



# BOYS DON'T CRY

...THOUGH THEY CAN BE FILLED WITH REMORSE, LONGING, AND SELF-HATRED WHEN CONTEMPLATING WHY THEY BROKE UP WITH YOU OR IGNORED YOUR CALL—OR THEIR FEAR THAT A WOMAN (AND HAPPINESS) MIGHT SOMEDAY COME BETWEEN THEM.  
BY STEVE FRIEDMAN

**M**y friend Jack wants to tell me what was wrong with my last girlfriend. I don't want to hear it.

"Yes, you do," Jack says.

"No, Jack," I say. "Really, I don't."

"It'll help you see the truth," Jack says.

"The truth is," I say, "you hate all of my girlfriends."

"I do not."

"Jack, you called the one before this 'the Antichrist.' She wasn't that bad."

"I did not call her the Antichrist."

"Did so."

"Did not."

"How can you refer to someone as the Antichrist, then deny it? What is wrong with you?"

"You make stuff up. It's like that time we went hiking and you got us lost and then you said—"

"I got us lost? I got us lost?" Against my better judgment, I am shouting. This is not uncommon behavior for me when it comes to Jack.

We are facing off where we usually face off on weekday afternoons, at our neighborhood diner, eating blueberry pancakes and bacon, dissecting the career arcs and talents of Lindsay Lohan and the Olsen twins, the oeuvre of Sylvester Stallone, and why we

don't at the moment have girlfriends. Jack has thinning hair. I consider myself balding, notwithstanding Jack's insistence that "just because you stick *-ing* on a word doesn't mean you can alter reality." I'm a decade older than Jack, but we're both firmly within the demographic known to our families as "Why are you still single?" Jack likes to while away the evening hours on his 15-year-old green futon, munching popcorn and playing snowboard video games. I'm partial to *48 Hours Mystery* reruns, a brown leather couch, and peanut-butter-cup ice cream. We both rent. Today, as it happens, we're both wearing hoodies.

I close my eyes and take a breath. I need to stay on topic. With Jack, when it comes to girlfriends, this is not an easy thing.

"Okay," I say. "Then do you deny saying, when I was headed over to G's for dinner, 'Don't look into its eyes.' It! You said *it!* Do you deny that?"

"That's beside the point," Jack says, with maddening calm. "We're not talking about G, we're talking about K, your most recent disaster, who never really liked you."

"That's a little harsh."

"You know, K, who didn't invite you to her office party, because 'you wouldn't feel comfortable,' and who wouldn't let you see

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What do you do in  
the a.m.?

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button...then I karate  
my blackheads.

Interesting...how?

Bioré's pore strips.

Anything else you karate?

My bum. My hubbie.  
Whichever one needs it.



## ELLEBOYS DON'T CRY

where she lives because 'it's a mess,' and who wouldn't make a weekend date more than five hours in advance because her 'life is so complicated,' and who, whenever an old boyfriend was coming to town, wanted to 'play things by ear'?"

I hate it when Jack quotes me quoting former girlfriends. I hate his Manichaean take on women, how just because G once threatened to smash a frying pan on my skull, she's suddenly an "it."

"You hate all my girlfriends," I repeat, again too loudly. I say this because I prefer to remember G as feisty rather than deranged, and my play-it-by-ear sweetheart K as frightened and conflicted rather than manipulative and evil. Also because I fear Jack might be right.

Jack and I met four years ago, when he was involved with a bisexual biker who had a large tattoo of a snake on her back and lived with her boyfriend. I tried to be supportive, and I meant to imply no value judgment when I called her "Snaky." My Latvian girlfriend at the time was struggling to find herself, working out some financial difficulties, and enmeshed in a tricky emotional situation. "What we English-speakers call *married*," Jack said.

It has recently occurred to me that Jack and I are happiest together when we are single and bemoaning our romantic fates. Luckily for our friendship, this has been a fairly common phenomenon. Jack has broken up with or been dumped by at least six women I can think of in the past four years. My number is five.

Over second cups of coffee, I tell Jack that while I pity his stunted and hostile worldview and his repellent lack of trust in people and his sad inclination toward corrosive rage when it comes to females, I want him to be happy. Consequently, I wish he would stop finding fault with the women who love him and avoid the women who treat him like topsoil.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Jack says.

"Do too," I say.

"Do not," Jack says.

(This might be the place to mention that I have taught writing at the college level and Jack, who will enter law school this fall, reads Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot when he's not playing snowboard video games. When it comes to women, though, our conversational rhythms quickly and ineluctably devolve into the cadence of the elementary school yard.)

"Oh, yeah?" I'm yelling again. "What

about Julia? Julia loved you." The waitress at the diner pours more coffee, takes our plates, and sighs. She avoids eye contact with us, even though we are here at least four days a week. "Julia was great. She was pretty. She was funny. Do you remember why you broke up with Julia?"

"You're a bitter man," Jack says. "Don't take it out on me."

"You broke up with her because you didn't like the way her nose crinkled when she laughed."

"You really think K was worried about your comfort level?" Jack asks. "You don't think she's finding her own comfort level with her old boyfriend right now?"

God, he is irritating.

"And Stephanie," I shout. "Remember Miss I-think-she's-the-one, Miss I-think-I'm-in-love? Remember why you dumped the woman who was going to save you from yourself?"

