INTRODUCTION:
LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

‘For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.’

Aristotle

A CHARACTER STUDY

I’m sixteen, and I have rudely interrupted the school choir’s rendition of Silent Night by passing out and falling from the top step of the soprano rostrum onto the unsuspecting scrunchies of the girls below.

I don’t know if you’ve ever fainted, but, experientially speaking, it’s pretty interesting. Of course, it’s hard to concentrate on its interestingness when you’re a sixteen-year-old girl who’s just made a dick of herself in front of the entire school, but never mind. Fainting is like watching fuzzy black clouds slowly encroach on your vision from the outside in. By the time you’re aware that there’s only a small and shrinking puddle of light through which to find
the world, you’re not entirely sure whether you’re dreaming or awake. Then you decide dreaming. Then you wake up on top of Patricia Houlihan, who is saying ‘Jesus Christ’, although this ejaculation may well get her detention for blasphemy. (Detention for blasphemy is not unheard of. In fact, I only ever got detention once, and it was for answering ‘Jesus’ when my history teacher asked me who founded the Gaelic Athletic Association.)

When you are peeled off poor Patricia, a kindly vice-principal takes you outside and says nice things like ‘it was very stuffy in there.’ You are both well aware, however, from the sight and sound of your bluish, crackling and emaciated wrists, that the problem is not a lack of oxygen, but a lack of foodstuffs other than Weetabix, soup, apples and half of whatever your mother nightly begs you to eat for dinner. The vice-principal asks if you want to call your parents. You say no – it’s almost home time anyways. When the refrain of Silent Night re-establishes itself, making you cringe like a poked hedgehog, the vice-principal says, with the psychic intuition lifelong observers of teenage anxiety possess, ‘no one will remember after the holidays.’ And that, to the best of my recollection, is what happens when you faint.

This is a book about how we perform our genders. It is also, in large part, about the body – because our bodies are used to define us and socialise us. I’ve started with an image of my body falling because the event is a kind of performance. Perhaps not an intentional or conscious one, but a performance all the same – a part of the character I assumed to play the part of ‘girl’. The fall is not a benign,
sweet or giggly enactment of girldom: it’s a harmful one, a sad one; it’s a performance that shows we need a new script. While lots of people, such as my erstwhile vice-principal, can recognise this need, no one seems to know how the lines got written in the first place, let alone how to begin writing new ones. And so the problem is ignored. The show, after all, must go on.

This is also, often, a book about my own experiences, which are personal and subjective. I’m aware that my life does not hold universal relevance. I hope it’s still worthwhile, however, to share the lessons I’ve learned as a woman who likes to play with social expectation, who gave up trying not to embarrass herself years ago, and who has spent a lot of time thinking about the pleasures, pitfalls and contradictions of performing her girldom and her womanhood.

A brief note on what this book is not: it isn’t a scientific book about neurological differences between men and women. There are lots of excellent publications on the subject out there – I particularly like Lise Eliot’s *Blue Brain*, *Pink Brain* and Cordelia Fine’s *Delusions of Gender*, both of which are rigorous, entertaining and written by women with PhDs in neuroscience.

Based on my reading of Eliot, Fine and others, my understanding of differences between male and female brains is this: there are small innate biological differences between men and women’s psychologies, which our treatment of people in male bodies and female bodies conditions into significant and oftentimes worrisome gaps. The brain is plastic, and while both nature and nurture affect the people we come to be, it is our nature, as humans, to be nurtured.
EMER O’TOOLE

That’s why thinking of gender as a kind of performance – as a series of acts that can, with conscious intent, be rewritten – is an idea with revolutionary power. If we can change these performances, we can transform what it means to be male or female in our society.

I have a PhD in theatre studies (a fact that was predictable from about the time I was three years old). This makes me the kind of doctor you least want to be sat next to should you be having a heart attack on a plane, but the one you most want to be beside should you want to spend the flight downing G&Ts and humming show tunes. Joking aside, I believe in the importance of studying performance – onstage and off – as a way of understanding human behaviour and identity.

But back to my blue-fingered, crackle-boned teenage incarnation. Why was I starving myself? From the outside, self-enforced hunger looks like a pretty masochistic way for anyone to treat their body. If my teachers thought my parents had been restricting me to 1000 calories or under every day for six months – until my periods stopped, my extremities were blue and I had more hair stuck to the shoulders of my school jumper than to my scalp – they’d have called social services: it’d be abuse. So, when someone behaves like this, it’s logical – in our individualistic society – to assume that self-starvation equals self-loathing and self-harm. And for some people it does. But I did not hate myself and I didn’t want to hurt myself.

I’ve had family, friends and lovers try to convince me that my eating disorder was the result of problems at home, or confusion about my sexuality, or exam stress,
or an unfulfilled childhood desire for a pet stick insect, and I’ve listened and seriously considered all of this \((d id I subconsciously want a stick insect?)\). But these explanations seem removed from the simple truth: I was starving myself because I wanted to be very thin.

In Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, the Ancient Greek philosopher suggests that happiness is the only thing that a person can desire for its own sake. If I ask you why you want money, you might answer, ‘to buy diamonds’. If I ask why you want diamonds, you might answer, ‘because they’re beautiful’. If I ask why you want beauty, you might reply, ‘because it makes me happy’. But it doesn’t make any sense to ask why you want happiness. Happiness is the ultimate end – the only thing you can desire for its own sake and nothing more.

