

Chapter 9

The Clique

Alice and Charlie were walking down the hall in school together, talking, when suddenly Alice went quiet. She had seen Mary and Rosa leaning against the wall giggling.

"What's wrong?" whispered Charlie.

Out of the corner of her mouth, Alice muttered, "I'll tell you in the next corridor."

"It's Mary and Rosa," she said, when they were through the door.

"I thought you liked them," responded Charlie, surprised.

Alice sighed deeply. "Well, not really, any more," she said. "They gossip about people all the time and put them down—everyone's afraid of them. Whoever they say is 'in' is in; whoever they say is 'out' is out. No one wants to be laughed at, so they all try to hang around them. And if they start picking on one of the other girls, everyone shrinks away from her, like she's infected."



After class, everyone seemed suddenly much more friendly with everyone else. We might as well just have been released from prison, Charlie thought.

"Are they saying bad things about you?" asked Charlie.

"No," said Alice. "But they want me to join their gang. The problem is, I don't want to be one of them—I don't want to have to make other people 'out' so a few can be 'in'."

Mrs Alam must have noticed what was going on because one day she talked to the class about 'cliques'. She said it wasn't a bad thing for people to group together, but it depended on the purpose and the attitude towards others outside the group. If the clique had no respect for other people, it was a bad thing. She also said that if a clique used peer pressure to make people do things they didn't want to do, that was wrong, too.

Charlie watched Mary and Rosa as Mrs Alam was talking. They were nodding as though they agreed with everything. He noticed the other girls looking hopeful, and after class everyone seemed suddenly much more friendly with everyone else. They all laughed and chatted—we might as well just have been released from prison, Charlie thought.

Then Mary and Rosa turned on them, their faces frosty. The girls fell silent.

"Alice!" Mary darted at her.

Everyone stared at Alice.

"Yes?" answered Alice politely.

"Come and walk down the corridor with us."

It was a command, not a request. Alice searched for the strength not to obey. Just then, she caught Charlie's eye.

"I'm talking to Tiffany at the moment," she said.

You could have heard a pin drop. Charlie could see how hard it was for Alice—she was trembling slightly and her cheeks were bright red.

To Alice's relief, Mary and Rosa just shrugged and walked off. But things did not end there—soon to Alice's dismay, the others began to gossip.

"Alice thinks she's so smart."

"She's a teacher's pet."

"She's a nerd!"

"She thinks she's better than everyone else."

And soon all the girls except Tiffany started looking at Alice strangely and acting uncomfortably around her. Why don't they stick up for her? thought Charlie angrily. Alice had deliberately not turned her back on them to be 'in' with Mary and Rosa, but they were siding with Mary and Rosa's attitude all the same.

Mary and Rosa sometimes broke into giggles when Alice was near. If she looked at them, they would stop, but as soon as she turned away, the giggles would start up again even more loudly.

Poor Alice! thought Charlie. School had become a nightmare for her. He wanted to beat those two girls up. It's funny, he thought—this kind of thing can even divide friends. Now that Alice was their target, he could see that even Tiffany was feeling the pressure to ditch Alice in order to be accepted.

Although Mrs Alam talked about cliques several more times, Mary and Rosa were very canny. In class with teachers there, they were friendly and nice to all the girls. But after class there were warning looks, whispers and glares.

Finally, Alice broke down and ran crying into the girls' cloakroom. Mary and Rosa followed taunting her, and all the other girls went in too, just to see what was going to happen. Tiffany looked miserable, shifting from one foot to the other in the passage. Eventually, Charlie approached her. "Can you go in and help Alice, Tiff?" he asked.

And soon all the girls except Tiffany started looking at Alice strangely and acting uncomfortably around her. "Why don't they stick up for her?" thought Charlie angrily.

Tiffany was working hard to hold back tears, but she nodded and ran towards the cloakroom. Suddenly, Alice flew out. She and Tiffany ran down the passage and into Mrs Alam's classroom. Charlie ran in, closing the door noisily behind him.

"Did they start pushing you?" he asked breathlessly.

Alice was shaking. "No—but words hurt worse than that," she sobbed.

The door opened and Mrs Alam came in. She was surprised to find two sobbing girls and a boy in her classroom. She asked Charlie what was going on.

"Most of the time people form cliques because they are insecure and they are worried that they won't be accepted. They reject others before others can reject them. They may seem confident on the outside, but on the inside they're just the opposite."

