger is suppressed, it either comes out through other channels, as in gossip or social manipulation, or it is suppressed, so that the women or girls experiencing it can still conform to social expectations. It can even become self-destructive, as in the case of girls who cut themselves purposely or get stuck in a cycle of bingeing and purging instead of expressing their anger. Cox, Stabb, and Bruckner write that anger for a woman is "a feeling she cannot readily embrace or give voice to in herself." Because of this, it changes "from an instrument for self-clarification to a weapon of self-destruction."

The problems with suppressing anger are many. Girls know themselves less. They run the risk of heavy social disapproval for slippages. People generally come to see women as more manipulative and cunning, less trustworthy. Women have less of a chance to work out problems directly when something angers them and less of an opportunity to use anger constructively.

Many of the girls and women I spoke to told me of secret anger. Diaries are the place where girls can write their secrets and, after writing about crushes, the number one use of diaries was to write about people who they hated. With bold pens and several exclamation marks, girls write over and over again phrases like "Mary is such a bitch" and "I hate Lisa!" It may be good that girls are "getting their feelings out" in this safe way; at least they are recognizing their hate. However, there is a pleasure in claiming one's feelings as one's own and not secreting them away that girls who write in diaries are not experiencing. Remember, they are writing this in their diaries, not telling their parents, not telling their best friends, not confronting the girls who wronged or slighted them. They reserve their strongest feelings for a secret place. While it may be resourceful and self-protective of them to write about their anger rather than express it, these girls also are missing the opportunity to practice using their anger in a constructive way to bring about change.

Most frequently their secret anger is aimed toward their mothers. The mother-daughter relationship is particularly charged because mothers teach their daughters to suppress anger and because they themselves have been taught to suppress anger. Nevertheless, mothers are the major disciplinarians in most households and so take the brunt of girls' anger.

Whether toward their mothers or toward girls at school, girls suffer from enormous guilt about these strong feelings. One girl wrote at the top of the first page of her diary, on January 1, year after year, the New Year's resolution: "Be nicer!"

Carol Tavris, in *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, suggests that it is women's subordinate position that makes them mask their anger. Emotion theorists remind us that people with more authority more often receive permission to feel, display, and act on anger than those with less authority, and women are less frequently in positions of authority. Perhaps if girls trusted that their anger would be accepted and could bring about change, they would express it more. Poet Audré Lorde writes that trying to train her anger to be accurate rather than to deny it has been one of the major tasks of her life.

For most girls, though, suppression of anger can be a source of pride. For example, Annie, a white middle-class college student, said, "If I was ever mean to someone, I was never mean to anyone to their face. . . . I was really nice. I just didn't like doing that."

Marissa, an African-American college student, was a very good girl. Being a pastor's child, she felt that she had to be good to set an example for others, whereas she envied her brother, who felt no such obligation. In fact, her parents told her last year that they believe they had made a mistake in raising her to believe being angry was bad. She remembered being angry at her mother, who home-schooled her, and "there were times when I would just be like so ahhhh!!!" But, Marissa added, "I don't think she even knew that there was like conflicts." Why? Because the conflicts were within her. Marissa admitted, "I would never, ever express it."

Serena, a nine-year-old white girl from Chicago, said she's never "really" mad at her mother. In her definition of what a good girl is, she said, "And I never really got mad at her really," defining a bad girl as someone who actually does get mad at her mother.

Robin, an African-American middle-class woman, remembered that when she was a child she tolerated playing with a girl she didn't like because she couldn't bear to tell her mother she didn't like the girl. The girl was her mother's best friend's daughter. So she would play with this girl but

do mean little things to her, like give her the cold shoulder or change the rules of the game so that the girl would lose. She didn't want to upset her mother, but she needed to release her displeasure.

Robin also wrote about it in her diary. "Most of the time I wrote bad things about Jenny. 'God, I was so mean.' And Robin added, "It was so irrational." She thought there was no reason for her to hate this girl. She could write about how much she hated her in her diary, but she could not tell her mother.

Robin may be better off than Serena, who won't even admit to being angry. Writing it down takes the edge off the anger in more ways than one. It helps simply to express it, and it's not quite as bad if one writes it privately rather than says it out loud. It is one step removed. But wouldn't Robin have been better off had she a person to speak her frustration to?

For Serena, a bad girl is someone who "always writes notes on papers like saying, 'I hate school,' or 'My teacher is dumb, stupid.'" She can't even imagine that a girl might say something like that out loud. A girl who says this out loud must be practically evil!

Marissa wrote in her diary about how much she hated the girl across the street. This girl was prized by teachers and parents because she was excellent at a number of different activities. Marissa wrote all the mean things she might have said to her in her diary. And she hated her because she was even a better good girl than she was, very much "into" the Christian missionary girls' club Marissa's parents had made her attend.

Nicolette described herself as a wimp who never wanted to hurt anybody, but in her diary she wrote for several years about how much she hated her mother, how unfair she was, "she's such a bitch!" and more. She wrote it, but never expressed it. When asked why she never expressed it, she said, "I let her do what she wanted to do and just figured out how to make it easy for us all."

At thirty-two she is still angry at her mother, but her mother still doesn't know how much and what about. The power of her anger seems so huge that at thirty-two years old Nicolette wondered whether she should throw out her diaries "because it would be devastating if my mother ever saw [them]." Her mother lives in another state now, and the chances are much more slim today that she would come across Nicolette's diaries; but the anger is still there.

As in Nicolette's case, girls and women fear that their anger could destroy others. So what happens when anger gets so large that a girl can't handle it, when it hasn't been or can't be siphoned into petty squabbles,

gossip, or cold shoulders. Typically they either find secret destructive things to do, go to their rooms and cry, or finally, for a very few, lose it.

One girl was so angry at her brother that she "lost it" and punched a door until she made a hole in it. Another, Becca, whose mother wanted her to be a ballerina, cracked the legs off the ballerina doll in her mother's doll collection to show her how much she hated ballet. "I knew it was wrong," she said. "I knew I would be found out and get in trouble," but she had to do it "because it was like a way to express I hated it." Even girls who lose it seem to still be in control.

Dorothy Jean, who grew up in the Midwest in the fifties, said, "Any time I expressed my anger I was punished, and yet I was in a household where everybody seemed to be angry." So she sprinkled garlic in her sister's hair when she got jealous, and put broken glass in the cookies she made for her father, the father who had abandoned the family. She was so mad at her mother once, she poured out the entire contents of her mother's perfume: "That seemed like a very angry act to me, and it was directed toward my mother, which leads me to believe that whatever was going on I didn't feel obliged to tell my mother, and I was angry at her for not knowing."

Penny, who is nine, white, and growing up in the projects, got angry at a girl who was being mean to her, but she couldn't say anything. So she thought, "She has puffy hair. I have scissors. I want to cut her hair." But she didn't do it.

If not destructive or imagining destruction, girls simply cry. Avery, eleven, has moved far too frequently. It clearly has made her unhappy to have to leave her friends and move across the country because of her father's job, but she doesn't tell her parents it makes her unhappy. When I interviewed her I tried to determine whether it also made her angry, but she was vague: "I think I tried to tell them," but then told me that she doesn't think that they *should* know. When asked how she copes with being angry, though, she said, "I stomp off to my room and cry."

Girls cry when they are angry. Usually this means that they have expressed or felt their anger and feel overwhelmed by it. Laura got really angry at a girl in camp: "I never had any fights in school, and I was so angry at her and we were yelling at each other and I started to cry, because when I get really angry I cry." So do grown-up women, and most of them hate this tendency, because they know it undermines their ability to express themselves when angry. Why do they cry? Because they assume from the start that they won't be heard. Because anger and hurt get all mixed together. And because they are simply overwhelmed with all kinds of emotions.

Mary Valentis and Anne Devane, in their book *Female Rage*, write that for many women rage is like a foreign language over which they have no control.

Lucy, a Puerto Rican woman, expressed this feeling of being out of control when angry: "If someone tells me something, I just get nervous and start crying. I just want to pick something up and hit them with it."

Feeling out of control causes some women to "just lose it" when it comes to holding in their anger, and many express a fear of losing it, while few discuss constructive ways of expressing it. It is as if the assumption is that one should have suppressed it. Miranda, an eleven-year-old girl from Boston, almost "loses it" whenever her aunt baby-sits. This aunt "gets on everyone's nerves" when she sings. "I literally had to string myself," she said, using a graphic if unusual word. "I don't know the words for that, but keep myself from reaching over and slapping her and telling her to shut up because she's getting so on my nerves."

Whenever we talk about anger in girls the conversation almost always turns to extreme displays of it—girls who kill, girls who explode, girls who can't control their anger. To suggest that girls be encouraged to express anger, be taught how to handle their own anger, and to show them ways in which anger can be used constructively is not to suggest that girls pick up guns and go on shooting sprees, as many fear. Jumping to this extreme conclusion plays on girls' own fears that to express anger threatens annihilation. Today girls are too afraid of their own anger and feel it as an alien force within them. The goal of parents and educators should be to cultivate it, understand it, and even deepen it for many girls before even beginning to talk about "letting it go" or confrontation. We do no less for other emotions. Our fear of hearing girls' anger, however, is too great.

Chapter 18

The Aggressive Acts of Good Girls

“And then I get so mad that I shake her to death. . . . And then I let go and look around to see if anyone saw.”

—Kelly, Asian-American, ten, referring to her sister

Aggression in women and girls is a hot topic. Some study the cruelty on the playground, others girls in gangs. Some look to the more unusual forms of women's anger, such as women who murder or women who take on careers in the police force or army. But few have looked at what I call “normal” aggression in the lives of girls. I don't want to glorify aggression; on the other hand, I am not nor should you be horrified by it. Aggression is a part of girls' as well as boys' makeup, and there is variation in the lives of girls just as there is in the lives of boys (from kids who are slightly aggressive to kids who are highly aggressive). When it occurs in the lives of middle-class girls, however, it has to be kept hidden. But hidden away, small aggressive acts bring too much guilt into girls' lives.

Good girls keep their lapses in goodness secret. Lapses are times when they do something that does not fit the image of how a girl is supposed to behave. While most girls would feel the need to keep sexual secrets, keeping aggression a secret really separates the good girl from the bad. Elenora, a Puerto Rican woman, who was, in her own words, a “goody-two-shoes,” secretly sneaked into her sister's room and cut off the heads of all the dolls in her sister's paper doll collection. Another girl, Heather, and her sister

would fight and punch each other, and then, crying, promise each other, “Don't tell that I hurt you, okay?”

For girls who are deeply enveloped in good girl expectations, aggressive acts seem to them to come out of nowhere. As noted earlier, Dana Jack, in *Behind the Mask*, calls this unfamiliar territory. Because the act seems not to jibe with who they think they are and who others expect them to be, these girls feel confusion and tremendous guilt.

All or none thinking, in the field of psychology, is considered problematic and dysfunctional. It is the kind of thinking that leads girls to say to themselves, “If I'm not perfect, then I'm nothing, I'm horrible, I'm really, really bad.” It leads them to conclude, “If I did this bad thing, I must be really bad.” It's a no-win situation, for to feel that much anger or rage, a girl must see herself as a horrible person. To not feel it, she will never own it or come to understand it in herself. She may even experience it as depression or turn it into self-hatred. While boys, it would seem, can integrate bad behaviors into a fuller image of themselves fairly easily, girls cannot without bringing into question who they really are.

Hear the extremes in Maya's thinking. Maya, an eleven-year-old white girl growing up in the suburbs, said that a good girl “never really hates someone,” a bad girl “is mean to everyone.” Serena, who is nine, said that a good girl “never pushes or shoves.” And what happens if she does? Just once? Maybe twice? Elyse was sent to “the bench” in second grade for talking during an assembly, and in her own words, she was absolutely “appalled”: “I don't think I had ever known of any *girl* being sent there. It was always like the boys in the class. . . . It was a really big deal.”

There is a range of aggressive acts that girls have kept secret. The range goes from saying the “F” word or breaking a brother's toy, to even kicking a kitten. The point is, there is a range. We think of little girls as nonaggressive simply because they are *less* aggressive than boys, just like for years we thought of girls as less good at math because at the very extremes in math knowledge, boys scored higher. Despite the stereotype, there were many, many girls who were better than boys at math. By dichotomizing girls' math skills as we dichotomize their behavior (good versus bad) instead of pointing out the considerable overlap, we promote either-or thinking.

Girls don't know that there is a continuum of aggressive behavior, not a division between aggressive and not aggressive. We have worked hard to teach them not to think this way about math (good at it versus poor, with no in-between) and have had great success in helping girls to succeed in

math. But teachers and parents are loathe to teach girls this lesson with regard to aggression. The culture would prefer to have girls strive to be all good and never aggressive, while parents approve of violent video games for boys and take their sons hunting.

Out of Nowhere

So, if a girl is good, all good, she is nonaggressive and has no way to explain it when she isn't. Natalie, an eleven-year-old from the suburbs, noted that she doesn't like to swear but, "like I said like a swear once, but it like popped out. I didn't like mean it." How does a curse word "pop out"? She also remembered that once she "whipped a girl's naked butt" with a towel and made the girl cry: "I felt really bad," said Natalie, "because I didn't mean to." If she had meant the swear word or meant to hurt the other girl, she would have difficulty explaining to herself why. For Natalie and other girls, there are too few paradigms of women's aggression through which to understand themselves.

When good girls do bad things, they don't understand it. It seems inexplicable. Instead of saying, I must be more angry than I thought I was, they think, What just happened? Was it me? It doesn't make sense. This is a way of othering the act, seeing it as coming from outside oneself.

