

“Balls” by Jim Van Buskirk  
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The other day, sitting on my therapist’s couch, I had a startling vision: my mother cut off my cock and balls, and then strapped them on herself.

I had just read to Harvey a passage copied into my notebook from a book by Phyllis Rose: “From the moment my son was born I found someone I preferred to all other men, some one who satisfied me as I could scarcely allow myself to be satisfied by a man my own age.... Of [my son] I approved without reservation. I loved his self-sufficiency as it grew, and I loved whatever lingered of his dependency. His maleness was my own.”

Struck by its frankness, I believed the passage portrayed how mother must have felt about me, her firstborn. But Harvey disagreed. He quickly convinced me that the author’s candid confession was actually a normal psychological response to her new son, unlike my mother’s relationship to me.

I pushed it out of my head, this horrific image of my mother mutilating me for her own needs. Then I tried to let it in. Finally, I verbalized it to Harvey, and he immediately validated the vision.

“Exactly. That’s what happened to you.”

I was shocked, sickened. How could it be? But I knew in my gut it was true. As I inhaled, tears filled my eyes. I had known of this castration for some time, but now I was trying to comprehend it on a deeper level. I felt ashamed and humiliated. One, that it had happened, but two, that everyone seemed to know this except me. I had no balls. Of course. It made perfect sense.

I had been passing as a man, but never quite successfully. I was a wimp, a wuss. Even as a gay man, I didn’t have what it took. I didn’t know what I was, but somehow I knew I wasn’t really a man. Because I was much more comfortable around women, I frequently referred to myself as a lesbian, without really knowing what I meant.

It was incredibly disorienting not feeling comfortable in my own body, presenting one way in the world while feeling completely different inside. I had profound respect for those transgendered individuals who underwent the painful and costly procedure of gender reassignment. But despite the many ways that I identified with my MTF and FTM friends, I knew I wasn’t one of them.

I sank back on Harvey’s leather couch. I felt lost. My power, my virility had been usurped by my mother and I had just visualized it. Tears trailed down my cheeks, and as I tried to keep breathing memories of my childhood bubbled up.

As a kid I wasn’t interested in sports or playing with the neighborhood boys. They played endless games of baseball in the cul-de-sac in front of our house; I read books and listened to records. Some days I sat on the sidelines and watched. I was amazed at the boys’ physical prowess and by the fact that I had no knowledge of their activities. Like games with balls.

While certain balls seemed to be associated with some games, which were played by different teams in other seasons, I could never sort out all the variations. There seemed to be football, basketball, baseball, softball . . .

Because I could never grasp the rules and rituals of this world, I pretended to have no interest in it. The balls I liked were ping-pong balls and miniature golf balls and billiard balls. Small balls, like the little hard red rubber balls I used to play jacks, with the girls. I felt safe with the girls. I liked playing jacks, and house and dressing up Barbie dolls.

“You run like a girl.” I don’t remember who told me that, but I believed them, so I stopped running. How did I learn that threading one’s belt from left to right is the way boys do it, only girls thread their belts from right to left. Looking at a shirt, I was informed that it was a girl’s; how did they know, I wondered: it buttoned differently. Selecting sunglasses, the pair I liked was for girls. My hyper vigilance increased. I was terrified of the gender traps seemingly everywhere. There were, apparently, two ways to carry one’s schoolbooks; I lived in fear of inadvertently holding mine the wrong way. Here was another test: look at your nails. Girls extended their hands palm down, while boys curled their fingers into their palm.

Or was it the other way around?

At La Palma Junior High, I was thrown into an exclusive world of boys. Before classes even started, I was instructed to purchase a whole set of clothes for Physical Education. My mother was the one who went with me to buy the gym uniform, as she did all my clothes. Together we checked the items off the list: reversible blue and gray T-shirt, blue shorts, white athletic socks—and a jockstrap. When we got home, my mother commanded, “Show us your outfit.” I went in to my room to try the articles on. I was particularly upset by the jock strap. How did I put it on? What did it do? Why did I need an athletic supporter at all? Didn’t everyone know I wasn’t athletic? (Didn’t everyone know, I now wonder, that I had no balls?)

