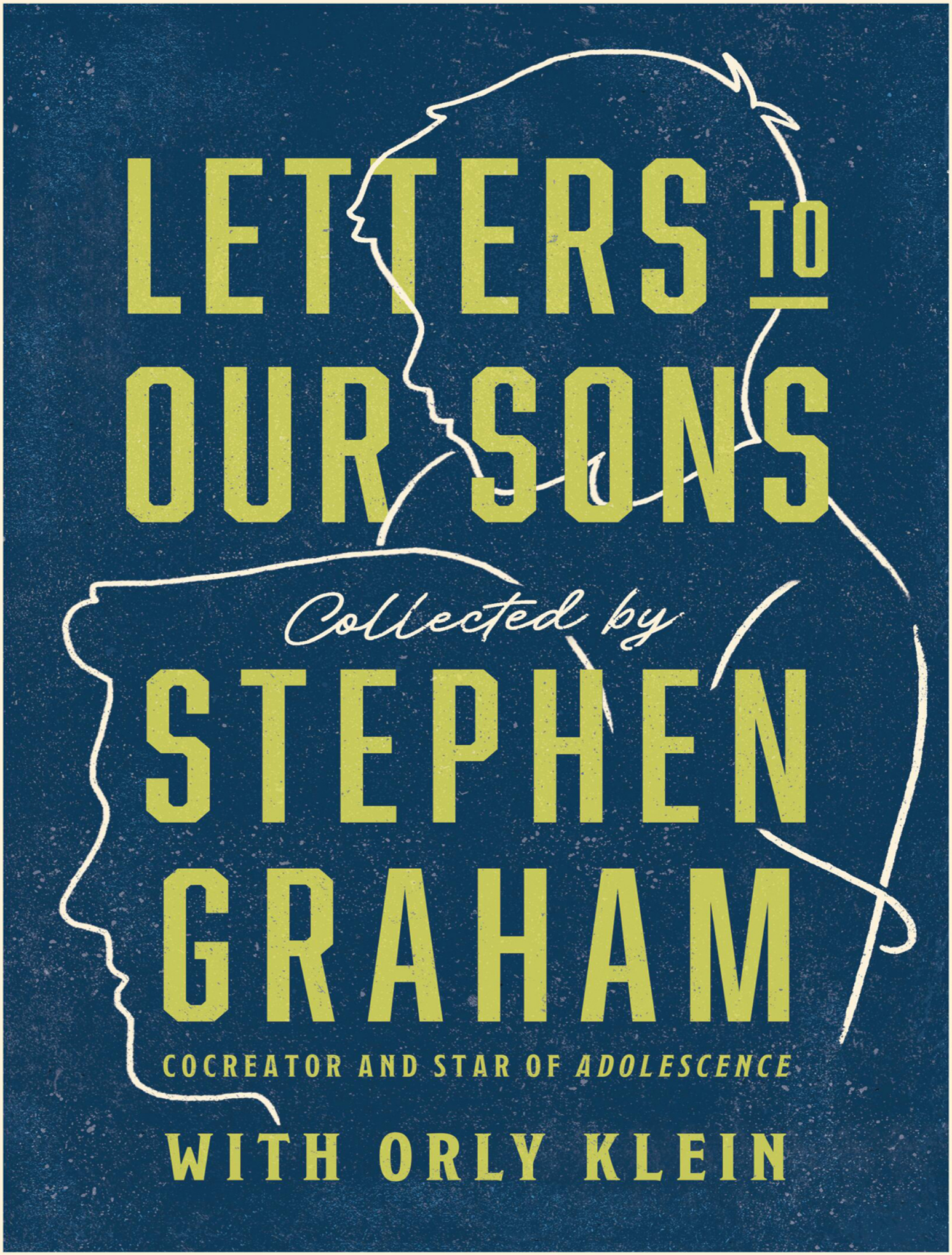

LETTERS TO OUR SONS
Collected by
STEPHEN GRAHAM
COCREATOR AND STAR OF ADOLESCENCE
WITH ORLY KLEIN

Digital Galley Edition

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STEPHEN GRAHAM

WITH ORLY KLEIN

UNION SQUARE & CO.
NEW YORK

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For every father and every son.