Chrissie, for example, did something mean that, to many of us, might seem inexplicable. Her "bizarre memory" (her words) when she was in second grade is about

being over at a girlfriend's house, and she had this younger brother. I don't know if he was sleeping or just sitting there or whatever, but she walked out of the room and I just had this urge to pinch him or hit him. I can't remember what I did exactly, but I wanted to hurt him. I don't know. He was just smaller, sort of vulnerable . . . it was this cute little boy, but for some reason, I wanted to hurt him. So I did. He started crying, and I just walked out of the room and acted like I hadn't done anything, like I didn't know why he was crying.

She asked herself, "Why [did] I want to do that?" and said, "I often find myself trying to figure out what is the source of it? Why do I seem to have this much stronger desire for that than other people?" While we as adults might be able to see the pinch as an expression of being overwhelmed by jeal-

ousy—"he was so cute"—or some deeper anger about growing older and no longer being allowed her own vulnerability, Chrissie, even now, cannot own this anger: "It wasn't an act of anger or anything like that." She called it "an inexplicable urge" and today she feels deeply "ashamed" and "definitely amazed."

Like Chrissie, who pinched her friend's little brother, Jackie kicked a kitten, and she also has no idea why: "I don't know what the kitten did or whatever, but I kicked it . . . and I felt so bad."

Dolores, a "good girl" from a very strict Puerto Rican family, also experienced her aggression as inexplicable. But it clearly is explicable. Dolores was, in her words, a "loner" who never did well in school because of a learning disability. She had few friends because her mother didn't allow her daughters to play at other children's houses or out in the streets of New York City. Generally well-behaved in school, Dolores remembered once hitting a teacher.

I guess she wanted to talk to me, and she pulled me, and I got so upset I smacked her. . . . I was like, "My God! I hit a grown-up!" You know? . . . It's just that she took me by surprise when she pulled me . . . and I just turned around and smacked her.

It seems likely that school was very stressful, that Dolores was constantly on her guard because of criticism and her lack of success, and angry about what she couldn't achieve, even angry at the teachers for pushing her. And this anger stayed until the small tug on her arm became the last straw in a building anger. But Dolores didn't say she was angry; she understands it simply as a crazy mistake.

Connie was part of a gang of girls who teased another boy every day at school. She "loved the feeling" and really "got into it," until one day she got a little carried away and spit on him too. The other girls thought that she had gone too far and became quiet; Connie also thought that she had gone too far. She said to herself, "Oh, my God," and had no idea where she had found that kind of aggression. But there were many reasons for her to be angry. Her father had died recently, and her mother was less available; there was more competition among the three kids in the family for her mother's attention. These kinds of events make a girl sad, we know, but why not also angry?

I Must Be Really Bad

Some of the aggression expressed by girls is, like Connie's, in a gang or group of girls. But that doesn't mean the guilt is not felt individually. Abbie, for example, "did something very bad when [she] was a little kid, like five or six years old." She was following around a group of older boys and one of them started throwing rocks at the windows of a set of summer cottages. Abbie said,

And then at a certain point I just started doing it, and it was really fun. We were throwing rocks. We broke every window in every single cottage and were just this band of little children. And I was tremendously guilty about it. I lost sleep about that for years. Every time I saw a policeman I was afraid. I would have these fantasies of sirens and police coming to the door, and they would trace it to me and my fingerprint was found on these rocks, or someone had seen us. That preoccupied me for a long time.

Although Abbie was only five or six, she was disturbed by this act "until I was about fourteen." She explained, "You have to realize that I was considered the perfect little girl and I had done this thing, probably a felony." She is right. It was a horrible thing to do and it was a crime. But she was five years old, and had she been able to tell someone about it, the eight years of fear and guilt may not have followed. Rather, she may have been asked to make reparations. Because her act was so out of character, it had to be kept secret, and eight years of guilt is the sentence when a girl who is supposed to be perfect commits a secret act of aggression.

Devin also felt "guilty for life" about a sudden act of aggression she committed. At about twelve years old, she was sitting on the couch doing her homework and getting into a fight with her little brother.

I just happened to be holding a pencil and thinking irrationally. Even now this is the worst thing that I've ever done and the thing I feel most guilty about. I stabbed him in the knee on the side. He still has a little piece of graphite in his knee that he likes to taunt me with. . . . It was the kind of action that you do and regret immensely afterwards.

So immensely that it has followed her into her college years. While we may admire her for feeling bad about this act, there is still something exag-

gerated in her description. She said she hurt her brother "in such an evil, painful way . . . in such a horrible way." Like other girls and women she finds the act inexplicable, and said about the pencil, "It just lunged out by itself." But she takes responsibility for the lapse in goodness, too much perhaps, saying that afterward she felt horrible: "I wanted to die . . . I was just sick, feeling I had done this, and I think I started crying, because I couldn't believe what I had done. I remember George wasn't even that hurt." The key to understanding this incident is the fact that her brother "wasn't even that hurt" so she was not horrified by the harm that she had done, she was not crying in sympathy with her brother; instead, she was horrified by the act that she committed, horrified at herself.

It's interesting that it was mostly the adult women looking back, not the little girls I interviewed, who told me about an aggressive act they feel guilty about. Are girls today so much more likely to accept their own aggression? This may be true about aggression in sports (see Chapter 20). But I don't think this is why I didn't hear much about guilty aggression in these interviews. I think that for these girls, the really "bad" acts are still a secret, still so horrible, that they are too ashamed to talk about them. Although many adult women still felt guilty about these acts, the edge has been taken off, allowing them to spill the beans. They didn't feel quite the same visceral shame that they had when they were children.

May, for example, remembered hitting her mother:

That was a big deal for me, because it was, like, wow! That was real, lots of anger there. And it just . . . I remember again feeling very ashamed of that, and I think one thing that I, one thing that I found very mean is, I could tell when my mother's blood pressure could go up, like when I would push her to a limit, like her patience or something. And I could tell, she'd get very red, and even sometimes there were blotchy red patches, and there was a sense of hating myself for doing that and yet not being able to control the fact that, you know, I would say, I don't want to do that. And I would watch her physically change and that was scary, and yet, it's like there was a sense of I couldn't control it.

The guilt of "good girls" is very long-lasting and detrimental to their understanding of themselves and human relationships. Chrissie recently apologized to a friend of hers: "I think I have a real worry that I've done something really horrible that she can't completely tell me about or that I can't remember or whatever."

Isn't Guilt Good?

It is true that guilt is indeed a sign of morality. Some would say that such guilt shows that many of these girls are thinking along ethical lines, that it is a sign that these girls truly are good human beings. Guilt indeed serves to keep people in line, help them from further incidents of inexplicable aggression and nasty intent. For those girls like Jeri, now forty-nine, who remembered being very young, seeing a nest of baby mice, and killing them one by one, her guilt over this act is entirely appropriate and probably helped her to become the gentle psychologist she is today. Nobody knew, and she never told anyone until she told me, but she has felt tremendously guilty about this act that she still finds inexplicable.

In our culture, where there is constant concern about violence in the lives of our children and the development of aggression in boys, we would wish that boys would more frequently experience the guilt that girls feel. But girls take on too heavy a burden. I would rather a girl felt sorry for what she did, be able to discuss the incident with an adult, make reparations, and then use it to understand herself better than to feel as guilty as some of these "good girls" did—for life. If girls restrain themselves because of the deep shame and fear of what happens when they are aggressive and *how they will be seen by others*, this is a rather superficial morality. It is a morality based on restraint. But a morality based on values, reasoning, and integration of emotions will take to heart the anger or frustration that caused the aggression and address it in a way that will transform behavior. When these acts can be discussed, there are more chances for girls to turn their bad acts into acts of reparation. Guilt and shame might help girls to restrain themselves, but not to understand themselves. And without understanding, restraint can work only so well.

Zeroing In On: Pranks, Mischief, and Little Meannesses

Nora, a white eleven-year-old from suburban Boston, told me that a bad girl is "daredevilish." But how devilish is too devilish? Doing a prank or a little mischief is usually at the expense of someone else, and we don't like to picture girls not caring about another person. They are supposed to be good at caring, not at carousing. Some girls experience delight when they allow themselves to be just a little mean. Depending on how identified they are with being a good girl, guilt overwhelms them. Or they read their behavior as being boylike.

Pranks, mischief, and the other kinds of little meannesses girls commit have multiple meanings. Some of these reflect the more expected and traditional ways girls express anger and aggression, such as gossip, rumors, and playground exclusions. These so-called catty and underhanded expressions of anger and aggression are, for some girls, the *only* way they permit themselves to be open about these kinds of feelings. Some of girls' pranks reflect a resistance to being a "girly girl." They carouse just like the boys, getting pleasure from being a part of a group, a wild one at that. Plus, group dynamics allows them to let down their overactive monitoring of good behavior.

Another way of thinking about pranks, mischief, and meanness is that they express a kind of pleasure that girls have in being a little nasty. That makes many of us uncomfortable: We don't like meanness, and we don't like to see girls act that way.

Mean pranks often are aimed at authority figures. Fun pranks are usu-

ally done in groups or in pairs and to an anonymous victim, like when girls together make prank phone calls. When the victim is not anonymous and shows hurt feelings, girls often feel guilty. Girls also are mean to each other at slumber parties, showing great delight at making fun of bodily changes and differences in girls' physical development. Generally, when girls give themselves the freedom to carouse with others, do a little mischief, and experience the thrill of being afraid of getting caught, they speak proudly and excitedly about these times.

Because authority figures are often the ones who rein girls in the most, expecting them to be good in school, in church or synagogue, or at home, girls find particular pleasure in small vengeance toward these adults. In the lives of children there is very little other opportunity to express one's anger at teachers, at fathers. Interestingly enough, though, no pranks are aimed at mothers usually, perhaps because she is someone to whom girls are allowed to express anger. Or she is too savvy to pull one over on.

A very common prank in city schools is to put a thumbtack on a seat before the teacher sits down. Looking back to their school years, adult women remember doing this "because everybody else did" or because the other children encouraged her to do so. Toni sharpened a pencil and stuck it right under the teacher when she sat down, and her teacher was so shocked she let down her guard and called Toni a "bad nigger." The reaction stunned this little girl. "I was really bad," says Toni, "but it really shocked me [that the teacher would say that] and I hated Miss Pine ever since." Toni thought the joke was funny at the time, but today it seems "that was a cruel thing to do." After that prank, Toni knew what Miss Pine "had in her heart," so she just did more mischief, wreaking her own style of vengeance—making the eraser disappear, hiding the chalk. She did these things more than other children because of what Miss Pine had said, and because the teachers "said I was dumb," and because "I was the one that had the courage." Toni grew up and, with the help of a neighborhood activist-tutor, attended an Ivy League college, but the anger she felt through her grade school years was clearly expressed in small meannesses toward the teachers. Lyn Mikel Brown, in her book *Raising Their Voices*, suggests working-class girls' anger is a form of resistance. Here Toni resists adults seeing her as dumb, one-upping them all.

But urban girls are not the only ones who make trouble for teachers. With her best friend Frank in the fourth grade in the suburbs of California, Jody put push pins in the physical education teacher's car tires. She doesn't remember feeling hostile nor bad: "If somebody would have gotten hurt and harmed, I would have felt really bad . . . because I wasn't intending

that, . . . but they asked Frank to leave the school 'cause he was a big troublemaker in general. . . . No one really understood why I was hanging out with him, because he always caused problems." The way psychologists understand such duos is that good girls tag along with bad boys to feel the excitement vicariously, and to allow themselves to be convinced to do the things that they are not supposed to do. They get the thrill without the full blame. But we might also ask whether "good girls," even when they do initiate "bad acts," do not get blamed because society does not want to acknowledge their ability to hate, disrupt, or disturb even those closest to them.

Like teachers, absent or mean stepfathers suffered from pranks, perhaps unknowingly. Julia and her brother didn't like their alcoholic stepfather, who was, in her words, mean. Once when they knew he would be home for lunch, they stuck a cockroach in his salad: "It was so funny, because he kept saying this salad was delicious, and we were just like cracking up!" Dorothy Jean's father left home for another woman, and once when she and her sister were baking cookies for him a glass broke, and they stuck a piece of broken glass in the cookie dough. Without permission to talk back, act out, or show their frustration at the powerlessness of being children hurt by their parents' mistakes, these girls found less noticeable ways of vengeance.

Adults are not the only targets. Groups of girls express their anxiety over changes in their bodies by picking on each other as well. Many adult women remember freezing the bra of the first girl who falls asleep at slumber parties. Jody remembered calling up plumbers and screaming into the receiver, "There's a pubic hair stuck in my drain." Mia, an eleven-year-old white suburban soccer player, says her friends like to put ketchup on a girl's pajamas at a sleepover if the girl falls asleep before the others. The hilarity is that when she wakes up she might think she got her period! These pranks might be mean to the odd girl out, but they serve the function of addressing the anxiety of bodily changes, and even a little self-hatred, without necessarily having to admit to these feelings.

When these pranks have a victim, when they show clear harm to another child (not usually to an adult), girls generally feel bad. For example, Leah and her friends covered a hole in the ground so that the odd boy in her class who was "kind of a dork" wouldn't see it and would fall into it.

And he tripped, and like Jess and I thought it was the funniest thing ever, . . . but he was really nice, and I was like seeing him like holding back tears after this happened, and then it just always like denigrated me.

Chanelle, who is sixteen and African American, remembered stuffing a girl's coat in a different locker. The girl cried about her missing coat, but the other girls left it there for a couple of days. She remembered this incident because it made her feel "weird." Miranda, only eleven, feels very bad that she teased a boy about his "rat tail" hair-do, calling him "Rat Tail Roy." She said, "I really regret this" about a time when she pranced around one of her best friends, Sally, and tortured her by singing over and over "Little Sally Saucer, Sitting in the Water." She "kept doing that and doing that and it was terrible . . . and we were all crying and mad at each other," but "it was so mean. It was terrible."