"Do you put sunscreen on your head?" Jack asks. "Because you really need to."

"You dumped Stephanie because she used the word *banal* too often. You broke up with the woman of your dreams because she said *banal*!"

"She pronounced it wrong," Jack says.

"Oh, that makes it reasonable? You give up happiness because the woman who would provide it didn't pronounce a word to your liking?"

"There were other problems."

"Were not."

"How about you?" Jack says. "Let's not forget your Australian girlfriend, Carolyn. Carolyn was the best. Carolyn was really smart. And hot. I *loved* Carolyn. I can't believe you let Carolyn get away."

At the moment, I am actually empathizing with G, the frying-pan threatener.

"Dude," I say. I have never uttered the word with such venom. It feels good, so I repeat it. "*Dude*. You loved Carolyn *after* I dumped her! Do you remember what you said when I told you about our first date? You said, 'You should have sprinted away from her as fast as you could.'"

"But that's because she was making out with you at her neighborhood bar," Jack says. "No woman does that on a first date. And she said, 'If I give you my heart, will you take care of it?' And she was drunk. You told me all that. I'm just quoting."

"She wasn't drunk," I say. "She was drinking. There's a difference. I thought she was being open and vulnerable."

"Or a neurotic stalker," Jack says.

We stare at each other. Patrons at other

tables stare too.

Pigeons fly through ice and sleet and treacherous storms and always find their way home. Pigs (at least some pigs) let not the loamiest, smelliest dirt in the world stand between their snuffling snouts and a fragrant truffle. Jack and I—we, too, know instinctively when we've found the happy spot.

"And what exactly," I demand, "is wrong with a neurotic stalker?"

Jack can't help himself. He snickers. This is a big deal. Jack doesn't give up laughs easily, like some of the giggly girlfriends we've both had. When Jack laughs, it makes me feel good.

"We're so screwed," Jack says.

"So screwed," I agree.

It occurs to me that Jack and I share an intimacy more like that of a lasting marriage than anything either of us has managed to sustain with a woman. It has occurred to some of my former girlfriends, too.

Carolyn used to call Jack "your straight boyfriend." The Latvian referred to him as "your angry lover." "Emotionally stunted," G said of Jack. "Filled with rage. And a misogynist." There was no love lost between Jack and the Antichrist.

Did my close bond with Jack threaten my girlfriends? I imagine it did. Other times I suspect my intimacy with women threatens Jack, and that rather than admit jealousy, he sets out to torpedo my romances. Me? While it's true that I have suggested Jack dump a few of his paramours, I like to think my motives were pure.

There was Megan, for example, who called him "Fathead" in front of his friends, and Jane, who insisted that they see each other exactly two times a week, and that they not go out in public, and that he never call her at home.

How could I have been Jack's good friend and not said something?

"You deserve better," I tell Jack. "You're a great guy. You should be with a great woman. I just want the best for you."

"Gee, thanks, Yoda," he says. He knows I hate it when he calls me that.

Sometimes I wonder if Jack and I get along so well because we can reassure ourselves that at least we're not each other. I suspect that even in Jack's darkest moments, he consoles himself with the fact that as lonely and desperate as his situation might be, it's a decade less lonely and desperate than mine.

Here's something else I wonder about

my friendship with Jack: I wonder if it's easier for a man to confront fear of intimacy and terror of abandonment and all the other emotional accessories of bachelorhood when the owner of those issues is in a hoodie sitting across a Formica square, rather than staring at him from the mirror. That's a little frightening to admit. And here's something *really* terrifying: "You deserve better" is the historical and hysterical line uttered by mothers who can't let go of sons, fathers who can't let go of daughters, lovers who can't let go of lovers. It's the self-justifying excuse used by all kinds of people who can't face the real truth: No one else is good enough for you, because I want you for myself. Is that what's behind our blueberry pancake bitch-and-moan sessions? I know what Jack would say to that suggestion.

"You are so gay," he would say. Or, "You really need to get laid." Or, "If I lose my hair, is my brain going to start melting like yours?"

So I don't mention it. We're men, after all. I chew on a bacon strip and listen to Jack tick off the clear and convincing evidence of yet another woman's perfidy. And as I listen, I wonder what will happen if one or both of us settles down.

Will our wives smile indulgently as we pad off to our afternoon gabfests, these Talmudic disquisitions on the human condition? Will we ever need a table for four? Will a woman who loves me have to love my friend too? Tough questions, but Jack is the person I like entertaining tough questions with. Sometimes I fear we will have many, many years to entertain them.

We suck on our fourth cups of coffee. "We need to change our lives," I say to my friend, though the truth is, at the moment, together in this warm diner on a chilly afternoon, I'm perfectly content.

"Aye, aye, Yoda," Jack says.

"No one in *Star Wars* ever said 'Aye, aye,'" I say.

"Did so."

"Did not."

"Whatever," Jack says. "Anyway, how are we going to change our lives? What are we going to do, find love?"

"I hope so," I say. "But in the meantime, I'm going to get in shape. I'm going to get back to the gym. I'm going to switch from peanut-butter-cup ice cream to low-fat frozen yogurt. I'm really going to."

"Right," Jack says. "And I'm going to buy a new futon." □

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