My teenage self would have wrecked Aristotle’s Hellenic head. Imagine: it’s 340BC, and sixteen-year-old me patters past the Acropolis on spindly legs. I bump into Arty boy, and, even though he believes that people with vaginas are too irrational to be able to think properly,\(^5\) he condescends to speak with me. ‘My my, Emer,’ he says, ‘you do look like you need a sizeable chunk of feta. Pray, why are you starving yourself?’ ‘Well, friend Aristotle,’ I reply, ‘it’s because I want to be thin.’ ‘Ah yes, but *why* do you want to be thin?’ says Aristotle. ‘Girls should be thin,’ I answer. ‘Do you not desire to be thin in order to attract a virile young Athenian male?’ ‘Mmmm, no, I have a boyfriend. He thinks I should put on some weight.’ ‘Do you not desire to be thin so that you can embark on a successful modelling career? Not here in Athens, of course – for aesthetic and practical
purposes our sculptors prefer women with fewer bones in high relief – but perhaps in some twisted foreign or future clime, where emaciated women are venerated? ‘Mmmm, no, I want to be a doctor when I grow up.’

Aristotle is getting a bit pissed off at this point, but he doesn’t like to let on when his tunic’s being tugged the wrong way. ‘See now,’ he helpfully explains, ‘every desire or need can be explained in terms of another desire or need, until finally we reach the ultimate end: happiness. Yes? So, in what way do you think that being thin will make you happy?’ ‘Because it’s good to be thin? Y’know, like the girls on TV?’ It is at this point that Aristotle storms off home and writes that in women the deliberative capacity lacks force. Femaledom suffers for his observations for millennia. Sorry.

Our complex brains mean that we are all philosophers. For Aristotle, because humans are rational by their nature, happiness comes, in large part, from thinking about how best to act and, based on this, living a good life. Being in good health, having enough money and allowing ourselves pleasures contributes to our happiness, but – because we’re thinkers – we can’t really be fulfilled unless we’re acting in ways that we believe are valuable.

Aristotle says that it’s through carrying out brave acts that we become brave, generous acts that we become generous, or just acts that we become just. The actions we perform over time create our characters, our sense of worth and our happiness. For Aristotle, we should behave in ways that are ‘virtuous’. And what’s particularly satisfying about his idea of virtue is that it isn’t the same rule for everyone, but,
rather, people have to figure out the ways of acting that are best for themselves.

This theory of happiness might have been written approximately 2,350 years ago, but it still has a lot to teach us. What Aristotle understands as ‘virtue’, I understand as thinking about our social roles and acting in ways that will create the kind of world we’d like to see. But this is hard, because we receive a lot of ‘common sense’ ideas about the parts we should play from our families, friends and from society more broadly; we are rewarded for playing these parts, and we have to deal with the fall-out if we act differently.

Teenage me wanted to be very thin because she knew that, in her society, it was good to be very thin. It almost didn’t make sense to ask why. All my girl friends wanted to be thin. All the women in magazines and on television were thin. Fat people were to be mocked and/or pitied. And yes, my diet went too far (possibly because I was small anyways so it took me less time to become unhealthy), but was my ‘anorexia’ really all that different to my friends’ yo-yoing and guilt-drenched relationships with their bodies and with food? We were all trying out for the same star role: that of the skinny chick.

I’d been socialised to believe that women should be thin. I learned this belief early from the images and attitudes around me; I internalised it, and while I might have been able to question it on a theoretical level, in my practical, day-to-day experience it was an incontrovertible truth. Being thin was a way of performing my society’s ideal of femininity. My friends and I were acting in ways we thought were good,
presuming that we’d get pleasure from being considered beautiful, without stopping to think about how these ways of acting were affecting us and the world around us: without properly considering that it was possible to act differently.

Being thin wasn’t the only way of performing my society’s ideal of femininity. I also needed a padded bra because my breasts were small, unacceptably un-spherical and adorned with deeply provocative nipples (the contours of which it was necessary to disguise); I needed make-up because my face was plain without it; fake tan because my skin was not an appropriate shade of caramel; and razors because my body hair was disgusting. I was socialised into all these beliefs, and not only did I internalise them, I shamed women who didn’t conform to them and enjoyed the praise I received for performing my pin-limbed, padded, painted and plucked female identity.

I also learned other, less tangible attitudes towards how women should act from my home life, school life and exposure to media and culture: attitudes to child-rearing, parenthood and housework; attitudes about who belongs in positions of power; attitudes to language; and attitudes to sexuality.

My mother usually started the day with an hour of ironing before getting my brothers and me off to school. I used to like waking up to the comforting creak of the ironing board and the clean, steamy smell in the kitchen. After convincing her three kids to get out of bed, providing them with uncrumpled school uniforms, breakfasting them, packing their lunches, ensuring that they were clad in outer layers proficient to external temperature and moisture and
bundling them off down the road to school, Mum would go to work in Galway City. When we were younger, we had a babysitter who was there when we got home in the afternoon, feeding us and keeping the place tidy. When we got older, we didn’t, and we’d all tumble in, leave a hurricane’s worth of chaos in the kitchen, and plonk ourselves in front of *Home and Away*. Mum would return to a filthy house and unresponsive offspring. Then she’d get angry and shout at us, before cleaning up and starting to cook our dinner. My father didn’t cook and did almost no housework.

As I got older and developed the curious capacity of empathy for one’s parents, I fell into a pattern of trying to have the house nice for Mum when she came home. This meant that I cleaned up after my brothers a lot. (Until we got a PlayStation, Ciarán – the youngest – could sometimes be persuaded to help out, but Ronan – the eldest – was impossible.) Now, if you’d asked me if I was tidying up after my brothers and father because I was a girl, I’d have said, ‘no, I’m doing it because I don’t want Mum to be upset when she gets home.’ But I clearly learned that it was my role to do this work from somewhere. And my brothers learned that they were justified in sitting around on their arses from somewhere too.

When I watched the news at night, the vast majority of political leaders making speeches and decisions were male. My parents and teachers told me that I could be anything I wanted to be, but that message was silently contradicted by the power structures I was becoming aware existed around me. Positions of power were primarily male positions.

On television, men middle-aged or older presented chat
EMER O’TOOLE

shows alongside young, beautiful female colleagues. The implication, again unspoken, was clear: the men were there due to their talents, and the women (even if also talented) due to their looks. It was not enough to be clever and dedicated – if I wanted success, I needed to be pretty too.