Kalinda, a twelve-year-old African-American girl, remembered playing a prank with a bunch of girls, writing a boy a mysterious love letter that said, "I really want to go out with you. I want to kiss you." They signed it, "Your secret admirer." The boy was so thrilled that he went around telling everyone he had a secret admirer, and she felt guilty because it wasn't true, and that they had done this prank to make a fool out of him. She ended up explaining the prank to him: "So I said I'm sorry, and it felt good in the end."

These girls feel appropriate guilt for humiliating or otherwise hurting a friend. Guilt is not a bad feeling, especially when felt for one's lack of concern for others rather than for not living up to a stereotype. But guilt is not the only feeling. Girls also get pleasure from mischief.

Mischief and Pleasure:

Researchers tell us that boys like to play in groups and girls like to play one-on-one. But really? It may be that girls simply stick to what is expected of them, conforming to the familiar, allowing their play to be shaped by the grown-ups who prefer, for safety or other reasons, to keep their play inside. While we more often picture boys roaming around in groups making trouble, girls too love the pranks they commit with others. But we would rarely expect to see a gang of girls derailing a train by placing a rock on the tracks, even though this indeed was a story told to me. Especially fun for girls are the prank phone calls where they order pizza to a neighbor's house, send a *Playboy* magazine to the woman across the street, even lowering their voices to scare someone with a threat such as "I'm going to kill you." Not fun to be on the receiving end of these, but girls enjoy these acts that seem to have anonymous victims.

Stealing, flooding someone's backyard, peeing outside, skipping school. These are all pleasurable and outrageous to girls who do them. When not feeling guilty, they associate these acts with courage. They love the thrill of almost being caught. Not one girl who described a prank recalled feeling horrible during the act; only, but still occasionally, afterward. Shamika, a nine-year-old African-American girl from the housing project I visited, said she shoots rocks at cars with other kids. Today she feels terribly guilty about it, but "at the time I was enjoying it."

How many opportunities are there for a girl to show courage? Advocates of boys' development and inherent differences between boys and girls sometimes label courage as a virtue we should promote in boys. But when we think about girls and courage we do not usually think of daredevilish acts but of moral courage, the courage to restrain oneself in the face of peer pressure or to point out a bad deed when she sees it. This is courage indeed; however, girls also seek out ways to challenge themselves, work on fears, and master them.

One thing we cannot deny, though, is that girls feel an exhilaration when they break the rules and act out. Where does this pleasure come from? It's a mixture of fear of getting caught as well as being one up on or superior to the person they're putting down. While these are qualities we don't want to promote generally, we don't want to condemn them totally either. We can point out the harm to others while still supporting the daredevil inside the good girl.

Chapter 19

Feeling the Power

"It's a great thing to be powerful. I've been striving for it all my life."

—Madonna

There are many forms of "girl power," some that draw from traditional ideas of power *over* someone, and some that draw on more feminist notions of feeling powerful within. In the past, women were able to obtain a kind of power by attempting to live up to the image of the ideal woman or wife. That may seem retro, but girls today still look for power through obedience. If they are good, they will be rewarded. Compared to the ones labeled bad girls, the ones who fight (literally and figuratively) against this image are indeed granted a sort of social power that allows them greater access to economic and academic resources than their bad peers. On the one hand, they speak the lingo of personal empowerment ("girl power"; "feel the power"); on the other, they try to be good so that those who really have the power will give them more of it.

The women's movement of the sixties sometimes spoke of power very generally as a bad thing: Men want power; women want cooperation. Power, to these early feminists, meant domination and oppression of others. They believed that when women were in charge, equality and caring would rule the day. The outcome of the women's movement of the sixties and seventies (though not intentional) was an overemphasis on our victimization rather than on our strengths. While therapy movements of the seventies and eighties encouraged women to feel angry, the "good woman"

Feeling the Power

theories of the eighties and nineties encouraged women to feel "better" than men for their lack of aggression.

Today power is seen as a good thing, even among feminists, in part due to the therapeutic use of the word "empowerment" to mean feeling one's personal influence in the world, taking an active stance toward problems, and fighting against one's own oppression. So when the media uses the words "girl power" it means girls feeling good about themselves, being out there in the world, and not letting anyone, especially boys, stand in their way. But there is a darker side. Until we accept the darker side of women and girls, including our own aggression, our anger, and our urge to compete as well as dominate, we will perpetuate the myth of the good girl and the good woman that has so oppressed women for ages. Although women and girls have both found a way to use the image of the good girl to their advantage, in so doing they bury this darker aspect of the self, a part of the self that would help them in many circumstances.

"Good girls" find secret ways to dominate others, either in private or in fantasy. They not only want power, but also power over another person. The desire to have personal power, to feel one's effectiveness, strength, and even superiority, is not merely a reaction to being oppressed or powerless, but a human feeling that comes with some pleasure. Granted, it is a dangerous human feeling, because it is at the root of oppression, war, and domination, yet we deny this as a human impulse to our peril.

In gangs some girls parade around the schoolyard. In one white, middle-class junior high in Washington state, girls kick boys in their private parts, reeling in communal laughter as the boys keel over. On another playground in Chicago, a girl gang delights over a game in which they run and push down the boys. On Kezia's playground in New York, the girls beat up the boys. In some respects, such aggressive behavior is acceptable in the "battle of the sexes" on the playground. Ensnared in a rhetoric of "girls against the boys" and "girls are better than boys," girl gangs on the playground, like Matilda in the movie based on the Roald Dahl book, love to prove *Girls Rule*.

Girls also get special pleasure from the power of swearing. Adult women remembering their childhood years look back so fondly at their swearing that it's hard to believe that it was a forbidden act. Dolores and Yolanda, Puerto Rican women of different generations, both told me, "I loved cursing." Yolanda particularly loved to tell someone in Spanish to "go to hell." Rachel, who grew up in a white middle-class suburb, boasts, "It was my first language."

Thus there are ways girls get around the powerless feeling that sometimes goes along with good behavior—through cursing, through ganging up with other girls, and through beating up their siblings. These are all small ways “good girls” can express a desire to feel the power, whether it stems from the pleasure of competition, shocking others, or the desire to dominate.

Power and the Life of the Mind

Grace, who considers herself to have been “a very obedient child,” fed her desire for power through fantasy. It began as a storytelling game she shared with her twin sister late at night as they lay in bed. The two created an ongoing story of twin sisters and a friend, Sarah, who had adventures. Soon after, they introduced a character called “Jarreth” who became the king around which all adventures revolved. He was a character who did “extremely evil, manipulative things.” Every night for years the twins continued their story. After a period of playing this game, Grace said, “The three girls found it difficult to have any sort of time travel adventure or anything if [Jarreth] wasn’t around. And I guess you could say that the game grew very gendered at that point, because it shifted from a focus with female characters that were exactly my sister’s and my age, too, to an older male who developed very much in terms of personality.”

Jarreth’s character grew into “the world’s biggest ego”—no, Grace corrected herself—“the universe’s biggest ego.” He and his “daughters,” the two twins and another girl, would go off fighting evil and always win because he had the most power. Grace relates that the game was frightening as well as exhilarating, and at some points they felt weird about how much power they gave to “Jarreth” in their fantasies; they felt “unease with what we had created.”

Jarreth was the center of “all of the stories.” Without Jarreth, rather than without the twins, no adventures would happen. This switch in focus aroused my curiosity because it transformed their stories to conform to many stereotypic movies and books which imply that only boys can have adventures but that girls can’t unless boys bring them along. These movies and stories celebrate boys’ adventurous spirit and male power, while they keep girls at home or needing to be rescued. Even within this game of mutual delight, even though it was a male character who contained all the evil, Grace felt like she needed to restrain herself. In her own words, she

became “really interested in the character of Jarreth. And sometimes I wanted him to be more powerful and interesting and central than my sister wanted him to be.” In the game itself Grace remembered that they would “close some doors” which meant “block off certain sections of his powers so he wouldn’t do horrible things without knowing it.” Like so many other girls, Grace worries that she is different, less normal, even in this closed duet of her and her twin, because she sees herself as more obsessed with Jarreth.

A psychoanalyst might take notice that Jarreth is a kind of father figure and see the power and control these twins crave as something they crave from their father. As they fear it, they also desire it. Freud might have called this penis envy. But feminist analysts would say that what they envy really is the power. The power about which they are so ambivalent could be the power within each of them. This power within actually can be symbolized by the father, just as it is in so many religions, where we put our trust in a male god and internalize his good wishes or his commands over us. We have seen before with tomboys that when a girl wants power and sees herself as seeking it, she calls this desire male. Jarreth is the power within them, a power they call male, and being male they can adore and fear it, as well as have “a real sense of unease at what we had created.”

Plus, Jarreth was sexual. He was first created as a representation of David Bowie in the movie *Labyrinth*, wearing tight black pants, a ruffled shirt, and high-heeled boots. Grace remembered thinking of him as both sexual and androgynous. He had long hair. And the image of him captivated the girls.

Grace, the “obedient” child, found a way to feel vicariously the pleasure of power and domination. Her power and urge for domination and even to do evil is projected onto the character of “Jarreth.” Perhaps this is where urges for domination should be kept, in fantasy. Wouldn’t we all be better off that way? Perhaps we would. Yet the trick would be in keeping these urges in fantasy while still honoring the pleasure, vitality, and humanity inherent in such urges.

Boys go through a stage of loving superheroes, all-powerful beings. There was Superman. And then there was the Incredible Hulk. More recently it’s been Pokemon, little monsters with various powers. And when they are through with imaginary creatures, they move on to men in uniform. Many little boys want to grow up to be policemen and have the power of guns as well as the law. Many dream about being a race-car driver or flying planes, with big hunks of metal at their control. And if we assume

that the need for this massive power is human, and not male, that there is a part of girls that longs for this power, and not through the Barbie dream house, then we also need to ask how and where does this power get transformed.

Love of Domination

Annie, a white, middle-class girl from the suburbs of Boston, “kind of had a thing about power,” she admitted to me as an adult. Looking back on her childhood, I asked her if she ever broke a rule “just for the fun of it,” and she quickly responded, “I’ve always done that.” Annie was unusual in her pure joy in recounting her tales of mischief and bad behavior. As we expect of boys, she files these acts under “fun” and “part of childhood,” without perhaps realizing the differences between her own childhood and those of most of the other middle-class white girls I had spoken to.

Annie had a kind of contempt for weak girls or girls who wouldn’t take chances and risks, who wouldn’t “stand up for themselves.” Like other “good girls” in the study, Annie proclaimed that she had never done anything mean to someone, at least not “consciously”: “I never like consciously would plan something.” But then see how she developed her story of a particular relationship of dominance, and even exploitation.

She introduced her story as “weird.” By doing so, she othered this experience of dominance. Then she further removed herself by adding that she never would have “planned” to do anything like this. Like so many other girls, experiences of meanness, aggression, and sexuality are outside the realm of their normal girlhoods. She began this story by describing the girl whom she wanted to dominate as “stupid,” needing, perhaps, to show me just why it was fine to dominate this girl.

I remember once I had this friend who was stupid. . . . I had this weird—I don’t know why—I had this weird resentment towards her for some reason. I don’t know why. She was just one of those people who just always annoyed me a little bit for some reason.

In that “I don’t know why” Annie is saying that this is not a part of who she is. This is the unexplainable. A girl who is never mean is mean. A girl who never plans mean things plans something mean. As she got into her story she remembered why she didn’t like her friend.

Oh, this is what it was. She’d want to come play with me, but I really wouldn’t want her to come over. Every day she’d ask if she could come over. I didn’t really want her to all the time, so I said, I’d tell her she could only come over if she did what I told her to do. So, she said, “Fine.”

A shallow interpretation would see Annie as doing the nice thing by playing with a girl she doesn’t like. But such self-sacrifice takes its toll on girls. She described a relationship of dominance and pure delight because of the power she had over the friend who would do whatever she told her to do.

So we’d walk home together. We’d play. . . . We would spend a lot of time together. I remember this one time, crossing the street, I would make her. . . . There were two things. She was really easy to boss around. So I guess in that way, it was kind of neat. I really liked bossing her around, kind of like a joke. She’d play along with it as a joke. So I’d tell her to do things . . . like, I’d tell her to lie in the middle of the street until I told her to get up. . . . I’d wait until cars would come. Then I would let her get up. It was weird, but she just did it. It’s really funny that she just kind of went along with it. I only did it because she’d let me do it.

Annie called what she did “weird,” but also thought it was funny. Like all victimizers she blamed it on her victim for “letting her do it.” While most reasonable adults would not blame the child who is being bullied, there is a sense in which Annie is correct. The victim did not say “no.” She did not fight back. It is difficult to ever know if Annie wouldn’t have done it if the girl had spoken up. No matter; it is clear that Annie enjoyed the power.

I thought it was funny. I thought it was really funny, because I would never go lie in the middle of the street if someone told me to. But she did. So I just kept doing it. But then there was that relationship established. So I did it this one time. We were crossing this big street near our house, and I had this weird urge to push her. Because I have this weird power relationship I think set up with her. So I was kidding around, but I had this urge to push her into the street. I would . . . I, like, touched her, and I don’t remember if she was conscious of it. I think I kind of bumped her and maybe pretended I did it by accident or something . . . as soon as I touched her and almost pushed her into the street, a car went by re-

ally quickly and I realized I really could have killed her. It was the scariest feeling. I don't know if she knew, but I almost killed her. I don't really know if it was that close, but it felt like it was.

Having this power, Annie wanted to test it, to see how far this friend would go, and more important how far Annie herself could go, thinking that if she wanted to, she could kill her friend, actually push her into the street when a car was coming. Having this urge, she tested it with a little bump, a shove. The power scared her but also intrigued her. She wanted to know its limits, and she wanted to feel the power: "It just scared me . . . I didn't want her to die. It wasn't like I wanted her to get hurt."