STEPHEN GRAHAM

To Danny,
everything, always x

ORLY KLEIN

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If I ever have boys they'll be dangerous men
They'll smile at dogs and children and be a tonic to friends
They'll send flowers to their mother just because and they'll be a shoulder for many when the world is too much
My boys will know that vulnerability is strength
They won't bottle anger, they'll learn how to express
They won't let pride be the reason they hide, wearing masks while they're hurting inside
My boys will be dangerous men
They won't stay silent even when it's uncomfortable for them
They'll learn that their actions are more effective than words but they'll use their voices to amplify the unheard
They'll know that love isn't something to perform
They'll see beauty in all of its forms
My boys won't grow learning to emotionally hide
They'll reshape masculinity into something they like, make it softer to touch
They'll know that who they are is more than enough
They'll know that being a man doesn't mean carrying the burden alone
They'll learn that an emotional man is a man fully grown
They won't settle everything with violent swings
They'll live in truth even when that truth stings
So yeah, if I ever have boys they'll be dangerous men
but the danger they'll be won't be the one society meant

Daragh Fleming

OceanofPDF.com

Content Warnings

Some letters in this book discuss suicide, self-harm, grief, violence, addiction and sexual and emotional abuse.

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Publisher’s notes

The letters have been grouped into three sections—Early Years, Adolescence and Adulthood—to reflect the different phases in a son’s life. Where the age of the son is not clear from the content of the letter, they have been put in the group that reflects the themes explored.

In some cases, we have not corrected a letter for spelling or grammar, to maintain the original voice of the letter writer.

Each letter includes the following information of the letter writer: first name, age range, location and occupation. Where this information is not included, it was not submitted with the letter.

For every letter published, Graham and Klein will be making a donation to the following charities that are helping men struggling with mental health: MANUP?, which aims to bring awareness and support to men’s mental health, and Comic Relief-funded support group Dad La Soul, which helps dads be seen, heard and supported.

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Foreword

I can’t tell you how happy I am that our book has found its way into your hands. For me, it feels like the perfect way to continue what we set out to achieve with *Adolescence*. The main aim of the series was to open the doors of communication between parents and their children. After the huge impact of the show, one of my closest friends, Jude, rang me because she’d been approached by Orly with an idea for a book. When Orly’s son turned thirteen, she’d asked some men to write to him with some guidance on what it means to be a man. Jude thought this might be a project that resonated with me, so came to stay with my wife, Hannah, and me for the weekend to talk about a possible book idea. It would be a book that could offer parents the opportunity to expand on the conversations we’d started through the show.

Together we decided that we wanted to specifically ask fathers to write to their sons, because this is one of the most influential relationships dads can have. Orly’s project sparked an idea that felt like perfect timing and I saw this as an opportunity to explore the connection between a father and son more deeply, about what it could or should be. That bond is so formative and important, so let’s dissect it, let’s talk about what we think about our own dads, let’s open up about what we did or didn’t get from them, and let’s be honest about what we as fathers need to do and say to our own sons. For better or worse, we are the main role models for them. If we want to help our boys, if we want them to flourish, if we want them to feel loved, to be secure in who they are, to feel like they belong and to grow into good men, then we need to communicate with them.

There’s no denying that at this moment in time that relationship has gone through and is still going through a cosmic change, with many people having different ideas and principles about what it should look like. Over the last fifty years what it is to be a man has also, thankfully, changed.

I was aware that some of the themes we raised in *Adolescence* were

hugely sensitive and difficult for many people to talk about openly. I thought it would be a wonderful thing if we could help bridge that gap using letters as perhaps a softer means of expression.

My hope is that this book will help fathers and sons navigate their place in today's world.

When we put this out there into the public asking fathers to submit letters via the portal, we were overwhelmed with the response. It was magnificent. We received more than 1,600 letters. This was in part thanks to the spectacular job the team at Bloomsbury did at getting the message out. It was absolutely essential to us that we include fathers near and far, and from all walks of life. We wanted to hear from dads who might not usually take part in something like this, who might not necessarily even have access to the portal. So the team sent application packs to places like libraries, prisons, community centres and charities, and thanks to the dedicated efforts of Katy, Ben, Amy, Trâm-Anh, Jenny and Paula, we heard from fathers from all corners of the world and with hugely different backgrounds, upbringings, religions and cultures—from bin men to barristers.