From the language I read in books, studied in class and heard spoken around me I learned that, collectively, people made up humanity: that fellow feeling led to the brotherhood of man. ¹ I learned that in cases where a pronoun was needed and the gender of the subject was unclear, I should use ‘he’ or ‘him’. In business studies class, I learned to address letters to ‘Dear Sirs’, or ‘Dear Sir or Madam’, never ‘Dear Madams’, and never ‘Dear Madam or Sir’. I learned that adult men were Misters and remained Misters their lives long, while women would transmogrify from Miss to Missus when someone liked it enough to put a ring on it. I learned that when two people got married, the woman took her husband’s name, as did all the small humans she grew in her tummy. I learned to use language that privileged male experience and identity – language that put women second.

I heard the terms ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ used as insults, and the term ‘man’ used as praise. I learned a plethora of words for women who had lots of sexual partners – slag, slapper, slut, floozy, tramp, tart, loose, easy, prozzy, bike, whore

¹ I first came across this phrase reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Eleanor Roosevelt, who co-wrote the declaration, is a personal hero and she had the excuse that she was writing in the fifties. 4 Non Blondes, however, as ‘90s pop rock starlets, have no such excuse, and we should all endeavour to change the lyrics to (the timeless classic) ‘What’s Up’ whenever some cheeseball (me) starts playing it at parties.
– and one for men: gigolo, which always seemed to carry an air of humorous accomplishment somehow. And I learned the worst thing you could say, the very worst word of all, was cunt. I learned to talk about female sexual behaviour and the female body differently – more pejoratively – to the way I spoke about male equivalents.

Like almost all Irish people who grow up in the Republic, I went to Catholic school, and learned to bless myself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I learned that divinity and authority were male, and Mary, the mortal mother of God, was blessed because she was a virgin. Every Sunday I went to mass, and watched a man on the altar (in a position from which women are forbidden) tell me how to behave. I learned that to be godly meant to accept the inferior position of women. (I’m an atheist now, thank God.)

In sex ed (what little of it we had), we learned that abortion was wrong, and that abstinence was the only sure-fire way to prevent pregnancy. Three girls in my co-ed year of about 120 were pregnant before our final exams. That’s one in twenty. That’s five per cent. Women have no access to abortion in Ireland. We learned that the choice fourteen Irish women make every day – to travel to England and terminate a pregnancy – was morally wrong. We learned that women are immoral.

And when it came to sexuality, I grew up surrounded by ignorance: homophobia, misogyny and slut shaming. I came from a progressive household compared to most of my friends (my mother works in sexual health, so she’s pretty clued in), but I distinctly remember Mum saying, ‘of course I’ll love you if you’re gay. But I hope you’re not, because
it’d make your life so much more difficult.’ Which is really very sweet and maternal, but, combined with the regressive attitudes of the West of Ireland in the nineties in general, didn’t exactly instil me with confidence in exploring my sexuality outside of sanctioned boy-meets-girl parameters. I learned to act like a straight girl.

I knew how to perform my female identity in the way my society deemed best. Other girls, from different nations, cultures, classes or races learn different, but intersecting, versions of this role. I was well into adulthood before I became aware that I was in a carefully scripted show. Even after I began to see the lights, the curtains, the expectant audience singing along, I didn’t stop playing my ordained part. I continued to sport the compulsory costume and choreography of womanhood, repeating the appropriate feminine actions that created my appropriately feminine character. I’d only learned one set of lines. I had no idea what would happen if I started making up new ones as I went along.

This book began with an image of my body falling, because this book is going to take the body down and rebuild it. From the second the doctor shouts ‘it’s a girl’ our bodies are used to define us, to dictate which of our behaviours are acceptable, and how it is acceptable for others to treat us. Our bodies are coded and costumed to turn us into easily identifiable men and women, creating artificial divisions in society and limiting the identities that people of any gender feel confident performing. So let’s start thinking about our performances of womanhood – where they came from, whose agendas they serve – and let’s start writing new scripts.
CHAPTER ONE: REHEARSING

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts

Shakespeare (Jacques from As You Like It)

I ENJOY BEING A GIRL

I am a nine-year-old diva, and my Saturday stage school is putting on its annual end-of-year variety show in Our Holy Mother of Mercy school hall. It’s a high-octane event – a night on which memories are made, dreams broken. Rehearsals have been intensive, and butterflies on amphetamine now flutter in the tummies of Galway’s most precocious little brats. Backstage is a heady mélange of fake tan, hair spray, ripped tights, orangey pound-shop foundation sticks and about a hundred gigantic egos in tiny human vessels.

This year I’ve been chosen to sing a duet with a boy called Paul (who I do NOT fancy, leave me alone he’s NOT my boyfriend and I HAVE to sit on his knee ’cause that’s the CHOREOGRAPHY). We are Hansel and Gretel, and, as we
wait in the wings dressed in what’s supposed to be, respectively, lederhosen and a mini milkmaid outfit (but is actually, respectively, braces and school trousers tucked into Paul’s dad’s socks and some random flowery dress), we watch the girls from the class above perform their chorus number.

And it’s strange, because I don’t remember much about my Hansel and Gretel song (other than that I believed it completely unnecessary for me to have to sit on Paul’s knee), but I’ve always remembered the piece that went on before it. In it, about twenty little girls in various shades of pink sported fake pearls, frills (ex-doilies), heads full of curlers, and faces full of make-up. They sang and danced to ‘I Enjoy Being a Girl’ from the 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song*.

*I’m a girl, and by me that’s only great!*
*I am proud that my silhouette is curvy,*
*That I walk with a sweet and girlish gait*  
*With my hips kind of swively and swervy.*

The little starlets (well, the ones who, faced with their expectant public, could remember to do anything other than stare like doomed rabbits into the spotlights) twirled and simpered in parodies of womanhood: waggling their hips, primping their pouts, blowing kisses and posing for imaginary wolf whistles.