The power that she wanted to feel was in the moment of the pushing. For Annie, it wasn't about hurting the other girl; as it is for many victimizers, it was about having power over her. The other person is a pawn, a non-person in the bully's inner struggle to prove her power to herself. Here perhaps is an example of an abusive exercise of power. But before fully condemning this act, it is important to acknowledge that these kinds of urges (the urge to hurt, to dominate, to diminish another person) exist in all children, in all people—in all girls. Annie experimented with this desire to dominate more than did other girls I interviewed. Clearly what she did to her friend was unfair and mean. But the answer to such interpersonal problems may not be to tone down Annie's urge for power, but to boost the weaker girl's strength to fight back and to resist domination. It is possible to confirm Annie's experiments in domination as part of human nature, and even encourage her to try to acknowledge and understand this urge more deeply, without at the same time encouraging cruelty. In the long run, this would serve her well.

Power and Destruction

When so-called bad girls act out, it is possible to understand the power they seek as defensive; that is, as a show of underlying vulnerability. Some "bad girls" have gone through difficult family situations; some have so little in their lives by virtue of being poor and invisible; some feel unwanted. These girls act out to claim their little space in the world, to show they are a force to be reckoned with, to be noticed. But we neglect to take note of the pleasure that they feel, that anyone would feel, when they, even for a moment, have control, are mastering a situation.

Lillian was "a bad kid," in her own words, a "hell-raiser," but, she says now, "Oh, I loved it!" As a poor Black southern girl, powerless in and invisible to the world at large, beaten down by her own family, a fantasy life of power and domination could not be enough. Lillian grew up living with her grandmother, her aunt, and her uncle. She knew her mother and her father, but they were not around much. Her aunt treated her well, but her grandmother would beat her, and beat her regularly. Like many of the older African-American women I spoke to who had grown up in poverty, beatings were a fact of life. Some considered these beatings discipline, and only now, looking back once again, reconsidered them and found them to be abuse. Some saw their beatings as a cross to bear. Lillian was beaten weekly, but remembered the particular time in which her grandmother hit her in the ear with a high-heeled shoe and broke her eardrum. Lillian is deaf in one ear to this day because of that beating.

She [her grandmother] would go in her bedroom with her bottle and she would start drinking, and usually by eight or so she'd come out of the room, and aunt would be fussing at me about something I'd done . . . so that's why I usually got my whipping.

Lillian claimed that at about eight years old through the age of ten she was a "fighter to the heart." When asked why she fought, she answered,

Because I could. 'Cause I was old enough, 'cause I was big enough, I was bad enough. I used to dig a hole for 'em [in the snow] and I'd wait for 'em to come out, and they didn't see. I'd hide from 'em. They didn't see me, and they come around the corner, and I'd step out in front of 'em, and ohhhh! They'd get scared, and then I'd shove 'em down in the hole in the snow I made so I could cover 'em up in the snow and then run off and leave 'em. . . . Sometimes their parents would come to the house and they would tell, "Miss Taylor, that daughter of yours did so and so to my child and I'm getting tired of that" and I'd be hiding. "No, I ain't done nothing to that girl. Ma, I aint's done nothing to that girl" and Mom [Grandmother] would say, "Shut up," and of course when they left I got beaten, and I told them [the next day at school] you made me get a whippin'; you gonna get it today. And that's what I did to 'em. I would beat them up because they had told on me. [And] after a while nobody told any more, and then after a while I stopped fighting a lot because I think I was getting a little older, I was becoming a little more con-

scious of the fact that I was being a warlord instead of a lady. And I not so much wanted to be a lady, but girls didn't fight a lot. I knew that.

Lillian said that her acts were not about aggression but about power. Like Annie, she said:

I never hurt anybody. The things that I would do was just to let them know I was the boss. I never wanted to break the skin. I never wanted to break an arm or a leg. . . . I knew the snow wouldn't hurt them. . . . I used to run and try and push 'em, but when I pushed 'em I'd grab ahold of their clothes and snatch 'em back at me. That way they wouldn't fall down. So I was always conscious of the fact that I could hurt someone and knew I could hurt someone.

Lillian and Annie wanted to show who's boss, who's in power. Reading Lillian's story alone, it would be tempting to only see her story as a story of intergenerational violence—she gets beaten, so she goes out and beats others, possibly even growing up to beat her own children. But holding her story side by side with Annie's, Grace's, and all the stories of sibling battles to come, it is possible to recognize it as human, the exciting urge to rule, to win, to conquer.

Dana Jack, in her book *Behind the Mask*, would argue that this thirst for power as well as the need to be aggressive comes from a failure of relationship. And this might be true. She and psychologists might say that the aggression we see in each of these tales is a kind of defensive aggression, built on the need of an insecure and weak person to make the world acknowledge that they really are strong, that they really are okay, perhaps even that they are invulnerable.

This idea of defensive aggression may be true, but at the same time we cannot deny the exuberance and joy that rests somewhere in these acts of power. And while we would certainly hope that girls do not "almost kill" their friends, nor smother them in snow to show their power, we do not have to enforce that by taking away their *longing* for power, their *wish* to be the boss. So maybe the question isn't so much, How do we tame these violent girls, but rather, How do we give them the experience of power and dominance without allowing them to hurt others?

Lillian was boss because she could be. But did she feel guilty about it? I don't think so. And this may be because Lillian *could* be out there with her aggression. She was caught, time and time again. Girls like Annie and

Grace live with a more private, secret knowledge of their aggression. Annie's mother was never able to ask her to reflect on what she did, nor was she ever beaten because of it. Annie had a more private burden of guilt to bear—Lillian's was more public.

And yet still my mother always said, "If you get on your knees and pray God to forgive you," but I guess it's probably why I did a lot of stuff. Because I was always praying. I'm a good prayer now. I tell you, I can say a mean prayer, and it's always, "Oh, please forgive me, because I know I have sinned today."

Private guilt and shame gnaws away; public guilt brings on beatings. Neither girl was given permission at that age to gloat over their power and dominance, but each girl found a way to do it anyway.

Power Over Siblings

Many of the girls and women who fought with their siblings did not show aggression in any other area of their lives. But they spoke about these fights with a lot of pleasure, pleasure about the physical sensation of letting it all out, of pulling no punches, of being able to show their anger.

Ethologists show play fighting as a way young bear and lion cubs and young monkeys pass the time and also train themselves to be able to protect themselves later in the wild. May and her older brothers did this kind of play fighting where they would try to hurt each other as much as possible, and then end the game when someone couldn't take it anymore. Growing up in a safe neighborhood in rural Vermont, they were not preparing themselves for life on the streets. But May felt sensual, physical pleasure at testing her limits, at allowing herself this violence.

Fighting with a sibling, the girl who is usually perfect can let it all hang out. For example, Kelly, an Asian-American ten-year-old who is generally calm, polite, academically successful, and an all-around "good girl," described what happens when her little sister bugs her.

And then I get mad and we argue and we argue and argue, and then finally she says, "You're stupid." And then I get so mad I shake her to death. And she goes, "Mom!" and then I let go and look [gives a fake innocent look].

I asked whether she feels bad about this, and she said, "Just a little bit."

Chrissie remembered she fought her sister "tooth and nail." June, an eighty-year-old grandmother, remembered being so angry at her older brother that she threw a pewter pitcher at him. Marilyn remembered wanting to see just how far she could go with her younger sisters "as far as hitting and being violent," but her mother stopped her. Maura and her brother used to wrestle a lot, and she would get him down on the ground, pin his shoulders with her knees, "and then get a big spitball and try to torture him with letting it slide out of my mouth and sucking it back up." She even boxed with him.

Rachel, perhaps, described girls' feelings best about beating up their younger siblings:

I would punch him, you know, because I thought he was so spoiled and everything that he wanted he got, and he was so well taken care of, and I would get so angry that he could have his own way all the time. Carte blanche. It would make me so mad I would want to punch him.

Then she would feel "great and guilty at the same split second." Rachel said, "It would feel absolutely great, and then" she would get in trouble because her brother would yell out, "Rachel hit me."

Fighting with siblings is not a problem for girls. They don't feel incredibly guilty about it. They do not have long-standing worries that they harmed their siblings. The anger doesn't spill over into other areas. And while they feel a pleasure that may make us uncomfortable, it doesn't seem to lead them into lives of violence. This is one area in which aggression has been normalized for girls and where they can act on an urge to feel superior over, to dominate another. But we often forget about these fights when we describe the essential girl or even teen. While this aggression is very much a part of many girls' lives, until recently researchers and psychologists who speak of girls' connection and caring conveniently forget about it because it doesn't fit into our versions of what a girl is like.

Fighting with siblings is about power. It's about hierarchy and asserting one's own needs over another's. Parents despair over trying to get their children to get along; however, this is the one place where a girl with a perfected public persona can let her hair down. Maybe we should let her, or at least condemn her as we condemn her brothers, no more or no less.

Chapter 20

Getting Physical: Girl Athletes

"When someone pulls my shirt, I feel like I've got to get them back, and I push them really hard. It makes me feel like, 'Don't mess with me!'"

—Mia, white, 12

Like fighting an arrogant older brother or an annoying little sister, there is perhaps one other area where "good girls" can be a little aggressive, and that is in sports. To earn this privilege of aggression, there is a difficult terrain girls have to negotiate so that they can maintain their femininity in the eyes of their peers and their teachers. This negotiation starts early.

Sports skills begin on the playground. But if a girl doesn't start playing sports before the age of ten, it is highly unlikely she will play in high school or college. She doesn't develop the skills early enough to fit in.

And many girls don't develop these skills early enough. Researchers report that boys like to play in wide open spaces, that they prefer ball games, competition, and roughness, while girls prefer to spectate, walk hand in hand around the playground, swing and hang from the bars. In a 1997 study, Lynn Jaffee and Heidi Sickler, working for the Melpomene Institute, an organization devoted to promoting health and physical activity in girls, observed over seven hundred children on the playground, but their interviews with the children afterward revealed something few previous researchers have realized. It isn't preference that keeps girls away from "boy" games on the playground; there are two other reasons: The boys exclude them, and the girls don't think they are good enough to play with the

boys. While 75 percent of the boys surveyed would rather play with only boys, the majority of girls would prefer to play in mixed groups and run with the boys; but, as one interviewee said, "I can't play boy games. They don't want girls to play."

Sports is one of the few places where our culture permits aggression, even rewards it, and girls who are given that opportunity within sports may feel more powerful and know themselves and their bodies better than girls who are not given this opportunity. Maya, an eleven-year-old soccer player, described this power: "I love soccer. And my team, like they get really physical and they shove people." I asked whether she ever gets aggressive when she plays, and she replied enthusiastically, "Yeah, 'cause, I mean, if they shove me, I get to shove them back, but not like pushing, but just shoulder shoving to get the ball." She "gets to" shove them back, as if this is a special treat for a good girl.

When we think of powerful girls we almost inevitably think of girls in sports, pushing their way around a soccer field or basketball court, feeling the force, energy, and control when you have the ball and you're keeping it away from the other team. Title IX of the Education Act Amendments assured girls this opportunity in 1972, a time when girls largely had been excluded from participation. Since then there has been a huge change in the number of programs offered to girls and the number of girls participating in sports.

When girls play sports, they contradict the culture's perceptions of them as weak and frail. Susan Cahn, in her 1994 book *Coming on Strong*, about the history of women in sports, writes that in the twenties and thirties, when girls and women started participating in athletics, doctors and educators wrote of the physical and psychological dangers of physical activity for women and girls. These concerns echoed turn-of-the-century restrictions on upper-class, white, menstruating women, condemning them to bed rest during that time of the month.

Girls on the field are the antithesis of the frail beauty of yesteryear and the embodiment of power, access, and agency. They are proving that sports can be every bit a part of girls' lives as it is of boys' lives. Research points to the benefits for girls and women at the beginning levels of sports: They get better grades and they feel better about themselves; Colette Dowling calls it "physical self-esteem" in her book *The Frailty Myth*. They are less likely to get pregnant, and they have a better body image and a lower school dropout rate.

But there's another side to this celebration. No matter the greater ac-

cess and participation, girls' sports still reflects society's intense management and scrutiny of the body, at least at the higher levels. Girl athletes are quite aware of how much muscle is allowed, how much weight they can gain, what kind of uniforms they can wear before they start looking too unfeminine.

And girls in sports today have to confront the cultural impression that when girls get powerful physically, they are less appealing in terms of stereotypical femininity. To do so they often tame their image by adding on femininity accessories, as do professional women athletes. Michael Messner, who has written extensively on sports and gender, points out that track star Florence Griffith-Joyner's muscular body is feminized with long nails, flowing hair, and "spectacular outfits." Female bodybuilders do their competitions in cute bikinis, make-up, and sexy hairdos. They are given points for fingernail polish, highlighted hair, and breast implants. Even when athletes don't feminize themselves, fans and the media may do it for them. Dayna Daniels, a professor of exercise science at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, argues that when women are "too" successful at sports, they not only face criticism for not being feminine, but they have to face a continuous focus on aspects of their femininity rather than on their athletic success.

Girls who participate in sports often have a double identity. While they are tough on the field or court, they may try extra hard to prove their femininity in school among the boys. High school track star Leslie Heywood writes about what it was like in high school to be marked as a good athlete. One of the best runners in the school, she also tried to be a cheerleader, but her athlete's body did not "look good" doing the dancer's steps. Because she was an assertive player and a successful athlete she was seen as "bigger than my britches" and a "bitch." She even had the nerve to demand to continue using the weight room when the coach said, "My boys need it." Over time she began to see the other girls, the cheerleaders, as "clean" and herself as "wild," "like a monster." Her coach put her in her place, first in subtle ways, like making her run through a sprinkler to get her T-shirt wet, and eventually by demanding sex.