We heard from expectant fathers, estranged fathers, single-parent fathers, same-sex parents, fathers who'd lost, fathers who'd only just discovered they were fathers after years of silence, fathers with regrets, fathers with hopes, fathers living through the tricky sleepless nights, the tricky teenage years, the tricky empty-nest stage, fathers cheering at the sideline, fathers learning that their son doesn't want to do all the typical things expected of a boy, fathers who've become grandfathers, fathers of neurodiverse children or non-verbal children, fathers with kids struggling at school . . .

You are all in here sharing your advice. When to intervene, when to stand back and trust your sons to sort a problem out for themselves, when to question but with a reminder not to judge our sons as they try to find their way. When to let go. When to say 'I love you' or 'I'm proud of you'. Grief, consent, manners, the real meaning of strength, being vulnerable, these were just some of the themes that came up in the letters we read. All the advice around these was aimed towards trying to help our young men become responsible, honest, empathetic, non-judgemental people. These things are the blueprint for being a really decent human being, and where the world is at the moment with extremes on all sides, achieving that

requires us to be compassionate.

One of my favourite pieces of advice in the book is ‘Get a dog’. It’s very simple, and it makes you smile straight away. If you think about it, it teaches you so much. Responsibility, discipline, friendship, loyalty, companionship, reliability, commitment, how to take care of something, to feed it, nurture it. Ultimately one of the most beautiful relationships you can have is with a dog, so I agree wholeheartedly with it as a piece of advice that will help a child to develop and grow. So yeah: get a dog but maybe I’d just add ‘And take good care of it’.

Another standout for me was from a father who talked about communicating with his son through blowing raspberries. A lot can be said in a look, a touch . . . a raspberry.

I also asked some close friends and family with sons if they would get involved. The response I received was fantastic. Some wrote a letter but in the end chose to keep it between themselves and their son, some said it took them weeks to be able to put down in words what they felt, some knew immediately what they wanted to say . . . For some it released suppressed emotions, for others it was a simple expression of love.

My friend Leon told me that writing a letter to his son gave him the opportunity to sit down and reflect on his life and the part his son had played in it. Leon separated from his wife when his son was four. He has always had a beautiful relationship with his son, but when he was putting pen to paper, it made him stop and think about his boy. Sometimes we are all too busy living to ever really think about that one person that we share so much with. We might do it on their birthday or their wedding day, but generally we don’t pause and quietly contemplate our relationships, what they mean to us, what we’re proud of, what we wish we’d done differently. We don’t often reflect deeply in that way. So to sit down, get a pen and paper, and consciously say, ‘I’m going to write to my son, about my relationship with him and what I want to pass on to him,’ is extremely cathartic.

For Leon, it brought him to tears because he realised that his son, who is now twenty-three, has been the one constant relationship throughout his life. The one who has always been there. When romantic relationships had broken down or friendships had faded, Leon realised that his son was his rock, his stability, his everything. Leon said that after he’d written his letter,

he sat and cried for two hours. Not because of things he regretted but because he was fully acknowledging just how strong the love he'd always had for his son still was and how appreciative he was for the connection he'd built with him.

Another friend, Emil, said to me that he'd never spoken the words out loud to his son that he put in his letter. He'd found it too hard to verbalise what he wanted to say. For Emil, his letter was an apology for the impact his addiction had had on his son throughout his childhood. Writing the letter helped him to express and take accountability for some of his life choices. When Emil read his letter out loud to his son, he cried through the words and at the end his son hugged him, thanked him and told him how much it meant to him. The honesty in Emil's letter helped them to move forward with a stronger bond. Many of us are tactile with our sons and tell them we love them but to sit down and write a letter is a completely different thing and it's brought relationships closer.

When I started reading all the letters coming in, I thought, these are phenomenal! I can't lie, at the back of mind I was thinking, 'No pressure on me writing my letter to my son then, is there!' When I thought about what I wanted to say, I realised I wanted to express how our Alf makes me feel. I am blessed, I have a wonderful relationship with him. As I reflected, what I realised was that he brings out the child in me. We have fun together. He makes me laugh, like really laugh, belly laugh, until I either cry or fart. Together we take risks, have adventures, get covered in mud, get told off by Hannah. He's my best mate.

Many letters also spoke about the importance of women, from strong mothers and grandmothers to inspirational wives and daughters. For me, this struck a chord. I am blessed with the most incredible wife, partner and friend in Hannah, I have an exceptionally close relationship with my daughter, Grace, and I am lucky enough to have long-standing friendships with some wonderful women. Men and women are different, and we need to be part of each other's conversations in order to understand the world through each other's eyes. In my opinion, equal rights for women are still a million miles away from where they should be, and to ensure we keep moving in the right direction we need to talk to our boys.