*I adore being dressed in something frilly*
*When my date comes to get me at my place.*
*Out I go with my Joe or John or Billy,*  
*Like a filly who is ready for the race!*
In the audience, mums and dads attempted to photograph their daughters at moments when they appeared to be in step with the other children. Some had to be physically restrained from running on stage to rescue little Róisín or Maeve, who had emerged from her light-induced stupor only to start sobbing. Most, however, smiled at the silliness of the spectacle – at these fillies, so far from ready for racing, enacting faux-flirty caricatures of outmoded womanhood. This was a song from the fifties, after all, and, even in the (not exactly cosmopolitan) nineties West of Ireland, we were well past these clichés of ‘being a girl’, weren’t we?

Yet, I’m not so sure, age nine, that I got the irony. Childhood is, in many ways, a rehearsal for adulthood, and I don’t think I understood that the image of womanhood sent up in this song was not one I should someday hope to perform. The messages I was getting from the world around me seemed to indicate that to be proud of being a girl meant to be proud of being pretty and sweet. During the ‘girls/boys are better than boys/girls’ wars in which feisty small humans so enthusiastically engage, I didn’t seem to have much ammo. Boys were bigger, boys were stronger and, in my occasional analyses of the incomprehensible world of adults, it did look as though boys were more likely to be in charge.

If I was proud of being a girl, what was I supposed to be proud of? If I liked being a girl (which I was pretty sure I did; I mean, I wouldn’t have swapped or anything), what was it that I was supposed to like? I think I’ve always believed, perhaps from having two brothers I’m very close to, that boys and girls are the same on the inside. I certainly
didn’t think that boys were smarter, or girls more emotional. I knew I could add things up as quickly as my big brother, and I knew that boys, brave in public because it was expected of them, were every bit as much cry babies at home.

If boys and girls were more or less the same on the inside, to be proud of being a girl must’ve meant to be proud of something on the outside. It wasn’t being stronger than boys or better at sports (although I was definitely better at climbing trees: a sport for which, sadly, there was little official recognition), so it must be the things that girls do differently – how they dress; how they look. To be proud of being a girl must mean to be proud of all this ‘girly’ stuff.

When I have a brand new hairdo  
With my eyelashes all in curl,  
I float as the clouds on air do,  
I enjoy being a girl!

As I grew up, my appearance did seem to be of more importance than my brothers’. Take our First Holy Communions, which happened when we were six or seven. My brothers wore nice little trousers and waistcoats, sure, but did they get special white dresses with hoops inside that swung like lampshades and glimmered with crystalline beads? Did they get tiaras or bows for their hair? Did they wear white gloves? Or have little silk purses into which to stuff the tenners pressed into their blesséd (yet greedy) hands by aunties and uncles?

I remember how special all this pomp made me feel.
I remember looking at myself in the mirror and thinking I looked like an angel princess. (Sadly, the angel princess was lacking her two front teeth, making her appear, in truth, less like an angel princess and more like a photographic negative of Bugs Bunny.) In short, I remember learning that self-decoration made me feel special.

*When men say I’m cute and funny*
*And my teeth aren’t teeth, but pearl,*
*I just lap it up like honey*
*I enjoy being a girl!*

It seemed to be largely exterior things that made other people think I was special too. When, holding my mum’s hand, one of her friends or acquaintances approached (I have one of those mums who knows everyone), I always knew how the conversation would go:

‘Is this yours?’
‘It is, yes.’
‘Isn’t she gorgeous?’
‘Well, I think so.’
‘She isn’t a bit like you.’
‘No.’

And, as my mum dealt pleasantly with the backhanded insults, I would smile at the stranger who’d complimented me, not paying much attention really. (This would generally have been the millionth stranger my mother had stopped to talk to in the preceding ten minutes. Sometimes strangers would pile up. It was as if all of Galway was conspiring, yes *conspiring*, to make me late for dance class.)
This stuff penetrated. I didn’t realise it for a long time, but the constant adult commentary on the merits of my physical appearance, it penetrated. It taught me to value myself as others seemed to value me: based on being pretty and girly. And, as I got older, I lapped it up like honey. More: I started to crave this attention; to need a compliment about my appearance in order to feel good about myself, and to perform actions to procure those compliments – actions, of course, involving clothes, make-up, diets and grooming.

I remembered this facet of my childhood experience following an ostensibly unremarkable event. I was in my early twenties, in the ladies toilet of a tearoom in the Wicklow mountains. I was poking at my painted face, trying to make my chin look more beige or my eyelashes look more individual, when a little girl of about five and an elegant woman (who I’m going to call her Auntie) walked in, seemingly so that Auntie could poke at her own painted face while little girl wee’d. When the child had dutifully piddled and been lifted up to wash her hands, Auntie took down her baby ponytail and re-tied it, pulling dark ringlets from the crown to frame a little face. Then Auntie took out some perfume and sprayed it on the girl’s wrists and neck. She straightened up her niece’s clothes, smiled into big round eyes and said: ‘Now! Aren’t you beautiful!? ’

There was so much love in those gestures. And the little girl was so happy to be made beautiful and called beautiful by this stylish grown-up, whom she very obviously adored. But when they left the bathroom, as I continued my labours on a particularly inappropriately angled eyelash, I thought ‘How is she going to know that her looks are not what
matters?’ I suddenly remembered all the adults smiling down into my upturned eyes, calling me gorgeous, and I looked at the face in the mirror (a face which, at that point in my life, I felt I had to paint meticulously each and every morning before leaving the house), and in the warmth of all those compliments, I saw harm done.

I’m not saying that, unilaterally, telling a little girl she’s beautiful is harmful. But when physical compliments are the default adult interaction with small human females, there is great potential for harm. When rituals of beauty are a primary mode of women showing girl-children love, then of course girls begin to equate their love-worthiness with their looks. After this incident, I started to notice how adults treat little girls. I started to notice how I treat little girls.