There is a natural instinct for people not to tell on each other—no-one wants to be a snitch. The problem is that it gives the advantage to the bad kids. Charlie remembered that his mum and dad had often told him that the 'no snitching' code was different from real loyalty, and he decided to break it that day: he told Mrs Alam everything he knew, even mentioning how Mary and Rosa acted outside after they had been nodding their heads off during her lessons.

Mrs Alam thought for a while. Then she said, "Most of the time people form cliques because they are insecure and they are worried that they won't be accepted. They reject others before the others can reject them. They may seem confident on the outside, but on the inside they're just the opposite. If you and Tiffany stick together, Alice, and invite other girls to be friends, eventually Mary and Rosa will have to respect that."

With Mrs Alam's help, Tiffany and Alice formed a group that that was quite unlike a clique. It was open and respected everyone's freedom. Its purpose was simple: to form a service club.

The new club began to make a real difference to the school. Sometimes they did jobs, like cleaning up the playground, but they were allowed to do fun things, too, like painting murals and decorating the corridors. The walls were starting to look

pretty dynamic, and all the students thought it made the school look more their own. The club's membership expanded rapidly.

Everyone was enjoying being together and having fun—even Mrs Alam, who gave the team pizza and drinks at the end of each project. No-one seemed to have time to listen to any gossip any more. Soon Mary and Rosa were on the outside looking in.

"Know something, Alice?" Charlie said one day. "You're the most popular girl in Year 8!"



"Me?" Alice replied, surprised. "Do you really think so?" Funny, she thought—she hoped people liked her, but lately she'd been too busy to bother about being popular. "Charlie, do you remember when I was really worried about being 'in' or 'out'...?"

She looked round to see Mary and Rosa coming towards them.

"Alice, can we talk to you?" Mary asked.

Alice looked at them calmly and with dignity. "What do you want?" she asked evenly.

"Could we join your service club?"

Alice thought. Mary and Rosa were looking at her anxiously—as though they were afraid she was going to reject them. Alice guessed that they'd been lonely for the last few weeks, and that they genuinely wanted to join in.

"Yes, of course you can," she said. "I'm glad you asked."

Mother Teresa

You have probably heard of Mother Teresa. She features on every 'Most Admired Person' list. She was a Catholic nun, but people of many beliefs acknowledge her as a saint.

To Mother Teresa, no one was 'out'. Everyone deserved to be respected and loved, even if they were living on the streets or in an alley. If people were diseased or abandoned, Mother Teresa saw that as even more reason to love and care for them.

When Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she accepted it in the name of "All those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared-for throughout society, people who...are shunned by everyone."