While this is an extreme example of how girls are reminded that they are, in the end, "just girls," or "just bodies," coaches, parents, fans, and the media make other attempts to control the image of girls in sports. Athletic organizations as well as coaches limit girl athletes' aggression while similar aggression is many times supported or seen as essential to the game in boys' sports. In hockey, for example, when girls and women play, the official

rules do not allow them to check, throw their body against another person to throw them off balance and get the puck. For better or worse, this is an integral part of men's hockey games.

People who believe in girls' essential goodness and cooperation think that the more women's sports are controlled by men (and there is a trend for girls' and women's sports teams to have male coaches more often than women), the more they reflect so-called male values such as hierarchy, competitiveness, and aggression. But these are people who think that aggression is not and shouldn't be a part of women's psyche and lives. Early on, the physical education establishment even said that girls didn't want highly competitive sports. This has not turned out to be true and is reminiscent of the politicians who argued that women were happy in the home and didn't want to vote.

Culturally speaking, Americans like to feminize our female athletes. Although the terms "lady" or "ladylike" are rarely used anymore in this culture to describe women, sports teams continue to take male team names and add the word "lady" to feminize them. At the college where I teach, the men's basketball team is the Knights; the women's is the Lady Knights. In Amherst, Massachusetts, there are the Hurricanes and the Lady Hurricanes, and in West Springfield High of Washington, D.C., the Spartans and the Lady Spartans.

The media also like to sexualize (and thus feminize) girls playing sports because sex sells. In 1999 *U.S. News and World Report* reported: "Women athletes—those who kick and shove and pant and grunt—have not traditionally held a lot of advertising appeal. Sequined skating outfits were sexy, smelly shinguards were not."

Sex appeal was also part of the magic of the 1999 World Cup women's soccer team. Although many women jog, play games, and exercise in sports bras, when Brandi Chastain tore off her jersey after scoring the winning goal of the World Cup, her sports bra was seen as an undergarment and her act was described as "provocative" by journalists. David Letterman called the whole team "babe city."

The media also make big news of female athletes' anger while at the same time feminizing it. Because anger isn't sexy, it isn't feminine. When Svetlana Khorkina showed her anger at the 2000 Olympics when the Russian team missed the gold because of a mistake in the placement of the vault, journalists called her a "diva." She wasn't just an angry athlete, as John McEnroe once was called the "bad boy of tennis"; instead, she was a "diva," "sullen," "petulant," and "pouty," all feminized, quasisexualized de-

scriptors. Straight-talker Rosie O'Donnell relabeled her behavior accurately; she was "angry." Calling an angry woman athlete a prima donna or pouty demeans her and makes it seem as if when a woman gets angry she is getting too big for her britches (diva) or she is infantilized (pouty).

Girls who love and play team sports are not girl-like in one more important way: They seem to prefer to run with a group rather than preserve that hallmark of "femininity," the best friendship. Remember, most researchers report that girls prefer (even though such a so-called preference may be a second resort) to walk around hand in hand, disclosing secrets and sharing feelings, while boys play tag, football, and kickball on the playground. One recent study, however, funded by the Girl Scouts, asked 362 girls which activities they did made them feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, being in the Girl Scouts, an institution that has become increasingly "feminized," did not typically make the girls feel good. Athletics won. Girls responded that it was because sports made them feel competent. The researchers make the point that previously psychologists had agreed that girls derive their self-worth from relationships, but only 10 percent of the girls they interviewed said that they liked an activity because they got to be with other girls.

This research contests the idealized notion that girls prefer being in pairs, walking around the playground. Many studies have shown that girls are "better" at friendships and that "best friends" matter more to girls than boys, but this doesn't have to mean that there is some kind of natural inclination in girls to bond, to nurture, to take care of others. Instead, Valerie Hey's concept of "performance of friendship" operates here as a certain girl-based "performance of femininity." Girls like best friendships for the intimacy and connection they provide, but girls also *feel the need to create* best friendships because they are trying to be girls, trying to be normal, and doing what their mothers and the culture expect them to do. Parents of daughters and researchers alike glorify best friendships for girls as almost a requirement of normality, whereas team or group membership is practically ignored. Few parents feel that it is important for their girls to learn to be part of a team. In fact, it may be more threatening to the culture when girls team up with each other rather than stay in small, cozy dyads or triads. Many adult women I spoke to complained about mothers forcing them to play with another girl, to be nice to her, and their desire to resist this imposition. Not one woman or girl complained, as perhaps some boys might, that they were forced to play a sport, or forced to be a part of a team they didn't like.

Some might argue that even though I write from a feminist perspective, I am, like male authors before me, putting down girls' specific competence in friend-making and friend-keeping (relationships) and elevating a male competence (the ability to play on teams), but I am not. I am only looking at opportunities and how the approval of certain kinds of experiences and disapproval of other kinds of experiences shapes and restrains girls' development. And while if this book were about boys I might be saying that we as a culture ought to be promoting best friendships among boys, this book is about girls, and we ought to look at what participation in sports affords them.

What Do Girls Say?

Many of the girls I spoke to play soccer. None of the adult women I interviewed identified themselves as athletes, preferring to call themselves tomboys if they played sports in youth, thus confirming that they bought into the idea of their time that girls should not play sports.

When I asked the girls about getting aggressive, Avery wanted to reassure me that she was still nice and kind. She said:

I get aggressive, but if I do and it really hurts somebody, I feel bad and I help them and stuff. Like the most, the worst I've ever done was stepped on somebody's toe, you know, and like, "Are you okay?"

She sees aggression and skill as two different methods in sports and told me "boys are a lot more aggressive than girls, but the girls have a lot of skills that the boys can't do. And the girls are a lot smaller so they can." Keeping in line with girl mythology of the present (that girls are not aggressive), she heard my question about aggression as a girls versus boys question and told me how girls are "better."

Maya, however, owned the aggression. When I asked her what she likes about the aggression, the pushing and shoving, she answered, "It's just the way I play." When I pushed her to find out what it feels like for her to be aggressive, she said,

Well, I like it more than just being a little meek soccer player, 'cause then you just get walked all over. . . . Yeah, normally I just like, if people are insulting me during school I just ignore it. And on the soccer

field, if people are taking the ball away from me I get to stand up for myself then. That's what I like about it.

Good girls can't fight back in school, but on the soccer field, if someone pushes you you don't have to take it, you can push back.

One twelve-year-old girl, Mia, asked that her alias in my book be "Mia" after Mia Hamm. When she openly admitted, "In soccer I'm rough, I'm, like, physical," I asked her if she ever purposely hurt someone in soccer or took it a bit too far. Mia answered honestly, "Probably. Like, well, I do. I push people and stuff." Her aggression doesn't bother her immensely. She told me:

I feel good! I like it, especially after it's, like, you just scored a goal or something. Or like when someone pulls my shirt, I feel like I've got to get them back, and I push them really hard. Even in front of the ref, but it makes me feel like, "Don't mess with me!" And I love doing that. So I'm really rough in soccer and stuff. That's why I love that so much.

What a statement for a girl to make! "Don't mess with me!" a statement that they can't make in the halls of the school. How could anyone deny a girl that kind of forthright feeling of power and self-respect? On the soccer field it feels right; off the field, it is often interpreted as masculine or too much.

Mia readily admitted to a time when she lost control on the field. In her last soccer tournament, when her team wasn't very good and only scored one goal all season:

So it was like our last game in the season, and we were playing this team that was like really good, because they had been playing for a while. They were like making passes, and they had scored like ten goals on us, and I got a breakaway kind of, and I think I would have scored in the end, but these two girls came and like tripped me, and I went flying, and my mom, luckily my mom and the other parents were right there, or I think I would have like punched them, I was so mad at them. I was like crying 'cause I was so mad at them. It hurt, but I was like crying more and screaming and yelling because I was so angry. . . . I think I was about to like go over the edge. I went over the edge. I was on the verge a lot of other times, because you know they had scored so many times, plus then being tripped. I just lost it. And my

mom and my friend like had to like hold me back . . . and I'm, like
"Let go!"

Appropriately her mom and other parents held her back, but she wanted to punch the other team members. Still angry in retrospect, she said, "They didn't deserve to win. I deserved to win!"

In another game, a girl kept grabbing Mia's wrist. She said to me in the interview, "I just lost it, I think, and said, We'll show them that we can play better or that we can get them back. . . . I just was really mad, so I just started like pushing them, playing their game." I asked her how she felt about that, and she said, "I thought it was pretty fun to do that. I probably wouldn't mind doing it again."

Some Girls Like the Aggression

What is the secret about girls and aggression in sports? That they like it. Where else can they stand up for themselves like that? Mia, in school, gets straight As, and at home, obeys her parents. She is a very good girl. But on the soccer field, in her own words, she can "lose it." When people lose control, they usually don't feel good, although it allows them to abdicate responsibility for their actions; but what Mia calls loss of self-control is not entirely self-control. It makes her feel good, although she others the response, in a sense, by disconnecting herself from it. But because she responds with pleasure, it seems that by losing control she may be giving herself permission to act out aggressively on the field, to show her anger, to push back, and to seek revenge for unfairness. We allow boys to have those feelings on and off the field, and we can do that for girls.

In team sports girls get approval simply by being able to be aggressive en masse, in the company of other girls. While a girl who plays an individual sport may be aggressive in her pursuit of excellence or against her opponent, alone she can be dismissed as a "freak." When a team of girls is aggressive together, they support one another and create an acceptable space for this aggression.

And they love it. Most are not trying to "prove something," although there is an antifeminist contingent who seems to want to read girls' achievements in this way. They ask girls and women who are good at sports whether they are trying to "prove something" about what girls or women can do. And when they do, girls look back cross-eyed and say, "I play be-

cause I love to play." A reporter asked Laila Ali, Muhammad's daughter, before a boxing fight whether she was promoting feminism, then added, "Hey, you're pretty, how can you do this kind of sport?" She answered, "It has nothing to do with looks." Katie Downing, wrestler for the University of Minnesota-Morris team, said to a reporter, "All the girls I know that wrestle are there because they love to wrestle."

Girls who have found pleasure in sports have found something many other girls haven't: a culturally approved of space to get to know themselves physically and in terms of their potential for and limits to aggression. They have found an area where they are allowed to take up space. Iris Marion Young, a philosopher and social theorist, writes in her book *Throwing Like a Girl* that girls and women in sexist society are physically handicapped. She argues that when society aims at physically inhibiting, confining, and objectifying women, through means such as rape, pornography, lower wages, and other forms of diminishment, women and girls come to represent that oppression physically. "As lived bodies," she writes, "we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world [made by] our own intentions and projections." The social confining of women gets enacted physically when women stand with their legs closer together and girls carry their books close to their chests. It is enacted when women "throw like a girl," "run like a girl," and "swing like a girl," all of which have in common the fact that women confine themselves by not putting their whole body into a fluid and directed motion. Women's bodies tend not to "reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through." Indeed, she writes, "I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity."

Is it no wonder, then, that girls who participate in sports are more likely to be leaders in their high schools and careers later? Sports can give girls the exhilarating opportunity to get to know their body's potential in a different way. When there is a safe space for the expression of aggression and a girl can push herself to break society's limits on aggression and the female body, and yet still do so within the confines of play, which is, we should remember, the foundation of all sports, girls can soar.

Chapter 21

Class, Clothes, and Cutting Her Down to Size

"She used to think she was the best. She used to wear nice clothes. So one day I picked a fight with her: 'You think you're better than me?'"

—*Camelia, Puerto Rican, 31*

When girls get angry or aggressive with each other for no apparent reason, more often than not it's over issues of social class. It may be disguised in phrases like, "She's such a snob," or "She thinks she's better than everybody," but when you pick apart these phrases, you'll often find that these girls are referring to socioeconomic class. It can go in either direction: Sometimes they beat up other girls because the other girl has nice clothes; sometimes they are cruel and distant because the girl is poor and wears dirty clothes or clothes that are out of fashion. In the grade school years, not just in high school, clothing is the marker of social class among girls, an impetus for hatred and sometimes aggression.

Social scientists have analyzed class and the association of good girls with middle class and bad girls with lower or working class. (Upper-class girls are almost too few to analyze, and rarely appear in studies.) Sometimes these social scientists have looked at what class means to the girls themselves, how they themselves measure it, and what they do about it, because middle-class shaping of difference and superiority depends on class distinctions. These distinctions are made on the basis of dress, self-restraint, and how femininity is portrayed. But how girls need to dress,

what they need to do to restrain themselves, and what exactly is feminine change by the decade.

Class and Clothes

Cora, who grew up in the thirties and forties and never had new dresses, was judged by her peers as an outcast; Josephine, who grew up in the fifties and sixties, said a good girl "kept her clothes clean"; those who grew up in the seventies and eighties depended on having the right style of clothes; and in the nineties, wearing "cheap" clothes was a sign of being lower class.

Wini Breines, in her book *Young, White, and Miserable*, suggests that the fifties was a time when girls began to be bombarded with advice about how to be popular. "Girls' popularity was based on attractiveness and 'good clothes' and a certain kind of poise more characteristic of middle-class girls than lower-class girls," she writes. But above all, white, middle-class girls were to conform to a single idea of what to wear. Postwar America was a melting pot and differences were supposed to be invisible. Breines also notes the invisibility of African-American girls and the lack of influence from African-American culture on the lives of white middle-class Americans.

One would think that the girls who don't dress well, who don't have the money to buy expensive clothes, might be the ones who are teased or most vulnerable to others' aggression. And this is true some of the time. For example, Chanelle, a teenager who goes to a public school near her home in the projects, admitted to insulting other girls by saying, "You ugly and your clothes look cheap." And then, she said, she starts flinging her hair around. The idea of flinging her hair around seems to be a marker of superiority that emerges directly from a white ideal. (*New York Times* journalist Lena Williams notes in her recent book, *It's the Little Things: The Everyday Interactions That Get Under the Skin of Blacks and Whites*, that when a white person does this in an elevator with a black person, it can be considered offensive.)

