

WHERE THE SPIDERS WERE

I find it when I am packing up the books. It's tucked between a collection of album covers from the 1970's and a book on Self-revealing Artworks by People in the Public Eye.

At first the books seem randomly placed, but I think I detect a thematic order. The interior—philosophy, religion, mythology, a hand-drawn guide on yoga positions. The exterior—books on fashion and make-up, tattooing, jewellery, and stylistic movements.

In between, bridging the gap between private thought and public outcome are stacks of novels, a few slim volumes of poetry, and plenty of second-hand art books.

I hold the home-made pamphlet and pause, considering its placement. The flimsy pages have a title page, 'A Young Mans' Guide to Leaving Home.' Written by me, eighteen months before.

Did he consider the advice I had given as a guide to putting on a public face? Or had he slipped it in between two larger books carelessly disregarded. Did he read it at all?

I study it—looking for creases or dog-ears, signs of wear and tear.

INTRODUCTION

The time has come. You're leaving home, my son. I don't mean to lecture or nag, but to offer some guidance that you can refer to if and when you need it.

I was giving him a get-out right from the beginning. I may as well have said, 'You don't have to listen to me because I've written it down,' or, 'I've made it easy for you— we can avoid conversation.'

BEING A GOOD HOUSEMATE

Be sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. They might not like loud music at 1 am, even if it is your favourite band! Not everyone is chatty when they first get up. Sometimes people have a lot on their minds, or they might be shy. You can't always know how people are feeling, but you can be sensitive to their moods.

I've always hated having to speak at breakfast. I don't like interruptions between me and my coffee. It's like a slow mourning saying goodbye to my numbing sleep, summoning the courage to face the day. You knew to give me a wide berth, even from a very young age.

1. While you want to be sensitive to others, remember that other people might not be very good at it—they won't always understand how you're feeling. Be forgiving of others' mistakes.

I sometimes get a blistering feeling when people stand too close, needy for my attention. I have to summon rigid self-control not to cry out, "Go away. Get out of my face".

2. If you're feeling low, don't hide. Instead, try to be sociable. If you think one of your housemates is shy or hiding away, perhaps struggling, try to make simple overtures to help them join in, for example, by knocking on their door and offering a cup of tea.

When I was a child, I often hid in my room to escape the poisonous arguments and seething furies. Then, we had plenty of tea; a pot re-topped into stewed and tannic tar.

If I felt you were too long in your room, I'd come and disturb you—to disrupt your quietness that might be disguising distress.

3. Make use of the shared space. Don't feel intimidated. You have as much right to be there as anyone else.

I didn't like interruption. I was never a patient mother, the kind who could dawdle, exploring gates and hedges on a walk to the shops. Sometimes I think I revealed my irritation. I wanted you to grow up.

4. Make sure you stick to rules regarding cleaning rotas/food sharing etc.

House rules that slide like wettened clay. Small rebellions against the rigidity of childhood — the growing disinterest in enforcement in the face of apathy and resentment. Busy and self-absorbed, I let lots of things slide—like appreciation, like paying attention.

A GUIDE TO A FRAGRANT BEDROOM

There are plenty of aromas that conjugate in a young man's bedroom; sweaty socks, trainers and workout gear, hormonal pheromones, plus, yes, we all know. If you'd like your room to be fresh and pleasant, even a social place, here are a few tips..

1. Open your windows. Allow fresh air in as often as the weather allows. If you can get a through draught, even better.

When you were small, young enough to have fears about sleeping, you imagined terrors in the dark, black spiders that crept over the floors and formed scuttling shadows on walls and doors.

We would pull the curtains tight to shut out the long summer evenings, slivers of light escaping from behind the drapes to tempt you away from your bed. I remember the frustration of hearing you moving about, restless, and furious that we might be having fun without you. 'It's bedtime. Go to sleep! I'm not coming up again'.

2. Change your sheets regularly. It might seem a hassle, but the upside is the deliciousness of a freshly made bed.

We had a ritual at bedtime. After the story, I'd pull up the covers, form a firm crease to fold across your small chest. I'd pretend to dig in my pocket for the stardust that only I, with my magical motherly powers, could see and feel.

You would close your eyes as I pretended to dust your eyelids, stroking the pale veined skin with my finger, blowing gently, giving you the gift of sweet and pleasant dreams.

3. Use tissues for those moments of self-love and dispose of them in the loo. Otherwise, the smell lingers and becomes fetid. Don't use your towel or anything that you won't clean promptly.

You grew tall and lanky. The stories you wanted didn't come from me any longer. I learnt to knock and pause at your door to allow for furtive recovery. The stardust stayed, watching while you slept; Ziggy Stardust, with lightning bolt eyes and dyed red hair. You took that picture with you and hung it above your bed. Your inspiration, you said.

4. You might like to eat snacks in your room but try to resist eating hot food. Aromas linger. Think of the smell of the kitchen bin and ask yourself, do I want that in my bedroom?