For the first ten years of my life, the most formative and vital years, I was raised by my mother. For a while it was just the two of us, and her love

was the most important thing to me. With it being just her and me in the family unit, there was a strong feeling of being part of a team that gave me an understanding of what it meant to be in a partnership. We formed a unique bond.

My biological dad wasn't around—I would see him occasionally and we had a good relationship, but he was very young when he had me, and having lost his own father when he was a child himself, he wasn't always able to show up in the way I perhaps needed him to. Thankfully for me, Pops came into my life when I was ten. He fell in love with my mother, but he also fell in love with me. He is the man who taught me morals, values, and he was my inspiration. It's easy to make a baby, but it takes a real man to raise a child, and for me that man was Pops.

My biological father is a good man and through a lot of self-work I've reached a place of acceptance about the relationship he and I had. I now look at it with compassion, empathy and understanding. He went on to raise three other children and he was there for them. What I have learned from this is that we don't have to be trapped in a spiritual malady. We don't have to repeat the cycle. As adults our lives may have turned out completely differently if we hadn't lived through the situations we had to face as children.

This came up a lot in the letters I read—fathers writing about their own relationships with their dads, some with pride and admiration, some with fear and sadness, some wanting to carry on a tradition, while others were determined to break a pattern. I've learned that as adults, we have a choice. We don't have to pass any of that on. It's about creating a brand-new landscape, handing over a blank canvas to our young men and helping them to paint their own.

So while these letters were specifically from fathers to sons, now that they are collected together, we feel that this book is aimed at everyone. We've had a lot of mothers say they can't wait to read the book because these letters will give incredible insight and understanding into the father–son relationship they observe at home. Thankfully, parenting roles have become more of a shared partnership—Dad going to work at 7 a.m. and coming home to tea at the table before going to the pub isn't as common as it used to be. For those raising boys with an absent father, it can be a tool that helps to guide their son through unchartered waters.

I hope this can be a communal book, the kind of book that can be in the bathroom, or on the coffee table, maybe at the doctor's or in the dentist's waiting room. I hope it can be a book that people dip into. Maybe you'll pick it up and have a quick flick through and see a sentence that sticks with you, that you can relate to, do you know what I mean? When you're a parent, you question everything you do, whether it's the right thing or not. Every single letter in this book has something in it that makes you think more deeply about a particular experience being shared. You will have your own interpretation of what is really being said and you will find the ones that resonate with you: a father that shines a light on something you're struggling with, or one you share similar pride and joys with.

My hope is that the letters make people smile, think and be a bit more empathetic. Some are simply love letters and show all the many ways we can display our love. I hope they might give others the words and the confidence to express their own love in a way that feels right for them.

My ultimate hope is that the book encourages communication, that it keeps the door open and that it shows our universal son that through communication anything can be solved. We all fall into dark times, we all make mistakes, and alone those times become even darker. Reading these letters made me realise that I'm not alone in this magnificent world of fathering. We just need to keep sharing, and talking.

I want to thank every single person who submitted a letter. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. If it were down to me you would all have made it in, because every single letter was valuable and had something to say. But unfortunately we had a limit and a word count we had to stick to. In facing the almost impossible task of selecting letters to be published, we tried to show the broad range of topics and themes that fathers had written about, so if you wrote a letter about being kind, you will see that there is a letter on that subject included in the book. It might not be your exact one, but know that your letter was of value and we thank you for submitting it. That goes for every letter on every topic. Finally, I would like to thank the two charities we have been working with—MANUP? and Dad La Soul—for their support and collaboration.

Some of our letters are exceptionally bold, and a lot of people have bared their souls, and for that I am truly grateful. The many voices in this book are incredibly unique and to preserve this, some letters have not been

edited. I hope people can appreciate the courage it took for each and every person who put pen to paper and submitted a letter to us for consideration. Without you there would be no book and we hope that the act of writing it gave you as much as the act of reading it gave to us. Every father we heard from at some point in their letter expressed love for their son. That's 1,600 I love yous we were blessed and humbled to read. So, thank you to all those dads who were brave enough to open up, to express their fears and to show their love. It's been an honour.