But more often than not it is the girl who thinks she's better than the rest, or who other girls perceive is putting on airs, who gets cut down to size. This cuts across race and class and is encapsulated in the phrase "she's a snob." While girls outwardly imply a desire for equality among all girls, that no girl should think she's better than any other, this disguises a deeper

and sometimes hidden competition between girls that our culture supports and nurtures.

Nine-year-old Madeleine, who is white and lives in an apartment building just outside of a big city, talked about how she and her friends made fun of a girl, Wanda, in her grade school. She justified it by saying, "She's Polish; she's snobby; she thinks she's perfect." Remember that for many white girls, "perfection" is an ideal; thus, her hatred of Wanda may have more to do with her resistance against the ideal of perfection or her jealousy of Wanda's perfection than with the American belief that everyone in a democracy is equal.

Kezia, who is eleven, said she hates Nina, a girl in her fifth-grade class, because she's "stuck up." Ten-year-old Courtney said that a bad girl was "someone who is just Miss Popular."

Often another girl's snobbiness is used as a justification for aggression. Danielle, a seventeen-year-old African-American girl, remembered playing a prank on a girl because "she had this look like she didn't want to get to know any of us." And Aidee, a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican girl, remembered pushing a girl in the mud simply because "she was prissy." Aidee, the tomboy whose mother called her a devil child, had particular reason to hate the girl who embodied girlish perfection.

Some women admitted to themselves, looking back, that their aggression in grade school was about personal jealousy. For example, Cora used to fight all the time because of "jealousy; they had a better life than me 'cause they ate. I would rather dress than eat." Kids had made fun of her for the "sacks" she wore, and she saved her money to buy new dresses rather than to buy treats and lunches.

Jealousy is not only a quality of those girls growing up in poverty. It is cultivated in all girls. Elyse, a middle-class white girl growing up in the Northeast in the eighties and nineties, picked on a girl in third grade because "she was like one of these perfect little girls who . . . had everything she wanted . . . and I think I really resented that."

This hatred of girls who thought they were better than the rest seemed particularly strong in the low-income Puerto Rican community of women I interviewed, growing up as they were with immigrant parents and varying job opportunities that depended on their language skills, training, and ability to adapt to an urban environment. Camelia, a child of the seventies, described her aggression as jealousy of a girl who dressed nicely: "She used to think she was the best and she used to wear like nice clothes . . . and I was sorry I couldn't have it like that. So one time I got a fight with her: 'You think you're better than me?' and started pulling her hair."

Pilar, a thirty-eight-year-old woman who grew up part-time in Puerto Rico, fought other kids "every day." And why? She said, "For nothing, because the other kids wanted me to fight the new one who wanted to be higher, more intelligent. They don't want to be seen with poor people." Corazon, too, a forty-nine-year-old woman, had dogs chasing her because a girl who owned them was jealous of her:

A girl, she don't like the way I was dressed. When you have a little bit of money, you know, more than the other one? People are jealous . . . and my mother used to comb my hair nice . . . and for some reason, that girl, she don't like me.

This desire to put down those who have a little more may be more a function of class than ethnicity. Researchers who have studied girls' friendships have found that working-class black and white adolescents didn't compete for status or popularity as much as middle-class girls, but worked at socializing others into group behavior and norms. When girls didn't comply with a group norm, other girls would be angry at them.

Angela McRobbie, in her studies of working-class girls in England, showed how the automatic response of working-class girls when in contact with middle-class girls was competitiveness and antagonism: They called them snobs. However, Lyn Mikel Brown, in her book *Raising Their Voices*, shows middle-class white girls acting much the same way with respect to their view of the popular girls. They see the popular ones as thinking they are "better than everyone else." But instead of fighting, they compete in their minds, attempting to convince themselves of their superiority through studying hard and having better, more caring, values.

Girls Hating Girls

What is girl infighting about? Sharon Thompson, in her interviews with over four hundred adolescent girls, remarks on how girls often define themselves against other girls when they talk about sexual and social relations. Others propose this as a kind of "horizontal violence" akin to what educator and activist Paolo Friere talks about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: Girls who struggle to exist within a male-dominated culture align themselves with dominant voices. For example, while dominant society might use the term "slut" to keep women in their place and allow greater freedom to men, girls adopt this name-calling of other girls in order to set them-

selves apart from other girls and to presumably be seen in a more favorable light to boys, men, or some monolithic, imaginary (male-controlled) other called culture.

But it's not all planned out in any conscious way. This other, the voice of dominant society, becomes an internal voice to which the girl responds and which polices her. Lyn Mikel Brown uses the word "ventriloquation," borrowed from philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, to convey what girls do when they start talking about others, especially other girls, as if they themselves were white male authority figures judging them. This also could be the source of comments that girls make that get called "catty" and prompt adults to exclaim, "Girls are much worse than boys" in terms of verbal aggression. This cattiness is a form of spectacle, or public entertainment, for adults, as women's anger is minimized and contained through adult jokes such as, "Oooh, cat fight!" when women disagree.

In an article called the "The Meaning of Meanness," one researcher studied popularity and isolation in a group of junior high school girls. Girls who weren't "supernice" in an *egalitarian* sort of way risked being called "stuck-up." But popular girls who actually *were* mean to others protected their position as popular. Because they weren't aloof, they couldn't be called "stuck up," and other girls didn't feel like competing with them because then they would risk being treated meanly.

Back-stabbing is so salient in girls' relationships, Brown argues, because it is really the converse of a group ideal of loyalty. The constraints of being "supernice" and superloyal backfire on them, producing the opposite kinds of behavior. Whether it's too tough to keep up the "good" work because girls long for a bit of the power or respect that outspoken, more aggressive girls command, girls find ways to speak in mean ways without challenging the male-dominated institutions they rely on. In addition, girls have a particular power to wound one another because the cut comes from a supposed ally.

Some support for the idea that girls are imitating ways of thinking that male-dominated society produces comes from looking at the way girls attack each other. Girls don't become mean to each other about what we think of as girl-centered kinds of issues (disloyalty, for example, or caring) but about how appealing a girl looks (how appealing to a boy, that is) or how she is dressed.

Girl-to-girl solidarity does exist. There are girl groups, girl gangs in the high school years, and girls' athletic teams. Many researchers have noted working-class white adolescent girls' tendency to support one another

against teachers and out groups as well. But as girls become adolescents, and teacher authority diminishes, I wonder if the only remaining way that girls can secure power (if they secure it at all) is through becoming someone's girlfriend. Then the competition that begins as who's dressing better in grade school becomes a contest about who's the best heterosexual girl, the most desirable one.

By asking girls to be nicer to one another, less exclusive and more inclusive in their cliques and playground talks, teachers and parents are asking for girl-to-girl solidarity. They want girls to be more caring and egalitarian. Doesn't society want this of all its children? But those appeals can never be entirely successful, because girls feel the anger and unfairness of class differences and, quite simply, they also feel competitive. These feelings are not to be denied. The cattiness and exclusivity, more indirect forms of expressing anger, don't do them justice and give girls a bad name for being underhanded and sneaky about their aggression. Unless proposed solutions to girls' cattiness and exclusivity acknowledge and find more direct ways to honor girls' anger and self-righteousness as well as their very human feelings of competition, rather than covering them over with "good girl" values of caring and sympathy, the girl-to-girl solidarity will have a falseness to it.

A real solidarity can be built through shared anger. Helping girls to identify common enemies can help, whether they are "the media" or "advertising" or "the system of inequality" or "poverty." If girls fight against these forces together, they can build solidarity while integrating feelings of anger with caring. Is this too much to ask of grade school girls? How young is too young to educate about class difference and unfairness in life's opportunities? If we start early, and examine it within our own lives and relations to one another, girls will be in a much better place in relation to one another when they hit high school.

Zeroing In On: Language and Loudness

It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

—bell hooks, in *Talking Back*

Kerri, a middle-class white girl growing up on the West Coast, called a girl a "piece of shit" in the fourth grade. The teacher wrote a note home to her parents. Shaping her class-related behavior, her parents let her know how embarrassed they were: "How could you do such a low-class thing? Do you want to be a good person and make people think highly of you? Don't curse in front of them." That was her parents' fear given the circumstances when they grew up, that by using those particular words, Kerri would indicate she was "low class."

Cursing and loudness are associated with being lower class. Yet they're as associated with girls described as "white trash" as with African-American girls who "tell it as it is." Wendy Luttrell, a professor at Harvard's graduate school of education, talks about an image of white working-class femininity that conveys characteristics such as tough-talking, feminine, and responsible nurturer all at the same time. This ideal was embodied most recently by Julia Roberts in the film *Erin Brockovich*.

Loudness in this film, as well as in the ideal of the working-class white woman, is associated with telling the truth. It also speaks of a lack of division between private and public life. On the one hand, it has been true his-

torically that people who have less power have less privacy from those who do have the power. On the other hand, loudness and telling it like it is are seen by those who cultivate a more private life as a lack of class or restraint. What people forget is that those who have the luxury of cultivating a private life can do so without fearing that their beliefs, their visions, their opinions will go unheard, because these opinions already are preserved in the dominant society. For other girls, being good means suppressing disagreements; the louder one disagrees with what's going on, the harder it is to be viewed as good.

Lyn Mikel Brown writes about loudness in the working-class, junior high school girls she observed and interviewed in Maine. The "Mansfield girls" insist on "bringing their loud, direct selves to school." They "speak their mind" and disrupt the boundaries between private and public lives, private and public speech; their aggressiveness disrupts what teachers hope to find in class in the name of the good girl. Brown says their teachers label the loudness as "impulsive, childish behavior," while in reality it is an attempt to be "heard and understood."

White middle-class girls also care about loudness, although it is not as salient an issue. Many of them have mastered the quiet of the good girl. Heather, now a college student, looked back to her grade school years and visualized the bad girl as "girls who were loud and drew a lot of attention to themselves in, I thought, a way that I thought was disrespectful to other people, especially like a teacher in a classroom setting. And I think it bothered me more than boys who were disrespectful like that." It's interesting to see how she holds girls to a higher standard of quiet than boys.

In African-American girls, the loudness means something in addition to "telling the truth with little regard for the consequences," because such loudness occurs in the context of a historical and institutional silencing. Even more than working-class whites, African-American women in our culture have been silenced from the beginnings of slavery through educational systems that continue to be oppressive.

Grace Evans, an author in Dale Spender's anthology about girls and education called *Learning to Lose*, coined the phrase "Those Loud Black Girls" to describe African-American girls who refused to stay in the background of white girls' lives in high school. Building on this work, Signithia Fordham, an anthropologist at the University of Connecticut, says that this loudness announces "I am here and I will not be made invisible." Fordham's observations at a high school in the D.C. area showed her that academically successful black girls became so in part because of their will-

ingness to silence themselves. Calling these girls “phantoms of the opera,” she worries that they silence themselves too much. One Asian-American “good girl,” Vicky, was punished by being sent to the closet in the third grade; so invisible was she to her teacher that her teacher forgot she was there for the whole day.

Fordham also notes that sometimes silence can be an act of resistance. The silent girl protects herself from others’ reactions and preserves a sense of her wholeness for her home environment. It is a “controlled response to their evolving, ambiguous status.” Felicia, now a forty-five-year-old African-American woman, became silent for two years in adolescence. Today she says she doesn’t know why, but she snapped out of it and “was fine.”

The American Association of University Women’s finding that African-American girls generally maintain a personal sense of self-worth yet disconnect from school may follow from Fordham’s observations. Fordham’s research with John Ogbu, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, showed that high-achieving African-American girls are ostracized by peers for “acting white”; meanwhile, low-achieving girls are asked or made to be quiet because of disruptive comments.

African-American girls describe a good girl in terms of voice; they say that good girls are not loud. Two of the middle-class African-American women I spoke to talked about loudness in this way. Both Marissa and Robin are high-achieving and soft-spoken college students. Marissa defined herself in contrast to the girl across the street who swore and played rock music loud. She was in Marissa’s mind, and in the perceptions of their middle-class mixed-race neighborhood, the quintessential bad girl. Robin extends the idea of the good girl to someone who doesn’t talk back to her parents or other adults.

The idea of loudness is associated with badness, but for African-American girls who are loud, it means presence. The paradox for African-American girls is that the louder they are, the more visible, yet the more they risk being seen as bad, wild, unruly, or simply unacceptable.

Loudness is a way of taking up space and garnering attention. As such it is an important form of resistance. But when women and girls take up space, Dana Jack explains in *Behind the Mask*, they are considered male and stigmatized as pushy and unfair. In fact, middle-class girls’ goodness often has been defined against boys’ messiness and loudness in schools.

In a society that puts you down, being pushy, loud, taking up space,

and making oneself known can be a form of self-protection. Janie Ward, in her book *The Skin We’re In*, says she likes bell hooks’s phrase “tongues of fire” to describe talk between African-American mothers and their daughters as a sort of a rehearsal for the real world, a way of toughening them up. Ward, who interviewed middle-class African-American parents around the country, says “bold, unreserved, ‘in-your-face’ truth telling in the service of racial socialization” is a part of African-American tradition. Standing one’s ground and “speaking one’s mind” is a resistance strategy to being lost in the system. In another study of teens of color, Niobe Way found that “speaking one’s mind” and showing anger were essential to keeping relationships. Without the social glue of confrontation, friendships and family relationships would lose their sense of closeness.

Although an important strategy of resistance, there are some problems with simply equating loudness with standing one’s ground. By romanticizing loudness as a way for girls to be heard, the complexity of girls’ intents is lost. Many, in their loudness, make wisecracks and insult those with power or advantage, using such noticeable acts of performance as a form of revenge. Furthermore, in choosing this individual style of becoming loud and “getting in people’s faces,” girls miss opportunities to join together. Peggy Orenstein, in her study of two junior high schools, points out that individualistic strategies of fighting male-dominated institutions take the place of joining together with other girls and thus changing the system. Another problem with choosing loudness as a strategy is the way it supports a disconnection of loud girls from the educational system and their teachers who could be role models and mentors. Middle-class girls look for power in the school through identification with teachers, and loud girls look for a personal power that can never quite reach the level of power to change the environment that they deserve to have and deserve to change. In one important study, Latina and African-American girls who were depressed had the best understanding of racism, sexism, and classism. This study could suggest that when girls don’t get loud, they get depressed.