I have a goddaughter, and she is so very, very beautiful. When I see her, I want to shout ‘oh my God she’s SO BEAUTIFUL!’ And I want to talk about how lovely her princess dress is, and how cute she looks in her little shoes. But she’s not a doll. She’s five – she doesn’t give a shit about shoes. Yet every female adult she meets seems to think shoes are the most important thing to talk to her about. She’s at an age where everything’s new and everything’s interesting, yet these creatures from the womanly realm, who have knowledge of life’s mysteries that is boundless compared to her own, keep talking about shoes. You know – the things that keep your feet warm. How dull must I seem? And how badly am I failing to teach her what’s important: about herself, about women, and about the world?

So now (although I still tell her, of course, that she is beautiful), I try to interact with my goddaughter in much
the same way that I interact with her brother: by showing interest in the games she’s playing, and asking questions, and telling her how clever and funny she is. I try to steer clear of compliments about her ability to colour between the lines, however, as when in the past I have attempted these her brother has been vocal in his opinion that I am a liar. This valuable lesson in sincerity notwithstanding, I now try to show my admiration for my hilarious, bright and special godchild by complimenting the things she does, not the things she wears.

But now I have another problem: what to buy her for Christmas?

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ flip when a fellow sends me flowers,} \\
I & \text{ drool over dresses made of lace,} \\
I & \text{ talk on the telephone for hours} \\
& \text{With a pound and a half of cream upon my face!}
\end{align*}
\]

We all know that grown-up ladies flip for flowers, but how did they learn such gymnastics? When you think about it, flower flapping is hardly surprising: we’ve been rapturously unwrapping gender-specific presents our whole lives.

Visualise: It’s Christmas Eve and you are standing in a panic-soiled toyshop trying to find something for your special little girls and boys. All around you, parents are losing their shit, pleading with customer services to please, oh please, let there be one more Furbie, just one, hiding in the dark and emitting scared electronic whimper at the back of the storeroom. The tills are weakly bleeping in discord, like heartbeat monitors predicting death. Your head is pounding
because, entirely against your will, you’ve spent every night for the last two weeks at inescapable Christmas parties. You only barely recognise the feeling of cold sobriety slithering slug-like over your skin. You are in hell.

The temptation is huge to pick up generic girl present number 347 from the girls’ section and generic boy present number 217 from the boys’ section and run. The generic girls’ present is pink, and has something to do with domestic chores or beauty regimes. The generic boys’ present is blue, and has something to do with motor vehicles or gratuitous violence. You briefly consider a giant talking SpongeBob SquarePants, but you’ve provided enormously irritating SpongeBob toys for the last three birthdays and Christmases running, and you may well be fired as godmother if you try that trick again. You lurch, nauseous, from blue aisle to pink aisle, but there’s nothing that doesn’t make you want to throw up into a temptingly-located doll’s pram. You think back. As a child, what did people get you for Christmas?

As if you are drowning, an entire lifetime of presents flashes before your eyes: dolls with magic hair and make-up; pissing effigies of babies; glittery, flower-painted ponies; a weird disembodied life-size head and shoulders with peroxide-blonde hair for the purposes of grooming; handbags; hairbands; non-toxic nail-varnish with an accompanying book about ingenious non-toxic nail varnish patterns; a Fisher-Price kitchen (I still remember the advert, where a little girl wakes her father up with the plastic spoils of her culinary imagination and says ‘Breakfast’s ready Daddy!’);
jewellery making kits; Barbies: PINK, PINK, EVERYTHING PINK.

You break down. You drag yourself to the queue of crazed Furbie-deficient adults at customer services and, when it is your turn, you sob: ‘I want a present for the children in my life that is not based on gender stereotypes.’ The zombie behind the desk, himself harrowed from dwelling in an underworld that he is financially bound not to quit, suggests a rainbow-coloured xylophone. You fall to your knees and kiss his feet. He tells you that if you do not take your xylophone and go he will call security. You leave, repressing the entire ordeal until the same time next year.

I’m strictly a female female
And my future I hope will be
In the home of a brave and free male
Who’ll enjoy being a guy having a girl... like... me.

But there isn’t always a xylophone. And sometimes a Barbie is just easier. Sometimes your little loved one desperately wants a Barbie. And it’s impossible to protect her from the tsunami of pink plastic beautification and domesticity training tools too zealously anyway. What are you going to do? Throw out all her birthday presents after every party?

And, in fact, as Cordelia Fine argues in *Delusions of Gender*, even the most well-meaning, leftie, feminist parents channel and craft their children’s gender performances, limiting, in particular, their sons’ access to traditionally feminine toys. Further, young children pick up on non-verbal cues such as body language and tone of voice, internalising
values that parents might not even know they are imparting. This leads parents who think they’re engaged in gender-neutral child-rearing to fall back on biological explanations for their children’s toy and game preferences, rather than seeing the deeply embedded attitudes to gender that pervade kids’ lives.

Attitudes to female bodies and female worth are pervasive, and little girls learn the lines of womanhood early. The things that we learn to take pleasure from as children condition us into strictly female females. Playtime is a rehearsal. We smear waxy make-up onto the eyelids and puckered mouths of scary doll heads in preparation for the day when we are allowed to start colouring in our own skin. We dress fashion dolls in high heels, which, as soon as the tweens begin, we beg our parents for. Nail varnish and jewellery are permitted early, make-up and sexy clothes later. We long to turn into the leggy, busty princesses on our television screens and in our dollhouses, and when we don’t we start performing rituals to make ourselves more closely resemble the impossible ideal.

I hated shopping as a child. I remember being dragged around Penneys (Ireland’s pre-Primark) whining like a badly trained Jack Russell and only just resisting the urge to bite strangers’ ankles. Yet, in late childhood and my early teens, shopping trips became mother/daughter-bonding time – special hours punctuated with cake in coffee shops – and so I began to enjoy them. I had graduated to a dress rehearsal for womanhood, but the dress rehearsal was really just an extension of the games that went before.