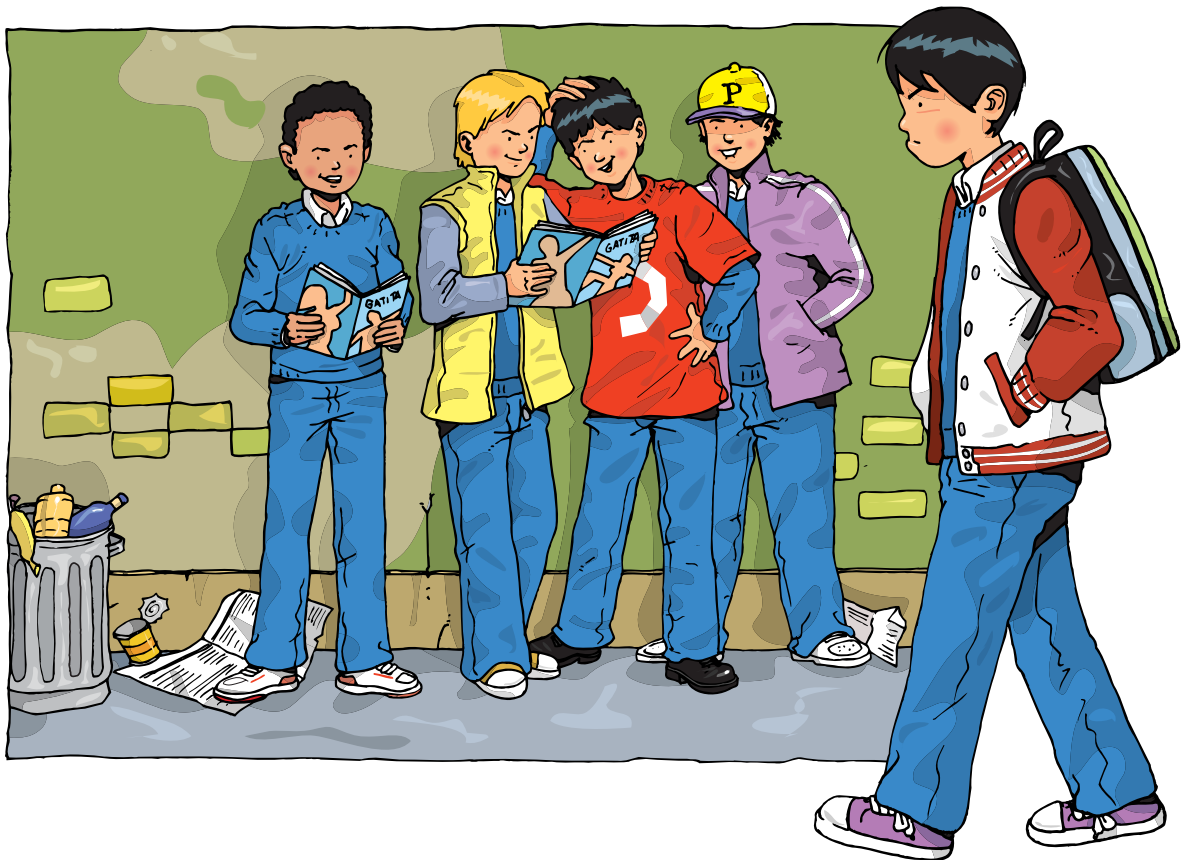
Mother Teresa showed that by loving everyone a person can come to be loved by everyone.

'Blondie'

Charlie was taking a short cut home from Mr. Travis's through a back alley. He was feeling pleased with life, and looking forward to a fun Saturday evening. He saw some boys from school some way down the alley, gathered round a dustbin. He was just about to say hi as he passed when he noticed a guilty look about them. He looked more carefully—they were reading unsold magazines that had been dumped by the high street shops. Charlie could not see what they were about.

Suddenly, Charlie had a strong feeling that he should turn round and walk back up the alley. But that would look strange. Anyway, he wanted to get home.

"Hi," he said, walking on steadily.



"Hey, want to see this?" said one of the guys, holding a magazine out. Charlie recognised him—he was John in Year 9.

Supposing it to be a sports magazine, Charlie glanced at it. In fact, it was showing women with no clothes on.

Confused, Charlie thought fast. "I don't like looking at stuff I haven't paid for," he said lamely.

"Come on—it's been thrown out!"

"These are hot girls, Charlie," said John, grinning slyly and cutting off Charlie's path. "Take a look at 'Blondie'—the one on the right."

Charlie felt surrounded. He was afraid of what they thought of him and he wanted to get past. He took the magazine and looked at a picture. Wow—his eyes nearly popped out. Surely it must be illegal to print that kind of stuff.

"Cool," he said, making as if to pass.

"There's lots here, Charlie—want to look?"

"No thanks, I'm late," said Charlie, managing to slip past.

Charlie found the magazine image stayed with him all the way home. She was blonde and beautiful. Thinking about her made his breathing become harder—in fact, it seemed to set off all kinds of sensations.

Charlie realised that he could go to the alley any time and see any amount of girls he wanted. It would be almost like having a date. Was it wrong, though? He would try to find out.

Later, Charlie went to meet Ron at the gym. Jason, Ron's elder brother, was there too, so Charlie thought he'd see if he could ask him. At the drinks machine during a break, he asked casually, "Do you ever look at pictures of girls with no clothes on, Jason?"

It was almost like having a date. Was it wrong, though?

Not only is it not healthy, it is addictive.

"Sure!" Jason replied. "Lots of guys do. Women are beautiful—so it's natural men want to look at them. Nobody gets hurt."

Hmm, Charlie thought. Nobody gets hurt. So it wouldn't hurt me. And it's just natural...

Then Charlie overheard a conversation his mum and dad were having a few nights later.

"Yes, they're having some trouble with Jason—I hope he's OK for Charlie to hang around with still."

Charlie felt troubled.

Next day, Mr Radigan gave a health talk in class. He ended by asking everyone to write down any questions they might want to ask about sexuality and asked them to fold their pieces of paper before handing them in.