Stephen Graham

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EARLY YEARS

Son,

I need to tell you something very important; on the night you were born, I committed a crime.

It was one in the morning when I woke up. Your mum was standing in the doorway; I could just make out her silhouette, gently rubbing her bump, and then I saw the look on her face that told me things were not OK. She said she didn't feel well, which given the dreadful pub lunch we'd had earlier in the day didn't surprise me, so I said that it was probably indigestion. Thankfully your mum knew differently and told me to get out of bed.

Five minutes later we were both dressed and driving to the hospital, but by that point your mum was in terrible pain. It was a Sunday night so the roads were clear and I knew we were going to be there in no time. But then, about half a mile from the hospital, we sat at traffic lights on red. We waited, and waited. They didn't change. Your mum was crying by that point and I was terrified. Terrified of your mum and our new baby coming to harm. Terrified of going through the lights and hitting something or someone beyond the blind bend I was turning into. That's when I became a criminal: I put my foot down. If I got a fine, I thought, I'd just send them a photo of you and your birth certificate. The fine never arrived, but you did —quickly. Too quickly for any pain relief for your poor mum who summoned something superhuman to squeeze you out into the world. She was a superhero that night and has been every day and night since.

My dad—your grandad—says that parenthood is the most difficult job you never have training for but I've always disagreed; the training I had for being your father came from him and how he brought me up. He taught me to always follow the rules, do as you're told, obey the law. It's not that I think that's bad advice; I just think that, looking back, it's advice that amounts to words based on fear rather than possibilities. And that's why parenthood has been so hard for me. It's forced me to look back into my own childhood for things I want to pass on to you and confront some painful memories that I never want you to inherit and feel for yourself. I want you to live a life without limits or fear of failure.

So, when you need to, I want you to drive through red lights, too. Because some rules hold us back in the name of staying within the safety of our comfort zones. Sometimes asking for forgiveness is better than asking for permission, sometimes the fear of punishment is far worse than the reality, and what we can achieve beyond the limitations we perceive can be the reason life is worth living at all.

That's why you were born in a hospital bed and not in the footwell of my car. You taught me something then, before you were even born, because you were in such a hurry. You've taught me so much more since then and you still always seem to be running somewhere. I hope you never slow down and never stop teaching me things.

Love,
Dad

Simon • 35–44 • Yorkshire • Teacher

My beautiful baby boy, as I sit down to write this letter, you are exactly three weeks old. In such a short space of time, you have completely changed my life. Without even knowing it yet, you have brought so much love and happiness into our little corner of the world. I don't know how old you'll be when you read this, or how much of it you'll fully understand when you do.

The man and father you see in front of you today hasn't always been this version of me. There was a time when I was lost, unsure of where I was heading, and questioning my place in the world. Life felt pointless at times. I was stuck in a cycle of damaging behaviours, hurting myself and the people closest to me. The truth is, I was a scared little boy who didn't know how to ask for help.

For many years, my biggest mistake was not listening—not even to my own dad, who was always trying to protect me. I took him for granted. I mistook his love and care for interference and control, when, in reality, he was guiding me. He used to say, 'Wait until you have kids of your own—

then you'll understand.' And he was right.

Since the day you came into my life, my heart has never been the same. You stole it, son. Through you, I have already learned me so much in just these first few weeks. I am becoming the man I always wanted to be—the man I always knew I could be. You've given me a purpose beyond myself. You've taught me what unconditional love truly means. An emptiness I carried for so long has been filled. You are the reason I get up and face life. You are my reason to keep going. You have made me say 'us' instead of 'I' and 'we' instead of 'me' and I love you.

I finally understand what my dad meant and what he was doing all along. He wasn't controlling me—he was loving me.

I want you to know that I will always be here for you. No matter what, you can count on me. We will grow together, son. We'll learn from each other. I'll be there to cheer you on when you win, and I'll be there to pick you up when you fall.

You are more than I ever could have imagined—my son, my best friend and my world rolled into one. I can't wait for all the memories we'll make, the lessons we'll learn, and the life we'll share together.

Live your life to the fullest, son. Enjoy every second of it. Be proud of who you are. Dream big, son—the future is yours.

I love you more than you could ever know.