Remember your best friends’ bedrooms in your early
teens? Remember the intimate spaces they became for practising the rituals of womanhood: the clothes swapping, the makeovers, the facemasks, manicures, botched hair curling and disastrous eyebrow plucking? Remember the newness of shaving your legs (age thirteen, I taught my eleven-year-old cousin Saoirse how: a fact with which she threatens to destroy my feminist writing career on a regular basis); of periods; of kissing boys?

*Bliss, Sugar* and *Just 17* magazines quizzed us on our flirting styles and advised us how to get beach bods. I went on my first diet with my cousin Megan when we were both twelve. She taught me how to count calories. On the first day, I ate 1000 and was proud, but Megan was cross with me, because if you eat too few calories you’re not doing it right. I was by no means an early rider on the bad body image bandwagon. Ofsted research from 2008 shows that a third of ten-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, and that, by age fourteen, half of all girls cite their figures as their number one worry.

I remember all of this primping, preening and self-improvement being a lot of fun. Of course it was – this is how we’d learned to have fun our whole lives short. And I also remember the affection and supportiveness in those tweenage bedrooms: how, contrary to so many portrayals of girls new to double figures, we were full of reassurance and love for each other. You’re not fat; your boobs will grow; I wish I had your skin; I wish I had your hair; borrow this skirt – it looks better on you; no one at school hates you; I think he *does* like you; I promise I won’t tell anyone.

Once, at a sleepover, Orla, Lorraine and I gave each other
makeovers, took (what we believed to be) totally stylish pictures (pre-digital, so we had to wait a week to find out they were all profoundly creepy) and wrote each other lists of ten things we liked about each other. I'll always remember the joy of reading my lists, and I'll always be friends with the women who were those girls. In many ways, I’m grateful for our early teenage rites. Makeovers and sleepovers taught me to trust others with my fears and insecurities; they taught me how to listen to the fears and insecurities of others.

This said, I wonder what these rites would look like if they were not centred on grooming? That even the intimacy of female friendship, that bedrock of my adult development, is inextricable from emotions related to socially-sanctioned performances of femininity, is disturbing. It doesn’t make the relationships shallow – the bonds we formed are holding strong a decade and a half later – but it does make me wonder how much good we were actually doing each other when five out of the ten items on our loving lists were things like ‘has beautiful eyes’ or ‘has great fashion sense’. This misgiving is cemented when I look at the young adulthoods of those three not-quite-kids: we’ve all struggled with eating and body issues.

There was a notable difference, of course, between the childhood rehearsals and the early-teen dress run, which was that all of our meddling and muddling with nails and hair and make-up now had a logical purpose: the attraction of boys. Our friends could write us all the lists they liked, but now there was an objective measure of the success of our performances – male attention.
EMER O’TOOLE

When men say I’m sweet as candy  
As around in a dance we whirl,  
It goes to my head like brandy,  
I enjoy being a girl!

I still believed, though our rites and rituals had become more diverse, our posturing of maleness and femaleness more pronounced, that boys and girls were the same on the inside. As a child I learned that to be proud of being a girl was to be proud of all this ‘girly’ stuff. Now, I learned that a significant end of all this ‘girly’ stuff – of striving to be thin and pretty and stylish – was to attract boys.

The unspoken logic was that a very important part of being a girl was being liked by boys. If the ‘girls/boys are better than boys/girls’ wars had still been ongoing, I’d have realised that the barricades were un-womaned and the ladyfort was surrounded. But I wasn’t playing that game anymore! I was too old to pretend not to like boys. And I put a whole lot of effort into making them like me.

When someone with eyes that smoulder  
Says he loves ev’ry silken curl  
That falls on my iv’ry shoulder,  
I enjoy being a girl!

I wouldn’t have owned up to recognising male attention as the underlying logic for having pride in my femininity. But, actually, taking all the evidence into account, it was the explanation for enjoying being a girl that made most sense. The values underlying the books, television programmes and
films I had been consuming since I was a child were really only comprehensible if boys were in fact better than girls. If this was so, it made sense that male esteem was more valuable than female esteem.

Why did George from *The Famous Five* always proclaim that she was ‘as good as any boy’? Because she didn’t want to be liked for her looks, or for cooking and washing up, like pretty, subservient, ‘girly’ Anne. George wanted to be liked and valued for her strength, bravery and intelligence – she was never so happy as when someone mistook her for male. I’ve read passages by feminist writers who warmly enthuse that George was their childhood role model – a brave, quick-witted, passionate girl character who refused to conform to gender norms.

But George was never an inspiration for me. She thought girls were silly. As a girl, I was insulted. More, George was always trying, yet only ever *almost* succeeding, to keep up with Julian and Dick, who would pull rank when the going got toughest. George’s pride would inevitably be hurt when the real boys reminded her that, however convincing her performance, she was, in fact, female, and they were honour-bound to protect her. Poor George – cooler than scaredy-cat Anne, for sure, but that wasn’t enough. She was lacking the all-important dangly appendage that would make her as good as Julian or Dick.

I’m sure some of you are thinking – yes, but *The Famous Five* was set in the fifties, and, even though you were only a child, you must have been aware that female roles had moved on. To this I’d say: *kind of*. I might have had the capacity to challenge some of the gender norms present in
the fiction I consumed, but the worldview it presented was still influential on my own. I learned a lot about girlhood and boyhood from Enid Blyton and other classic kids’ literature. And so did my brothers.

Case in point: one summer in Connemara, where we were annually taken on holidays, the gang (us and our multitudinous cousins) was engaged in a very serious war with the neighbouring Kelly children. Having accumulated an arsenal of pine cones and experimented with less-than-expertly-manufactured catapults to varying degrees of success (what was wrong, after all, with simply *throwing* pine cones?), we decided that we needed a secure base to retreat to should our offensive be overpowered by the locals’ rural savagery and superior knowledge of the boggy terrain. A long-disused outhouse with a still-functional and locking door was ideal, and we spent hours divesting it of briars to create our very own Fort Knox. Feat accomplished, we had to democratically decide who would play which role in the upcoming war effort.