Loud girls also make themselves more “masculine” in the eyes of their teachers and the culture when they are loud, and this may make them more vulnerable later to proving their femininity in stereotypical ways. Does the girl who is seen as loud and pushy prove to herself and her peers that she is also a “woman” through reckless or early involvement in heterosexual romance or sex? When she reaches adolescence might she be more prone to look for acknowledgment of her “girl-ness” through stereotypical girl dress or getting a boyfriend?

In some ways, loudness, while it may serve some girls in terms of their self-worth, may also serve middle-class girls in creating an other to define themselves against. In adolescence, loudness projected onto the working-class white or African-American girls is conflated with sluttiness, serving as another opportunity for the middle-class girl to paint herself as the keeper of purity—as the good girl.

What's important here is to understand the complexities of loudness as completely as we can. It's not only a form of resistance but also plays into a white middle-class othering of girls who do not fit into this narrow, exclusive category. Parents and teachers would do well to pay attention to loudness, as it serves not only as a celebration of girls' voices and truth-telling, but also as a kind of vengeance that emerges from being excluded, from being hurt. It is a way of connecting to other people rather than letting oneself disappear, a way of assuming masculinized power. It has strengths, although girls who use this individualized bid for power may be at risk. Bringing loud girls' voices into the fold of all girls' voices and not permitting the othering or misreading of this voice as bad or "trashy" or "slutty" serves all girls of all classes. When all girls get loud, these single voices won't stand out quite as much.

Chapter 22

"I'm No Sucker": Fighting and Fighting Back

"I know I'm bad, but I'm not the baddest one."

—Kiara, African American, 14

Some girls like to fight and some girls have to fight. Until recently, television and other forms of media have ignored girls' aggression, implying that the actions are so deviant they can't even be discussed. But recent headlines have proclaimed that girls are getting more violent, and more violent at a faster rate than boys. In 1986 girls constituted 22 percent of all juvenile arrests, and in 1997, 26 percent. The Violent Crime Index indicates that the arrest rate for girls rose 102 percent between 1981 and 1997, while it rose only 27 percent for boys; however, it's important to note that the greatest increase was for drugs and curfew violations. Still, personal offenses were also up, up 146 percent for females versus an increase of 87 percent for males. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) report shows that a disproportionate two thirds of those girls arrested are African American or Latina. Researchers ask whether girls really are getting more violent or whether counting strategies have changed; that is, previously police may not have arrested or brought into the system girls who were violent. Interpretations tend to blame the new statistics on either the women's movement or the victimization of girls.

When we worry about girls getting too aggressive, it often stems from the pacifist assumption that it is better not to be so, that it is better to resolve arguments and injustice through talk, or when talk won't work,

through avoidance. This assumption, however, applies only loosely to boys, who are permitted some forms of aggression as shows of masculinity and pride. When a girl acts aggressively, the public responds as though she has breached her proper role. For example, when Carol, a white middle-class girl growing up in the suburbs of New York, got so angry that she ripped the blouse of a girl, a neighbor saw and "he was like appalled that two girls would be fighting like that."

Middle-class girls and women experience their aggression as a surprise, an eruption, as coming out of nowhere. Anne Campbell, in her book *Men, Women, and Aggression*, calls this the expressive view; aggression comes from no longer being able to hold one's anger in. But women and girls who grow up in low-income neighborhoods, who face so many more stresses (illness, drugs, poor schools, and lack of safety), typically use an instrumental view, one that corresponds with the way men and boys view violence. The instrumental view sees aggression as useful; in such environments, the "coercive power" that aggression brings with it operates as a tool for survival. It is difficult to persuade girls to rely on the so-called pacifist responses of talking or avoidance when they live in the center of such injustice with little outside protection. The place in which girls grow up, thus, is enormously important in understanding the usefulness of aggression as well as the meaning of it in their lives. The interaction of neighborhood, home environment, and peer group plays a primary role in influencing the way girls act out aggressively, in the acceptance of aggression in girls, and in the shamefulness or lack of shame they feel when they are aggressive.

The majority of the women and girls I talked to, whether from middle-class suburbs or low-income neighborhoods, had at least one experience where they hurt someone else; where they became aggressive; where they punched or kicked and did it so it would hurt. "Good girls" did it maybe once or twice and felt ashamed; "bad girls" did it more frequently, with righteous anger. While good girls handle this guilt as a secret worry, the bad girls dismiss the guilt and experience the aggression as a part of their lives, a part of themselves.

Revenge and Self-Protection

Revenge and self-protection go hand in hand for many girls who fight. Dana Jack, who interviewed only adult women for her book *Behind the*

Mask, sees her most aggressive subjects as putting up a "wall of self-protection." But attacking others is not only about protecting oneself, it's about revenge against those who have harmed you. Many girls and women cite examples of getting even or fighting back when someone provoked them. Fighting back is a matter of survival. Corazon, a fifty-year-old Puerto Rican, describes fighting between kids in low-income neighborhoods: "If the kids fight they fight together, and the parents they don't get, how you say, messed up in any of the fights of their kids. No. We had to defend ourselves. That we call 'survival.'"

Acts of revenge show the attacker that he or she can't pick on you, that you are a person to be reckoned with, even that you are a person to be respected. For example, a boy tripped Corazon in grade school, so she waited for him after school "with a rock in my hand, and I hit him in the head. . . . After that he never bothered me. I make a hole in his head." Tanisha, ten, African-American, and living in a housing project, said, "I hurt other people when they hurt me." Kezia, who is eleven and currently negotiating the different rules of her home life in the projects and her private, mostly white school life, won through scholarships, is still ready to interpret accidents as an opportunity for revenge. A boy hit her in the head with a tennis ball, so she "got mad, and I pushed him into the wall. I do bad things, very bad things." When asked why she thinks this is a bad thing, she says she should have waited to see if it was an accident, but that "if someone hits me, I hit them back real fast. It comes out of nowhere." Though Kezia says these impulses come from nowhere, they likely spring from reflexes she uses to protect herself in her home neighborhood.

Girls also fight when they are teased. Karen, a white girl growing up in a rural area, wore hand-me-downs; when one girl started making fun of her, she "punched her in the face." Cora, the fifty-two-year-old African-American woman from the South, was also teased about her clothes: "I think that made me very, very angry and mean. I would fight all the time." Josephine, from a working-class African-American family, responded when a boy called her a bitch: "You remember clogs?" she asked. "I took my clogs, and because I felt irritated, I started hitting him, it was so irritating." And her response worked: Every time he saw her coming "he was going the other way." Josephine was the first of her friends to ever attack back: "I guess they was scared of him, but I had to be the bold one." Felicia, from a working-class African-American family, was teased constantly by a girl for being fat. In home economics she asked the mean girl for a pincushion

and, when the girl threw it at her, Felicia “was so frustrated, I picked up a pair of scissors and, just like, . . . stabbed her in her butt and she jumped.” The girl never teased her after that.

The explanations girls and women give for these acts prove their aggression to be instrumental, or useful, to them. Their stories show that when you stand up to teasing with a show of aggression, people leave you alone. There are other situations where a show of aggression comes from a deeper sense of injustice and a broader need for revenge, revenge on the system and representatives of the systems that have caused deep and individual hurt. One such system is the schools.

Several Puerto Rican women recall the prejudice of New York City teachers toward immigrants in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Many of them put thumbtacks on teachers’ chairs. Dolores remembered becoming so angry at a teacher that she tore an old wooden school desk out of the floor to which it was nailed and held it over her head, threatening the teacher. Cora remembered a teacher “beating her” because she wouldn’t apologize to another child.

Racial prejudice was and is a system worth fighting, but it is hard for schools to recognize when combativeness comes from standing up for oneself specifically as an African-American girl or a Puerto Rican girl. Shamika claimed that even now she fights at school “like, every day” because the kids call her “blackie.” She said simply, “They irritate me. They deserve it.”

Toni, three decades ago, also felt prejudice acutely and responded violently. She would beat up her little cousin just “because he was light-skinned.” Toni remembered the day Martin Luther King was shot:

I was a young girl, and I wasn't in school, and I was enraged. I didn't even know who Martin Luther King was, to tell you the truth, but I remember sitting in class and it came over a loudspeaker that Martin Luther King had died, and I knew that he was a Black person, and all I know is, a white person did it. And I remember going on the street just looking for white people, and in my community there was very little white people, so any light-skinned person who had long straight hair got beat up. . . . I remember yanking a girl who did nothing to me, just by her hair, for no reason at all. Just because she was white.

Kiara, who is fourteen, remembered how, when she was younger, an act of aggression arose from a feeling that all whites were racists. She told of pick-

ing on a little white boy simply because he was white. She told me, “I play with whites now. I’m used to them now. I play on a white basketball team, so I’m used to them.”

Sometimes life was so bitterly unfair for a girl or woman, and racism appeared to pervade all environments from school to playground, that all she could do was hit and fight and make trouble. The NCCD study of juvenile female offenders found that 92 percent of them had been subjected to some form of abuse. By age thirteen to fourteen they were likely to have been beaten, stabbed, shot, or raped. Such overwhelming factors are a key to becoming aggressive, and yet the revenge isn’t aimed necessarily at the person who has committed the harm, but at anyone, anyone in their path.

Sometimes anger is so immense with nowhere to go that it simply feels good to hurt someone else, Cora told me. Although she constantly beat up other children, even stuck a pencil into a girl’s face for revenge, she said she feels most ashamed of the day she killed a cat. “I said that if you scratched me, why can’t I do something to you? So I killed the cat. . . . I was a evil little child for my age. . . . I think what made me so angry was because of the way I was treated.” Cora had been beaten for years by her stepfather and sexually abused by an uncle. This was a revenge killing misdirected.

Protection of Others

Having been abused themselves, many girls also show extraordinary sympathy for others who are vulnerable and fight on their behalf, especially their little brothers and sisters. O’Brishia, for example, got in one fight “because this girl slapped my brother, the one that I be fighting.” And even though she fought her brother at home constantly, when this other girl said her brother had big lips, she was on her: “I was, like, ‘My brother does not have big lips.’ ” Kiara protected her sisters: “One of my sisters might get hurt, really, really hurt. Then I would jump in.” Stella, a white woman in her fifties who grew up in a poor neighborhood, remembered:

I beat up a girl because she hit my baby brother, and I chased her for half a block. I chased her into a store. She didn't think I was going to go after her. I went in the store and I beat the hell out of her, and I said, “If you ever hit my brother again I'll come back and kill you.”

LaShauna saw someone picking on her sister and beat her up: "I felt that I did the right thing protecting my sister. . . . I knew that my sister couldn't take this girl on." Roxanne, having no sisters, made friends with a bully: "She looked after me 'cause I had no sister, and the girls used to always beat me up."

Girls do look after one another. Jessie, a white girl from a rural area, got into "a hell of a fight in the fifth grade." There was a black girl from Africa in her class, and the kids called her "black widow." She stuck up for her African friend one day, so the other girls started beating Jessie: "All I remember is I smashed her head into the sink because she was beating me up. I got really ugly. . . . I almost broke her nose." Chrissie also took pride in her role as protector: "Not only was I the aggressor, hurting people, but lots of times I was the protector too. . . . I was always the sort of the girl that would somehow be able to defend or protect or whatever."

Some girls learn to protect others at home. Toni would see her father beat up her mother for drug money, and she and the other kids would join in, trying to beat their father off. LaShauna grew up in a household where she observed many strong women getting beaten down by their boyfriends and husbands. She remembered how her aunt Lena was beaten so badly that it was in the newspaper: "And I'm like, 'Oh my gosh!' And I was little. I was like six." She continues to describe how her aunt couldn't take care of herself because of the beatings, and her mom would send her over to her aunt's house to help her wash up and take a shower.

And when her boyfriend hit her I be right there. I wanted to see everything, you know. I just felt that I had to . . . but after a while I didn't take it any more, so when he started hitting her I was like, "You are dead wrong." And I started getting into it. When he get in my face, I was like, I felt really proud. . . . I was kind of scared because . . . his face was whenever I moved, he would move too, and I didn't like that, so I pushed him out of my way because he wanted to hit me. But he didn't, though, and my aunt came in, and she was like, "No, don't put your hands on her. Don't put your hands on her."

The courage of that little girl is quite amazing. And one can imagine that this experience of protecting adult women beaten by adult men might make a difference in the kinds of relationships she will become involved in later in life. While we might wish that a little girl did not have the respon-

sibility, or take on the responsibility, to stand up to a grown man, we hear pride and power in her stance: "You are dead wrong."

Teach Your Children Well

In some households, girls are taught to fight back, and why not? Girls need to. Teaching a daughter to fight back can be akin to teaching her to stand up for herself. As Rosa's mother said to her, if Rosa didn't fight back she would give her a beating herself when she got home. With her mother's past in mind, a past in which she was exploited and hurt many times, it's no wonder that she didn't want her daughter to grow up to be similarly exploited. It is understandable how vehemently she felt that Rosa must learn to fight.

Mothers teach their daughters to fight simply so that they are ready for anything. Realistically, their daughters will face times when someone wants to hurt them, and being able to fight back is a necessary skill. Some readers may think that fighting doesn't get anyone anywhere, that violence begets more violence, and that girls put themselves at greater risk when they fight back. This also used to be the wisdom of rape counselors, until the last few years, when research showed that women who fight a rapist have a much greater chance of getting away; furthermore, if they don't get away, they still have a much quicker recovery. Fighting back works instrumentally as well as psychologically.