Confident of anonymity, Charlie wrote, "Is looking at pictures of naked girls OK?"

The following week, Mr Radigan organised a class for the boys alone. He was going to address their questions. They had covered a wide spectrum, he said, but "a lot of you want to know if it is healthy to look at pornographic pictures or videos, in print or on the internet, that can stimulate you sexually." He paused. "Well, not only is it not healthy," he said, "it is addictive. It works just like a drug—you have to have more and more to get the same rush you got the first time. In fact, that's a classic feature of addiction."

Charlie kept his eyes fixed steadily on his desk. "Using pornography may start casually in the first place," Mr Radigan continued. "But soon it will start to dominate your thoughts. Eventually, you may even begin to arrange your life around it. It is possible to start preferring it to the company of real people, in which case your relationships suffer. With some people it escalates and they need more or more twisted, even violent, kinds of pornography to become stimulated. They get less and less sensitive to it and to the standards of the community. Then they start seeing all women through the lens of pornography."

"Pornography shows women as sexual objects to be sniggered and salivated over—used and discarded. Often they are given names like 'Cupcake', as though they were something to be consumed. Pornography encourages disrespect for and mistreatment of women—your mothers, your sisters, your class-mates, your friends. The person using pornography just sees them as sexual targets for his fantasies. Do you like the idea of some man thinking those kinds of thoughts about the women you know and love? That's the sort of thinking pornography encourages.

Pornography spoils sexual activity between husband and wife.

"You may not know this, but pornography is strongly linked to organised crime. Rape is when someone forces someone else to do sexual things, and many rapists are pornography addicts who are acting out what they've been looking at. In America, a presidential report found a link between the murder of women and the use of pornography.¹ And serial killers have said that pornography drove them to do what they did.² In fact, many studies show a link between looking at pornography and committing sexual offences."³ Mr Radigan paused and looked round the class. He cleared his throat.

"So who are the people in the pictures? That's a good question, isn't it? Pornography is doing them no harm, you might think—after all, they chose to do it. But that's where you'd be wrong. Many of those people in pictures and in movies do it because they are drug addicts or have run away and they are desperate.

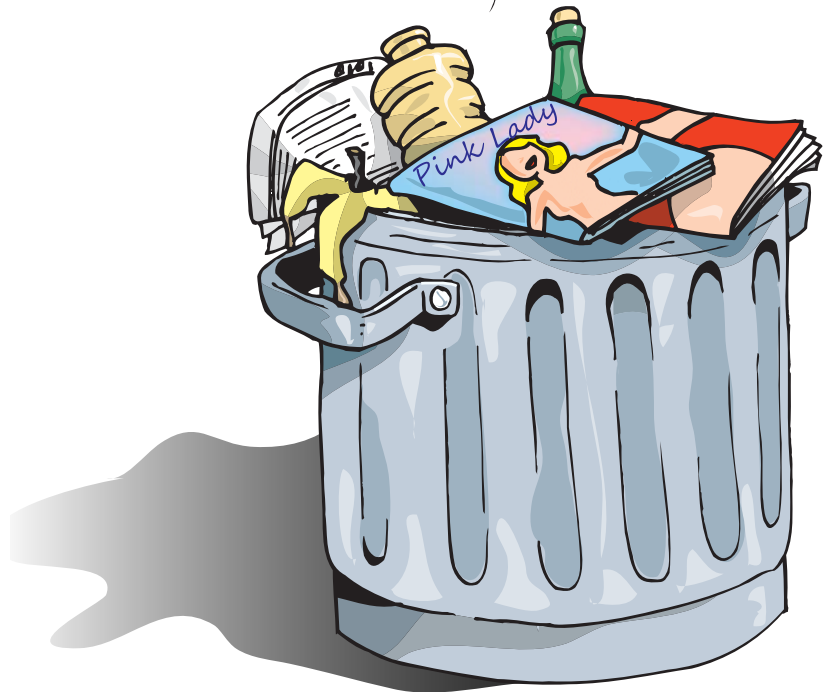
"It's not just the people who are pictured who are exploited by pornography. You are being exploited by it, too. That's because pornography exploits your natural appreciation of the beauty of females (and external beauty is just part of a girl's beauty, of course). Your sexual desire—a wonderful gift given to you for the sake of love and having children—is being used and twisted by people who care only about money.