Minutes later, I had unceremoniously tendered my resignation to the gang and was inside crying to the grown-ups. ‘What’s the matter, Emer?’ asked Auntie Anne. ‘They made me the HOUSE MAID!’ I wailed. That’s right: the house maid. I continue to blame Enid Blyton.

The ‘boys are better than girls’ logic of other cultural products I consumed as a child was less in-yer-face than the fifties’ ideology of Blyton, but it was there. Heroes, it seemed, were almost always male. As a little one I listened to Ringo Starr narrate so much *Thomas the Tank Engine* on my Fisher-Price tape player that by the time I started school...
GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS

I was speaking with a distinctly Liverpudlian accent and my teacher asked my mother when we’d returned from the UK. In *Thomas the Tank Engine* there are no girl engines (Emily was only added to the seven-engine-strong ‘steam team’ in 2003 for the television series, partly in response to accusations of sexism), while the carriages – sweet, dependent Annie and Clarabel – are female.

The television programme that I (and probably most Irish children) watched religiously was called *The Den*. The presenter was male (first Ian Dempsey, then Ray D’Arcy), as were his two awesome puppet sidekicks, Zig and Zag, their puppy Zuppy and the later addition of Dustin the Turkey. Of all the cartoons this masculine conglomerate of flesh and felt offered to my elastic young mind, I can’t remember one – not one* – that had a female protagonist: not *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Scooby Doo*, *Captain Planet*, *Count Duckula*, *Inspector Gadget*, *Johnny Bravo*, *Rugrats*, nor *Animaniacs*.† Research proves my memory correct.

The computer games I played on our Super Nintendo reproduced the pattern: *Mario*, *Donkey Kong*, *Kirby*, *Yoshi*, Link in *Zelda*, everyone except Princess in *Mario Kart*, everyone except Chun Li in *Street Fighter*. To an outsider observing, looking at three children watching cartoons or playing computer games, it might seem that my brothers

---

* I can remember programmes for older kids like *The Girl from Tomorrow*, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* that had female protagonists, but no cartoons.
† Originally all three Warner Brothers characters were conceived of as male, but Dot, the Warner sister, even if added as an afterthought, was pretty darn brilliant. As an aside, remember Hello Nurse? The chesty nurse in a miniskirt who functioned as an object for Wakko and Yakko to perve on? That’s a cool thing to be in a children’s programme, isn’t it?
and I were having similar experiences. But we were not. The boys were learning that they were the protagonists, and I was learning that I was the understudy. Or the house maid.

Looking into The Den’s layout and programming now, I can see that things have changed considerably – it is now presented by two humans, one of whom is a woman, and two puppets, one of whom has a high-pitched voice and ribbons adorning its head. There are more female cartoon characters included in its programming too. Go Powerpuff Girls! But let’s not get over-excited: cartoons still feature predominantly male lead characters, and there have been a number of studies into the effects of this on children.

In 1995, researchers Eugenia Zerbinus and Teresa Thompson summarised evidence from the seventies onwards showing that female characters are under-represented in cartoons, and that they are typically lower status. While noting modest improvement, they found that the trend continued strongly into the nineties. In 1997 they asked: ‘Do children notice that boys predominate in cartoons and that characters are often stereotyped?’ The answer was yes for a majority of the children surveyed, and, significantly, the researchers found that children who noticed gender-stereotypic behaviours in cartoon characters reported more traditional job expectations for themselves and for others. Indeed, there’s a strong body of evidence indicating that children’s TV viewing is positively correlated with their degree of gender stereotyping. This, I’d argue, indicates that children can recognise gender stereotypes in the products they consume, but lack the capacity to question and critically evaluate them.
In 2002 a research team analysed the degree of gender stereotyping across different genres of cartoons, and found that lessons children were likely to learn about gender from watching cartoons include the idea that men are more important than women, the idea that men are aggressive and get into fights, and the idea that women are fearful or nurturing. A study from 2012 found that television exposure was significantly related to children’s self-esteem, and that watching TV decreased the confidence of all children of colour and all female children, while it increased the self-esteem of white, male children.

As we get older and start consuming adult cultural products, the pattern doesn’t change. The graphic novelist Alison Bechdel once drew a strip called ‘The Rule’, which became quite famous. In it, two women are trying to figure out what to see at the cinema, and one tells the other that she has a rule: she’ll only go to see films in which there are at least two female characters, who actually talk to each other, about something other than a man. This has come to be known as the Bechdel test. According to Bechdeltest.com, only 54 per cent of films pass this ludicrously simple feminist exam, and many do so dubiously, because the women talk to each other briefly, or about babies, marriage or equally stereotypically-feminine fare.

It’s not just television and film either. If you’re bookish, like me, you learn early on that great literature is largely the preserve of men. Reading the classics means filling your head with male voices: male voices that create female characters. And these female characters become part of you, of your understanding of how to perform womanhood. There
are exceptions obviously – George Eliot was secretly not George at all, and, of course, there’s Austen and the Brontës, but the bulk of canonical literature is by white men.

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o talks about growing up in colonial Africa and having a European education. When we think about European colonialism, we tend to think about Europeans colonizing people’s lands and resources – dispossessing them of material things. But Wa Thiong’o talks about how his mind was colonised by his education: how, constantly, he encountered images of bestial, inhuman Africans in the ‘civilised’ and ‘superior’ European literature and philosophy that he studied at school and university. He internalised these images – his understanding of the world was based on tacit, unspoken acceptance of his own inferiority. Africa might have won its independence, but, for Wa Thiong’o, decolonising African minds is the ongoing struggle.

Women’s minds are also colonised. In a huge proportion of the cultural products that we consume at home and in school, from Shakespeare to Spiderman, women are decorative and domestic – the warm-up number, but rarely the headline act.

