

### On the Bus Ride

I huddle against the side of the bus with my friends, our ears pressed to the glass, trying to hear the voice of our coach over the thrum of the engine and the confused whispers.

After the awards at the end of a cross-country meet, our coach had herded the team towards the bus with a sharp tilt to his voice, his jaw set sternly. The girls filed onto the bus, but the boys weren't allowed to join us. Instead, they were lined up outside.

I swap shocked glances with my friends as we piece together the story from snippets of our coach's lecture and the gossip of the seniors in the back. From what I can tell, the boys stole a whole pack of Gatorade from the other team, lied about it, and the other team's coach had to get involved.

As the boys are finally allowed to start piling into the bus, one senior girl's haughty voice rises from the shocked mumbles.

"Oh, it's fine. Boys will be boys."

I stare.

There's something hot and angry rising in my stomach, and a glance at my friend confirms she feels the same, but I'm afraid to confront the girl about it. I settle for sinking into my seat instead.

More often than not, those words are a crutch used by the parents of rambunctious boys. When their kids wrestle on the floor, they say: "Boys will be boys." When boys are yelling too loud and the parents can't reign them in, they say: "Boys will be boys." The phrase is common

enough that a lot of people don't think twice about it anymore; they speak it as if it has no repercussions—but it does.

When a young girl goes out to the playground for recess, small hands reaching for the ladder to the slide, she gets shoved aside by a boy in her class. He sneers and spits, and she wants to fight back, but she's afraid of getting in trouble. She cries instead.

It happens the next day, and the next, and the day after that.

She goes to her friends with the issue and she's told, "Oh my god, he likes you! Boys are mean when they have a crush on you."

The little girl shrinks at that, shoulders creeping up as if she could sink into them, hide away like a turtle in her shell. She offers her friends a smile, feeling a little sick.

She goes to her parents, and together they go to the principal.

"Boys will be boys. He'll stop eventually. No one's been hurt."

Too many girls have been told that a boy's bullying equates to a crush. Where boys are allowed to be rowdy, loud, obscene, and even violent, girls are expected to look for "love," and to always be polite, gentle, and lady-like.

Boys are given monster trucks and swords, which serve to cultivate a sense of dominance, an allowance of violence. Any dominance or anger inside a girl's chest is shoved down. They are given baby dolls and told to "play mom"; they are handed Barbies and told to play for the career of their dreams because it certainly won't be handed to them.

Kids are malleable. What we offer them is what they take. What we tell them they are is often what they want to be. Because of this, consequences are critical in the development of young minds; they teach them what is right and what is wrong, and they shape the type of people they become.

If every time a boy shoves someone or has a tantrum, he gets away with the dismissal of “boys will be boys,” and each time a girl does the same she’s scolded, what kind of precedent does this create?

Of course, we need to allow children to be children. Kids are going to make mistakes. They’re going to be too rough, to get upset and throw things, to yell a little too loud. That isn’t the issue at all. “Boys will be boys” stems directly from societal gender expectations, and is used far too often to excuse inexcusable behavior.

“Boys will be boys” is not a harmless phrase. It sets the precedent that it is okay for boys to do whatever they want, even if what they want is a bad thing. It acts as if these behaviors are the natural state of boys, but that is far from true. Boys should be—and can be—kind, too. Although some actions are okay to dismiss as childlike behavior, the cliché sets the precedent for excusing things that should not be excused: from shoving to stealing to even assault.

A few years ago, my friend sat with me in her room, green eyes wide and scared and rimmed in red.

She told me, her voice trembling, that she had been assaulted by a counselor at her summer camp. She had gone to other counselors for help, she had gone to her parents, but no one believed her. If they did, she got a similar response from all of them.

“Boys will be boys, it’s not like he raped you.”

I pull my knees up to my chest as I sink into the bus seat, feeling almost claustrophobic among the whispers and questions and unfazed laughter as the boys sit down.

My friend pulls out her AirPods. She offers one to me, and I’m sure as I take it that the disgust in the twist of her lips mirrors my own.

“I hate that phrase,” I say, and my voice comes out tight.

She nods in agreement. Together we turn our backs to the rest of the bus, eyes on the trees passing by.

She turns the music up.