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1. Attorney General Meese's Commission's Presidential Report on Pornography, 1988.
 2. David Bender, ed., *Is Pornography Harmful?* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1989), p. 142.
 3. Julie A. Attison and Laurence S. Wrightsman, *Rape: The Misunderstood Crime* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), pp. 37-44.

"Of course the majority of men don't turn into rapists or killers or child molesters through using pornography. But it does bring something really distasteful into a marriage—into a family. It often means that a man is not mature enough to deal with a real woman—he can only deal with images. So that man will just carry on living in a fantasy-land and never learn how to love unselfishly. He is seriously missing out because, in the end, pornography spoils sexual activity between husband and wife. Because it focuses only on the body, it can never bring total satisfaction, because sexuality involves the mind and heart, too. And then, because the pictures are cut and airbrushed to make the girls look perfect, they set up a comparison that a real woman can't live up to. Even worse, it may not be just the pictures that are altered, but the girls themselves—through surgery.

"So, if someone offers you pornographic material, I hope you will be man enough to say no."

There was silence. They had asked a question—and Mr Radigan had certainly answered it. Suddenly 'Blondie' didn't seem attractive to Charlie. Was she a drug addict? Suppose she was being forced to pose like that. Maybe she had AIDS? Charlie shivered. I'm going to leave those magazines where they belong, he thought—in the bin.



Chapter 32

Solitary 'Pleasures'

Everyone found Mr Radigan's health and hygiene sessions interesting because they touched on topics which affected them all closely. The topics he talked about were part of life. Against that, parts of them were more than a little embarrassing—Charlie's eyes had stared down at his desk for the whole of last week's talk on pornography, for example.

Mr Radigan came in. He was seeing the boys on their own again. Charlie wondered what he would be talking to them about this week.



"Well, this is a big topic," Mr Radigan began. "Today's issue is: 'Is masturbation healthy?'" Charlie cringed—this could be worse than pornography.

"So where are the girls today, Mr Radigan?" demanded Alan. "Are they too 'pure' to hear this stuff?" The girls had escaped the pornography talk, too.

"No. Girls are sometimes tempted by pornography and masturbation, too. But these problems affect boys more than girls. In fact, the girls are having a separate session with the nurse. Does that answer your question, Alan?"

Alan was quiet.

"I know that Mrs Alam has already talked to you about sexual intimacy and its importance in bonding a man and

woman together," Mr Radigan began. "Of course, getting this sexual bonding right is one of the most important things that you will do in the whole of your life.

"Given how important it is, it is not surprising that we develop sexual thoughts and feelings as we approach adulthood. Our bodies begin to yearn for sexual union—and it can seem a long time to wait until we get married for this to be fulfilled. It's this physical yearning which I am going to talk to you about today.

"The primary organs used in sexual intimacy are the genital organs. We all know how sensitive they are—get kicked in the wrong place and you really know about it! But rub or stroke the genital organs and the sensation is altogether different: it gives a sense of pleasure, the pleasure which is intended for intercourse. This is called masturbation.

"In our sexuality, our thoughts and feelings are so bound with our bodies that what we do with our bodies immediately affects what we do with our minds and vice versa."

"It is normal to be tempted to masturbate, especially in your teens when your body is growing fast and you are getting ready for adulthood. It isn't a good idea to give in to it, though, and I'm going to tell you why.

"The pleasure you get from masturbation is quite different from the pleasure you get from having a good meal, or feeling the warm sun on your face. In our sexuality, our thoughts and feelings are so closely bound together with our bodies that what we do with our bodies immediately affects what we do with our minds and vice versa. Masturbation encourages sexual fantasy—we use the image of another person for our own satisfaction and enjoy the thought of doing things which we know would be wrong in real life.

"Sexual pleasure is meant to be shared between husband and wife. It nurtures closeness and intimacy. The endorphins and oxytocin which are released in sexual activity are intended to make us feel bonded to one another and fulfilled. The problem with masturbation is that these hormones are released only in relationship to ourselves and the fulfilment is a cheat.

"There is another reason why masturbation isn't good for us, and that is that it reduces the respect we should have for the gift of fatherhood. The ability to give life is very precious. It's bigger than us, something which goes beyond us, something which is touched by mystery."

Alan raised his hand. "I've heard that masturbation helps us to be good at sex because we learn what gives us pleasure." There was some audible sniggering and Charlie looked at his desk.