While my parents and teachers might have told me that girls and boys were equal, life taught me differently: that boys were the main characters – the Thomas the Tank Engines; and girls were the sidekicks – the Annies and Clarabels. This difference in the way girls and boys are valued was embedded in my worldview and, as the studies on children, gender and TV I discuss above suggest, as a child I probably didn’t have the faculties to break down the
prejudiced views I was consuming. So can there be any more natural thing, if you’re a girl, than to subconsciously start to look to men for validation, by performing the actions and speaking the lines that you think will make men like you?

When I hear the compliment’ry whistle
That greets my bikini by the sea,
I turn and I glower and I bristle,
But I’m happy to know the whistle’s meant for me!

I couldn’t be a boy, and, unlike Enid Blyton’s George, I didn’t want to be. So the next best thing was for boys to like me. And for boys to like me I needed to be considered attractive. I mean, I was hardly going to impress men through my in-depth knowledge of the life cycle of the Liver Fluke (Latin: *Fasciola hepatica*), nor with my ‘game’ of finding ways to do theorems that weren’t in the maths book. I had yet to see a boy go wild when he asked to cog my geography homework and witnessed my meticulously rendered stage-by-stage diagrams of sea-stack formation. Even my extracurricular activities in the choir and school musicals, which should have been at least *kind of* sexy, only seemed to add to my overall aura of nerd. I always considered being bookish to be an inconvenient genetic flaw. I was Cuthbert the class swot, when I so badly wanted to be any other Bash Street Kid (Toots, probably, as she was the only female Bash Street Kid).

So, obviously, I wasn’t going to get any male attention in school. I didn’t have the right tracksuit bottoms, and I put way too much expression into my voice when I was asked
to read poetry in English. I focused my energies on boys from other schools who had no way to know that I enjoyed French translation exercises. I acquired army jackets and Nine Inch Nail CDs to fool people into mistaking drastically unhip for ‘alternative’, and my skirts got shorter, my T-shirts tighter, my hair lighter, my face more painted and my limbs thinner.

Seeing as so much of my social preparation for womanhood had been focused on my appearance, it was a logical extension to move from pretty to sexy. And, seeing as the positive attention I was used to receiving had been based on my appearance since I was a little girl, it’s unsurprising that this was the positive attention that I continued to crave. But something was different.

In 2012, I went to see the Iranian-British Comedian Shappi Khorsandi at London’s Soho Theatre, and she played out (in comedy that was borderline unbearable to watch but made me laugh ’til everything hurt all the same) the change that her relationship with her father’s male friends underwent when she was about fourteen. They went from chucking her under the chin, hoisting her onto their shoulders and spinning her round by the legs to fearfully hugging her for nanoseconds, before looking anywhere — anywhere — except at her suddenly sexual, suddenly terrifying teenage skin.

I can’t say that, like Khorsandi, I noticed my parents’ friends sexualising me at that age. But what I do remember — and maybe this is the difference between growing up in the UK like Khorsandi and growing up in Catholic Ireland like me — is that grown-ups became disapproving of the physical attention I received. I went from being allowed to
wear whatever I wanted really – short shorts, crop tops – to being subtly monitored. I remember once, on holiday, age fourteen, coming down to the lobby of a hotel dressed in my friend’s brother’s thigh-high sports socks and a mini skirt (which my friend Leah and I had decided was a totally winning combo). My parents got really angry.

Looking back, I’m pretty sure they saw adult men looking at me. My mum tried to couch her explanations as to why I had to change in the ridiculousness of wearing sports socks when not actually playing sports, and a dislike for the skirt I’d borrowed from a friend for the holiday. But I’d been allowed to wear the skirt before, with nothing but flip-flops, so I wasn’t biting.

Something similar happened again a few months later, when, visiting family in Wales, I wanted to wear animal-print tights and a black miniskirt to Easter mass. My mum got really mad and made me change. Again, it was weird. I’d been allowed to wear the same outfit to mass in Ireland about a year before.

The problem wasn’t my clothes (although, admittedly, wearing sports socks when you’re not actually playing sports is odd). The problem was that the attention I was receiving now contained a sexual element. Suddenly, strangers’ interest in my performance of femininity carried an element of shame – I would get into trouble if I dressed to encourage it – and also, of course, excitement: because what was this new sexual attention if not the biggest and best kind of compliment?

Compliments centred on my appearance had been de rigueur since I was a child. These compliments had only

GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS
been a good thing before. Clothes and make-up were part of my childhood play and my tweenage rehearsals of womanhood; now that I was almost grown up, a significant part of my energies focused on my appearance. Teen magazines advised me on how to attract men, while books, TV, films and other cultural products subtly reinforced a narrative of male superiority, which was confirmed by the gendered make-up of the world around me. Surely male attention was a good thing? Now I was getting stares, comments and whistles. I didn’t glower or bristle at all. I smiled and waved. I liked it! My entire life – toys, cartoons, films, books, friendships – had conditioned me to like it. How could I not like it?

I’m strictly a female female
And my future I hope will be
In the home of a brave and free male
Who’ll enjoy being a guy having a girl… like… me.

Let’s return to Our Mother of Mercy school hall, 1994, to where a troupe of expertly choreographed but poorly coordinated mini-Galwegians is flouncing across the stage, enthusiastically vociferating its enjoyment of the trappings of femininity. The auditorium looks on, deeming the performance harmless, drawing no correlation between the stereotypes of womanhood that these little girls have been taught to ironically enact and the social roles that they will one day be expected to play. The sexism of the performance is an inoffensive joke.

All the world is this stage. The little girls have learned
their lines as directed; their actions have been choreographed and directed by adults, and performing their parts will gain them applause. They’re too young to recognise the troubling values present in the songs they are told to sing. By the time they are young women, this song, this routine, has become – like the abilities to count, read or communicate – second nature. Rehearsals are over – it’s time for the show!