O'Brishia, who fought off her brother constantly, finally was allowed to beat him up. He was two years younger than she and wanted her blue crayon. When she said no,

he bit me on my back and I had the teeth marks. I cried and cried and cried. But the next day we was in the backyard and I beat him down. My mother tried to stop me. [But] my aunt said [to her mother], "Uh uh. You not going to stop her. All that he's been doing to her, you is not going to stop her." And they let me beat him up. Ever since then we still fight, but he cannot beat me at all.

Carol's middle-class white mother told her to fight back: "If she's going to pick on you every day, then you have to fight back." Gail, although a "goody-two-shoes," learned to fight back by wrestling with her father and other sisters: "He'd toss us around and would allow us to hit him as hard as

we could." Once, when she came home crying, he said to her, "The next time you come home crying, as hard as you hit me when we play, you should be able to knock somebody out. . . . We were always basically told to do what is best for yourself. And when he gave me permission, when this girl came to us . . . I fought like I had never fought before. . . . I came out of it unscathed, and she was the one who was crying." Rosa also appreciated her mother's lessons:

She used to tell me that if anybody hits you and you stay hit, when you get home I'm going to give you a beating, So if anybody picked on me I made it my business to hit back. . . . She made me a strong person in that sense, where I didn't let nobody bully me.

Fighting with brothers was also good practice. Susan, raised in a large Catholic family, said that kids would "try to bully me, and maybe because I was always fighting with my two brothers, I was not intimidated. . . . So we would start hitting, and I would break this kid's glasses, you know, or give someone a black eye. . . . I wasn't afraid to do it." Valerie's older brothers would tease her, hide her books, take the heads off her doll babies. She and her brother started fighting one day on the way to church—"I was kicking and everything, you know?"—and it suddenly dawned on her, "Hey! I can fight these boys!" Rather than serving as a merely destructive ability, knowing how to fight was a route to empowerment and protection.

The Tougher They Are

Sociologists for decades have seen boys' aggression in the "underclass" as a plea for respect and a show of masculinity that society has denied them through lack of opportunity to prove themselves in more mainstream and middle-class venues. The rise in aggression in women and girls might also stem from a rise in feelings of injustice and a desire for more agency and power in the world outside the home. While girls and women aren't fighting to prove their masculinity, they are certainly fighting to gain respect among their peers.

Anne Campbell, in *Men, Women, and Aggression*, describes this kind of proving oneself among girl gang members. Her girls enjoy "image-promoting" and, through bragging, even seek to earn the label of "crazy bitch." She points out how the girls reassure themselves of their own toughness, and even begin to use aggression preemptively.

Toni used to be a member of the group the Sweet Six, six girls who would go around New York City beating people up just to beat them up. Tai remembered a group of girls "instigating" her. A boy she liked preferred this other girl and her friends would "light her up" to get her to fight. She remembered them saying to her, "Oh, if I were you I would knock her out. I would get her, 'cause she's always with your boyfriend," and "Look, she brought her mother to hit you." Tai said, "They would bring up things to kind of stir me up, and I guess I thought I had to prove something."

Proving something is important to girls who live in areas where fighting means toughness. LaShauna, twelve, agreed that "sometimes I fight to prove that I'm worthy of being a good fighter. Or sometimes I would fight just 'cause I want to . . . but it's been a long time since I fought, you know, almost a year." Sometimes fighting proves to other girls that a girl is tough enough to be avoided. Yvonne, who considered herself to be a "good girl," remembered a couple of girls trying to force her to fight with someone else, although she wasn't really a fighter. She said that "it was more or less like a truth-or-dare kind of thing, and they said, "Oh, we know you not gonna fight her. We know you're too scared to fight her." Lucy, in the fourth grade, was told by her girlfriend to go hit another girl: "I guess she dared me, told me to go hit her for no reason, and the girl was cool, too. And I just went up to her and I just hit her and I pushed her."

Proving you are tough earns you respect from peers. Chrystal, a white teen growing up in the projects, remembered, "I picked a fight with the wrong person, and she was bigger than me, and it started a lot of rumors that she was planning on having other people jump into the fight and that she was planning on having weapons, and I got nervous and brought a steak knife to school." When asked why she picked the fight, she said, "Because she was bigger than me and I thought I could take her. . . . If you lose the fight you get friends, they won't leave you alone about it. . . . And if you win the fight you've met their standards, and I was a typical kid. I wanted to be liked."

Traditional girl theorists might have a hard time fitting Chrystal's vying for position and status through aggression into their theories. They might interpret this aggression as an internalized "male" vision of how to win friends and influence people. But her feelings and actions are not less authentically female than are pacifist inclinations, unless the model for comparison is a white middle-class stereotype of femininity.

For these very real girls, their toughness means self-esteem and self-respect, not only from others, but from themselves. Cora saw herself as a "sweet bad kid. I had a lot of sweet intentions in me," and yet she knew

that "if trouble came to me, I'm here to bank myself. . . . That's right. You treat me right!" Becca stood up for herself as early as in the first grade: "I don't care if you're eighteen feet tall, . . . I wasn't going to take it, like I hit back." Her mother had taught her to stand up for herself. When she was bullied by a bigger girl, she thought: "Just because she was big and she was using her size against me and I was like, screw you! I don't care how big you are, you know?"

Over and over girls said, "The fighting was something you needed to do because you had to prove that you wasn't gonna let anybody take advantage of you, number one." Another said quite simply, "I felt proud I could protect myself."

Toughness gives a girl a kind of freedom. Middle-class white Chrissie said it was "liberating to think of myself as tough: 'I am tough.'" She also confessed that, for better or worse, "once you admit that that's true of yourself, then you're not a good girl or a nice girl."

Fighting girls tell their stories with incredible pride and joy. This pride and joy, I think, speaks to a feeling of competence. The guilt about hurting another person is simply not present. As Chrissie said, "I remember I got such a rush. . . . There was this one boy. I can't remember why I got mad at him, but I kicked him in the balls. I was a big fan of kicking boys in the balls. You knew they were so vulnerable there. You were such a stud if you could just completely knock a guy out. . . . It was really fulfilling to kick that guy in the balls and feel like I'd really hurt him."

Other girls spoke in this free way about accepting their aggressive sides. Lillian said, "I was a fighter to the heart. [And why?] Because I could. 'Cause I was old enough. 'Cause I was big enough. 'Cause I was bad enough. [How did you feel about it?] Good. . . . Because I could do it. Just 'cause I could do it." Even if it was just in the area of aggression, Lillian was competent.

LaShauna, the girl who defended her aunt, didn't even understand the interviewer's question about whether or not she felt any guilt when she was aggressive. Her fighting was about protection, and sometimes about revenge. She fought a girl and fought hard, ending up in the principal's office, and even though she said to Bev, my assistant, "I felt guilty," when Bev asked her why, she said, "Because I didn't win."

The Meaning of Aggression

Aggression is about self-respect and not letting others take advantage of you. Through aggression girls not only protect themselves but show pride in their competence, their ability to protect themselves. Knowing that so many of these girls are also victims, we have to ask whether their aggression is a defense against their vulnerability, and of course it is that too. But not solely. Through aggression they make an angry statement to the world about their abuse, the prejudice of schools, of whites, and the harm done to them by family members.

Denitra, who is twenty-two and has three children, said that as a child she was "stuck in the house" while her mother did drugs. Even today she has many secrets and few friends. She also sees herself as a "good girl:" responsible, doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, and is "kind-hearted." But when asked if she ever got into a fight as a child, she answered, "Oh my gosh! Almost every week [with] basically anybody." She explained that "basically it made me feel good. I got a lot of anger out, and you know that was that. I was happy." For one eight-year-old African-American girl, fighting is part of who she is. To her a good girl is someone who doesn't pick on "too many" people (my italics). But fighting? Well, "it's one of my favorite ways to let my anger out."

These are girls. They "should" be playing house or school or pet shop or some relational game with their best friend in the privacy of their bedroom. They should "tell the teacher" when someone threatens them so she will protect them. They should "walk away" if someone says a nasty remark to them, content in the superiority that they don't have to fight.

But what a luxury that would be. "Devil" children, like Aidee, whose mother called her that, are devil children because they have to be. Warlords, as Lillian dubbed herself, are warlords because there is a war out there. Fighting is a way a girl who is unprotected can stand her ground, feel some power, battle injustice, and seek revenge. Sure it's compensatory, in part. Compensatory because it is too threatening and horrible to feel the real lack of protection and vulnerability. Sure it's at times all bluff and bravado. And unfortunately so, because these tough girls are still likely to be victimized. But I wouldn't take this form of power away, coercive or not, until we can afford them better protection.

I also want to say that we should be careful not to normalize white middle-class girls who seek to mask or control their aggression as "real

girls” or “natural girls” while making these mostly lower-class, but some middle-class, girls the “problem girls.” Instead, we should see whether or not a girl is aggressive as a function of her need to be so. One might even argue that middle-class girls go unarmed into colleges and bars where men will grope and acquaintances might rape. Perhaps more of them should go to college better trained.

Chapter 23

Raising Aggressive Girls?

“[A fourteen-year-old girl] fought off a would be kidnapper as she walked home from school in La Crescenta California . . . she was able to break free of the attacker by administering a swift kick to the groin area which caused him to fall to the ground.”

—Los Angeles Times, November 23, 1993

Parents could learn a little from those “bad girls,” the ones who curse and fight and grow up to raise their own daughters to know and understand their potential for aggression and be able to use it if the situation calls for it. While pointless violence is always wrong, don’t we want girls to be able to fight if they need to? How many among us know that we could or would be able to fight back in a rape attack? Some of us would think of relying on our intelligence to talk the rapist out of it, or on our ingenuity to escape. Few of us have taken our daughters to a self-defense course. Teachers of self-defense always meet up with women’s resistance to using their body to defend themselves, their fear of bringing all of their anger and aggression to bear on a situation. Sometimes it’s necessary. Colette Dowling, author of *The Frailty Myth*, writes that most violence against women has a point: “to reaffirm that women are incapable of responding.” We have taught our daughters to not respond.

Some theorists have suggested that girls developed higher levels of conflict resolution because they *couldn’t* fight as well as the boys. But any of the “bad girls” I interviewed could tell you with pride about which boy

they clobbered on the playground. I think, instead, that the ladylike behavior expected of middle- or upper-class white girls, from the Deep South of the nineteenth century to the suburban homes of the fifties, was cultivated much to girls' detriment.

The trouble with the so-called bad girls is not that they've learned to be aggressive and that this is now an unnatural part of who they are, nor is it the fact that they take pride in their strength and ability to fight. The trouble is more one of judgment. Other methods of conflict resolution would help them in the long run, and they do turn to violence too readily, even when nonaggressive approaches would yield better results. But in the short run we ought not to disarm these girls who live in dangerous places, among dangerous people. Instead, we ought to first work with them on choosing ways in which they want to use their aggression, join with them in their pride in this ability, and help them to understand to not turn immediately to aggression. All this while working on longer-term solutions to poverty and violence in neighborhoods.

We need to help girls to understand and feel angry, justifiably angry, when the situation calls for it. Today, though there's a lot of "in your face" advertising about girl power and supposed girl assertiveness, anger is never discussed as a part of this right to exist. Jeffrie Murphy, a philosopher and author of many books and essays on virtue, argues that anger and resentment are the proper response when one's rights have been violated. But even in the shocking pink, wild, and wonderful teen guide *Deal With It*, advertised as a "whole new approach to your body, brain, and life as a gurl," including chapters on boobs, masturbation, and zits, there are no entries on aggression. Even in these authors' attempts to be subversive, they leave out the parts that just don't fit with being a girl. Anger is found under the topic of "Those Sucky Emotions," and in this section, girls are given advice from other girls on how to cope with it: "cry"; "count to 10 and wait for the feeling to go away"; and think about whether your anger could really be about "loneliness" or "poor self-esteem." Is anger only a "sucky" emotion? Is it *never* justified in the life of a girl? And why cry or wait for it to go away when you might actually do something about it?

Anger is one of a palette of emotions, all of which are rich resources to all girls. Middle-class girls need encouragement to be angry when they are justified to be so, to be heard out loud, and to develop ways of expressing it. They need to be taught about their own potential for aggression, to develop fighting back as a skill, and to know when they might use this power and when it is better to negotiate or walk away.

Girls who grow up in rougher neighborhoods ought to learn about other means of conflict resolution, but they also need better protection. We need to protect these children as well as we protect middle-class girls who grow up in suburbia. When they can relax their aggressive stance, they will be better able to reach out to others in solidarity and use their aggression on issues of fairness, justice, and protection of others.

It is quite interesting that one of the girls who felt the most pride for her aggression was the one who grew up among a lot of aunts who were beaten by husbands and boyfriends. At the age of seven, LaShauna stood up to a grown man to protect her aunt, and she backed him down. What a dangerous and courageous act.

Parents, teachers, neighbors:

- Don't let girls grow up afraid of their own aggression. Teach them to use it wisely: to learn to walk away when it is important, negotiate verbally when they can, and stand up physically for injustice and self-respect when it is needed.
- Realize that anger and aggressive feelings can be the impetus for creative and productive acts. It can lay behind the ambition to achieve, the desire to win, the urge to create and express oneself in art or by writing. These forms are not hidden forms of expression such as diaries but ways in which women have creatively and productively integrated their anger when they could.
- Don't let girls feel utterly helpless in the face of someone else's aggression. Teach them how to fight back or resist the aggression in all different ways, some physical, some not.
- Every girl should be given the opportunity to participate in an aggressive sport—to learn karate for example, or a team sport like soccer, or even how to box. These kinds of opportunities teach girls to feel their bodies are competent, and that they deserve to take up space.
- Remember that education about aggression doesn't undo empathy and caring. They can exist simultaneously in everyone's lives. Empathy, caring, and fairness are always important.