5. Clean your room. Not just the bits you can see but behind and under things too.
It's the bits we can't see that cause all the trouble. Or perhaps I should say, the bits we choose not to show, or even the bits we know that are there but try our damndest to ignore.

WASHING YOUR CLOTHES

There is nothing worse than realising that you have nothing to wear. You can have multiple pairs of pants and socks but at some stage, they still need washing.

Pants and socks—that seems so quaint. Shoulder pads, striped tight-fitting trousers, and plastic knee-high boots more like it. I didn't give any advice on removing make-up stains. Or on how to get the glitter out of your hair.

1. Try to diarise regular times to do your washing. If you get in the habit of doing it each week, your life will be so much easier. Try to do small amounts often. If you save it all up until you've run out of clothes, you'll be in the laundry forever.

When you were young, you liked to pair up socks. You'd sort by colour and by size, making neat uniform balls. The stray socks disturbed you. Where had their partners gone? How could such abandonment happen within the drum of the machine?

2. Put your dirty items in a laundry bag and keep them separate from your clean clothes. Wash sweaty kit post a workout or run as soon as possible. Otherwise, the smell becomes engrained in the clothes and is hard to shift.

Sweat from dancing, your shirt split to the navel, your chest, flat white and hairless with that morgue-like pastiness from never seeing the sun.

3. If you hang your shirts up on hangers and fold them, you can avoid doing much ironing at all.

You took care of your clothes—your costumes, your armoury. You pressed and altered, repaired, and embellished: sequins and tassels, feather boas and hats, exaggerated shoulders, belts, and bracelets. Thin multi-coloured scarves, a black felt eye patch.

SHARING A KITCHEN & HEALTHY EATING

A shared kitchen is a testing environment. Resentments can build quickly. Who ate my last yoghurt? Who used my cereal bowl as an ashtray? There is no easy way to overcome these issues, and they will occur. Often. Try to make sure you are not the one inviting complaints. *The problems I anticipated seem so trivial now. Who cares about a few dirty dishes? Who cares about stains and messes that come from sharing sustaining food? There are far worse stains to imagine.*

1. Putting plates in the sink is not cleaning them. Wipe down surfaces and clean any splashes from the oven. Always tidy up after yourself. And if the rubbish bin needs emptying, empty it—even if it's not your turn.

You left snail trails behind you; the crumbs and jam spots, the spilt granules of sugar. The empty jars and bottles returned carefully to the fridge, and the freezer door left ajar to ooze creeping ice to blister and swell.

2. Don't nick food from your flatmates. Not even a little bit. Not even if you think they won't notice (they will) or mind (they will).

I was in the habit of writing notes. 'Don't forget your P.E. kit.' 'Please empty the dishwasher,' or 'Your room is a tip. Please sort it ASAP!' Deadening little messages that invited screw-balling into the bin.

Maybe that is why I was surprised to find my guide, to see it had survived, intact. Did you read what I wrote, and if you so, did you scoff? Were you grateful? Sentimental? More importantly, could you read between the lines?

3. Try to eat a balanced diet, including lots of fruit and vegetables, and manage your intake of sugars. Too much can give you a quick high and a long crash, making you

feel lethargic and not very good about yourself. Try to keep some staples so that you can always rustle up a quick meal at short notice.

Try to eat! You liked it when your hands (or someone else's hands) could circle your waist.

Sure, you had long fingers but even so. My son, you needed to eat more to keep your strength up.

4. Don't keep food beyond its use-by date. Trust your nose—bad food smells and can make you ill.

Trust. I should have told you to trust all your instincts, the raw animal ones. To be wary of danger, to sniff the wind like a rare beast in the wilderness. To listen, tuning your ear to the rumblings of discord, raised voices singeing with spite, to watch for movements, sidling in your peripheral vision. To have eyes in the back of your head.

5. When chopping fresh meat, always clean the board thoroughly before using it for anything else. Keep cooked meat separate from fresh meat. Don't let anything bloody leak onto fresh food. That's the way to get food poisoning.

Son, don't let anything bloody leak!

KEEPING YOURSELF FIT AND HANDSOME

If you're feeling fit and healthy, you'll feel good about yourself. Your brain gets a positive effect from exercise. There is a rush of endorphins that brings happiness and a sense of well-being. You don't have to be an Olympian to feel this. A brisk walk will do it. There will be times when you will spend long periods at your desk studying. Try to make sure you break up these hours with bursts of activity. Walk up and down a few flights of stairs or do a few minutes of star jumps in your room. Your body and your brain will thank you for it.

You were gorgeous but not strong or fit. Tall and arresting with your long angular limbs.

Your spiked up hair, sharp-edged cheekbones, your hooded eyes.

1. Be realistic. Don't buy a membership to the gym if you know you won't use it.

That's just throwing money away.