“Come on out.”

I slunk down the hall and stood in the middle of the living room, in front of my father, my brother and my mother. I knew that it was a masquerade, that these were boys’ gym clothes and I wasn’t really a boy, at least not that kind of boy. Nevertheless I pretended: I marked my name on them with indelible ink, and took them to the first day of classes.

In gym class we were required to undress, “suit up,” and assemble outside on the asphalt court. I was a tall, awkward boy, hunched over, avoiding eye contact, trying to disappear. Unwanted for anyone’s team, no matter what the game, I considered it a victory if I wasn’t absolutely the last person chosen.

If it was baseball I was directed to a position so far outfield that I could do little damage. I awkwardly put on the well-worn leather mitt tossed to me. Sticking my hand into this piece of equipment I hoped that it would instill magical powers. Like I had seen the other boys do, I pounded my fist into the palm of the masculine article. But I felt no different, just slightly ridiculous, part of a hoax.

When my team was up for bat, I tried to avoid actually having to pick up the wooden stick: the jeers were just too painful. Sometimes I pretended to have already struck out, rather than actually do it.

Because I was tall, it was assumed that I would be better at basketball. I dutifully trotted back and forth across the wooden court, acting as if I cared which team was dribbling the big orange ball, and hoping that I would not be called upon to shoot a basket. With all eyes upon me, I invariably missed the hoop, and then tried to block out the groans and shouts that followed. The fifty-minute period felt like it would never end. I was grateful when finally we were ordered to the showers -- my next circle of hell.

Shyly I stripped off my clothes and entered the communal showers. I kept my eyes on the wet tiled floor, not looking up at the other boys' pubic hair or their cocks. I prayed not to get an erection, which, I knew, would result in being tormented. I self-consciously soaped up and rinsed off. Taking my tiny towel from the assistant coach assigned to passing them out, I walked briskly back to my locker, trying to dry my body with the stiff cloth that smelled incongruously of graham crackers. I kept my eyes down and avoided attracting attention. I didn't want to get a towel snapped at me. I can still feel that sting on my thigh.

Not completely dry, I quickly climbed into my white jockey shorts, and pulled my pants over them. I watched with wonder as other boys stepped into patterned boxers, shoving the baggy underwear into their jeans. I knew better than to get caught staring, but I thought maybe I might still figure out how to be a boy.

Fridays after class we were required to take home our gear so it could be laundered. I spread my T-shirt on a bench and into it placed the other articles.

Rolling from the bottom of the blue and gray T, I learned to pull the sleeves back over the cylinder making a two-toned sausage. This phallic totem I handed to my mother, another offering up of my maleness. I never fully understood this ritual. It certainly wasn't as if I actually perspired during the week.

I continually prayed for rain, which meant that we wouldn't have to "dress out." Rainy days are rare in Southern California; I thanked God when my prayers were answered.

By high school somebody must have felt sorry for me: I was assigned to adaptive P.E. It was embarrassing, being with the other "retards": the fat kids, the asthmatics, the ones recovering from a broken limb. There I wasn't always the most physically uncoordinated. I actually enjoyed the emphasis on swimming, gymnastics and other individual pursuits, with less focus on competition. I tried not to think about the fact that their disability might be only temporary while mine was apparently terminal.

Harvey interrupted my reminiscing to tell me that our fifty-minute session was almost over. "And what about your father?" he asked. "Did he ever play sports with you?"

"Not really."

"How about with your brother?"

"Yes," I acknowledged, then hesitated. "But no balls."

We laughed at the inadvertent double entendre. Again I was forced to confront my complicated relationship to maleness, my family -- and the many variety of balls.