"Well," said Mr Radigan when everyone had quietened down. "It teaches us about pleasuring ourselves, not someone else. It's self-centred. Being with another person is very different. Masturbation means you've learned a lot of sexual responses that are not suitable with another person. It takes away the 'us', or the mutual pleasure dance of sexual response."

"What if you have a sexual thought, say, right before you go to sleep and you get turned on by it?" asked Alan.

"Everyone has sexual thoughts, Alan. Men have a lot of sexual thoughts. It's what you do with the thought that counts. If you entertain it and watch it like a movie, yes, you're going to get more stimulated. So try to dismiss it, before it gets a grip on you. Taking control of your sexual thoughts is a battle. You may not win it at first, but it's worth fighting. Giving in to masturbation doesn't give release—it just increases the grip sexual thoughts have over you. But the more you resist sexual thoughts, the more they lose their power."

"What about wet dreams?" Alan asked. He was certainly persistent, thought Charlie.

"Wet dreams happen in your sleep—they're beyond your power to control. The formal name for them is 'nocturnal emissions'. It's when your body releases semen in the night. That's your body's natural way of releasing itself—you can't stop it or make it happen. You just have to trust your body to take care of releasing itself in that way."

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Stephen, a good footballer, was emboldened by Alan's questions. "I've heard you go blind if you masturbate," he observed.

"I don't know where you got that one from," said Mr. Radigan. "Except, of course, that you do become blind in a sense—socially blind. As I said, the effects are not always physical. The person who masturbates will become more self-centred. Although it's sometimes an escape mechanism for those who are facing difficult or unpleasant situations at home or who are having trouble socially, it will not solve these situations. It can only postpone coping with them."

"But it does reduce stress," said Alan.

"Maybe," said Mr Radigan. "But there are better ways to reduce stress."

"What ways?" Alan asked. Wow—he doesn't pull his punches, Charlie thought.

"Exercise and sport are great ways to reduce stress and build self-esteem," said Mr Radigan. "There's plenty of opportunity for those."

"But what are we supposed to do when we feel the urge?" Alan asked.

"Well, your first line of defence is how you regard the opposite sex. Always try to look at members of the opposite sex with the attitude of wishing them well. Think: they're not on this earth for your sexual pleasure—they're here to live



their own lives and be helped by you, not taken advantage of. Don't think of them in a pornographic way. Try to think of them as your sisters, or your aunts, or your mums. Try to see their personalities and not just their bodies.

"It's good to avoid situations that lead to thinking about sex. We've already spoken about pornography. But there are other things. For example, don't listen to sexy songs or talk about sex. Avoid dirty jokes—either telling them or listening to them. Then, if people call you a sissy or a baby or a coward for avoiding such things, remember that it takes a real man to stand up to the crowd.

"Don't spend too much time in your bed, either, lying around dreaming or listening to music. Spend time in good company. You've got a lot of physical energy to release, so get going physically. Find a sport you like: go for a good walk, climb a tree, go for a run. That kind of physical release helps a lot. It'll make you feel altogether better than if you shut yourself away in your room.

"As to the physical effects of masturbation, a regular habit becomes rough on the penis. The blood vessels of the male pelvic region become gorged and congested with blood. These vessels are very long and irregular, and if they become congested, they can form little pockets (the technical term is micro-diverticuli) that can easily harbour bacteria. Infections in this area of the body are hard to reach with antibiotics because it is so well-protected by nature. So these infections can go on for a long time, and they can cause permanent damage—even sterility. Male sterility is on the rise at present, and looser attitudes towards masturbation could be a contributing factor.¹ I should say that these risks are small and they are not going to come about from occasional lapses. But they are another reason why the habit is worth avoiding."

After class, Charlie was surprised how much most of the boys seemed to just take Mr Radigan's talk in their stride. It was quite a contrast to last week, he thought, when there had been a lot of sniggering after the pornography session. Oh well, they were all growing up, he supposed. That's the funny thing about becoming a man, he mused. The very things you think make you grown up and manly—like playing around with your sexuality—are the very things that make you remain a boy.

1. Professor Aldo Isidori, Chair of Andrology at the Sapienza University, *Etica della Andrologia*, (Palermo: G.Russo, 2003). See also E. Nieschlag and W Behre, *Andrology: Male Reproductive Health and Dysfunction*, (Berlin: Springer, 2001).