2. Swimming is a great all-around exercise, using all your muscles without straining or hard impact. It's also very relaxing and calming.

And yes, there are the saunas and the sweltering steam rooms where inhibitions scatter as easily as the quickly shed clothes.

3. Dance dance dance! You love it, and it's exercise without feeling like it.

Of course, you danced! You didn't need me to state the bleeding obvious.

4. Try to walk as much as possible. It is good for your body and mind, and you will get to know your campus and the surrounding area. Walking can be a process of discovery that is very rewarding. It's also free!

Is this yet another point where I went wrong? Sometimes walking is so free that it costs you—you can be striding along, arms swinging, carefree, only to turn a sharp corner and find yourself penned in, trapped in a dead-end.

5. Running is a great way to keep fit. It's as long or short as you like, plus you can do it anywhere at any time.

I should have taught you to run like the wind. To surprise with a swift turn on your patent high heel to sprint freely, safely away from those chasing, vigorous in hateful pursuit.

MANAGING YOUR MONEY

Many young people get into difficulty when they first live independently. There is the shock of realising how much everything costs when you have to buy it all yourself.

1. Budget. I know that is the most boring thing a mother could say, but it's the only way to manage your spending. You will need to consider how much you can spend in a week and how much of that money to allow for transport, food, books, and social life. Be realistic and stick to your budget.

Budgeting suggests such meanness and caution. Now, I would spend every penny, every saved and pocketed pound. I'd throw notes in the air. I'd fritter and splurge in extravagant abandonment on every single cherished moment with you.

2. Don't give your money away to beggars or homeless people. I know it's hard to see people suffering, but there are other, better ways to help, like volunteering or fundraising by participating in a charity event.

That was you all over. You didn't like to see others in pain. You would never dream of hurting someone else. You would never pick on someone because of the way they acted or dressed or spoke. The way they sauntered down a street with stardust in their eyes, their bright red head catching flame-like in the glare of passing headlights. You never understood where hatred came from.

3. Get in the habit of keeping your bank card in the same place, so you know where to find it. Keep your money safe.

Son, keep yourself safe.

DRUGS & ALCOHOL

This section is not a lecture. Socialising is a vital part of student life, and you want to enjoy it to the full. The emphasis wants to stay on the enjoyable.

I listed points of sensible advice. I tried to make light of it by quoting Dean Martin; “You're not drunk if you can lie on the floor without holding on,” but I knew the horror stories of spiked cocktails and drinking competitions that went tragically wrong. I worried about overdoses and choking on vomit, of walking under the influence into speeding cars or falling into rivers while unsteady on your feet. I thought I had imagined the worst.. I thought I was alerting you to the most serious dangers. I was blind in my imagined wisdom, worrying about the wrong things.

1. Drink at your own pace. Don't let bullies pester you into drinking more than feels comfortable or into taking anything you don't want to. Ever.

You were your own man —you weren't the kind who followed the crowd.

2. Try not to drink on an empty stomach. You'll get drunk much more quickly, and your hangover will be far worse.
3. Drink water between drinks. Drink water before you go to bed. A hangover comes from dehydration—the fluid surrounding your brain depletes, and this causes headaches and nausea. Drink water.

You didn't have a taste for drink. We never drew lines on the gin bottle or found empty cans hidden in your room. You didn't like the weight of beer; you didn't like to feel slow or heavy. It was dancing that made you high. It was life, in all its screaming richness, that made you high.

4. In the pub, take your turn to buy a round of drinks. But don't be the one who is always going to the bar. You don't want to fund others' drinking, especially if it's more excessive than yours.

You wouldn't have minded. You didn't keep a ledger of obligation in your head. You found pleasure in being generous.

5. If you're offered drugs and feel curious to try, start with a small amount. You want to feel the effect and know if you like it before taking too much. Wait. Never take a second dose without knowing the effects from the first try. Always know what you're taking and if in doubt, don't.

I thought I was subtle — implying that you wouldn't be the one to have bought the drugs. I pretended to assume your innocence. I pretended not to notice so many things.

6. With highs come lows. Drugs, like alcohol, alter your equilibrium and the dopamine in the brain.

While they might make you feel on top of the world, there can be a crashing return to earth.

7. If others' drunken behaviour upsets you, leave. Don't stay in a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable. Not all people are happy drunks.

You did leave. You were uncomfortable. But where was my advice on personal safety? Why didn't I tell you to keep your phone charged? About being cautious of walking in dank, dark streets alone late at night. A warning that your snaking hips and extraordinary clothes might provoke hateful, dangerous emotions. I should have alerted you to baiters who bully and

batter to leave you smashed, bashed and bloody. Why didn't I say to you that I knew who you were, my beloved boy, endangered by the stardust in your eyes?

Son, keep yourself safe.

Son, I wish I'd told you how to keep yourself safe.

Son, I'm so sorry I didn't keep you safe.