Love you to the moon and back.
Dad

Jay • 35–44 • Merseyside, UK • Actor

I sit here in bed at 5:21 a.m. with my youngest son in my arms. He is only three months old. My other son (just turned six) snores happily from his bedroom. I think of their lives stretching out before them with excitement and trepidation. Everything I see in the news and on social media these days suggests that men are lost, frightened and dangerous. My wife and I joke (though it is not funny) that when some horror story comes up on our phone

it will most likely be a man at fault. How do I protect my little boys from this seemingly overwhelming affliction to harm others or themselves (looking at the stats for male suicides)?

I believe I am a good man. I think it comes from a childhood growing up with strong women around me at home and surrounding myself with girlfriends in school. These women were never afraid to show their love for each other and for me. There was never the question of holding back my emotions or feelings because ‘that’s not what men do’—it was instilled in me to feel all the feelings with absolute abandon. Now that I have two young sons, it is my job (and privilege) to help guide them to becoming vulnerable, loving men, and my advice to them is to lean into the feminine, not away from it.

So, surround yourself with strong female role models and learn from them. Reject the status quo on what it means to be ‘manly’ in this world as it could not be more outdated and is downright dangerous.

I will walk this path with my sons, with the immense weight of responsibility of being their male role model and hope to show them that this life is so full of love and to let it in.

Tom • 25–34 • Product Manager

To my incredible son: you’re still too young to know any different, but one day I’m pretty sure you’ll ask me why we’ve never really talked about your grandad—my dad. The truth is he wasn’t a kind man, and growing up with him was really tough. I still have days where I struggle to process some of the things he put me through. None of us get to choose the past we come from, but we can choose what to do with it, and if you look carefully even bad role models can teach you something. He showed me very clearly the kind of person I never wanted to be.

I used to tell people at school that I was adopted, and that my real dad was Arnold Schwarzenegger (though I never did inherit his muscles!). I clung to people like that, to heroes from films, music and books, trying to work out what it meant to be a man. Your granddad was a bully. Because of

that, I learned early on how much I hated bullies, and how much I couldn't stand any kind of injustice. Arnie wouldn't stand for it, so why should I?

Sometimes that's made me clash with people or got me into trouble, because I've never been good at staying quiet when something feels wrong. But you know what? That's part of who I am, and it's a part I want to pass on to you—the courage to stand up for what's right, even when it's hard.

I didn't have a great role model, so I had to go and find my own. I hope that as you grow up, you'll find your own role models too. Some will be famous and some might be people in your own life. Just remember that your heroes don't always have to be perfect, but if one of them shows you something ugly, hurts others or stops living by the values you admire, you don't owe them your loyalty. They don't deserve you. The people you look up to can change, and so can you.

My dad showed me who I didn't want to be, but you've shown me who I can be.

I might not be able to jump from helicopters or fight twenty men at once like the heroes I looked up to, but if I can show you what strength looks like in kindness and love, that's enough for me.

Thank you. l love you.
Dad x

Luke • 35–44 • West Midlands, UK • Teacher

Dear son,

At the time of writing this letter, you're just seven months old, and it still feels weird writing the word 'son'. I'm still getting used to it all. There are many ongoing questions I ask myself, like how do I make sure you're not too cold when you come out of the bath? When is it time to pass you over to Mum to feed? How can I make you smile when you're feeling frustrated and upset? But the one thing that has come easily is knowing how to love you.

From the moment you came into this world, everything changed. Suddenly, I had a sense of purpose: you. You've brought light into my bones, and you've given me a whole new lease of life, a second chance on this planet. The chance to help usher you into the big bad world with an affectionate nudge, hoping you don't make the same mistakes I did. It's interesting to me, so many letters in this book will be between fathers and sons who already have a dialogue, but we're not there yet. That's not to say we don't communicate—your smile when I get home from work and your goofy laugh when I blow a raspberry on your tummy bring immeasurable joy to my day.

I recognise myself in you, and I sometimes see shades of your mum—though granted not as many as she'd like. You're an extension of me, yet when I look down at you, I don't see a greying, stressed man looking back at me, I see a future, and one filled with hope and possibility. What a gift that has been. I can't wait to share music with you, and cinema. I want us to laugh together, I want us to cry together. I want to be there for all the important moments, and all moments that don't seem significant, but matter more than anything.

I think about your future all the time, and it's funny knowing when you read this letter, the future will have arrived. What sort of man will you have grown up to be? Will you be into football, and if so, I pray you'll carry the same passion for Spurs that I do. Don't go and do something silly like supporting Arsenal to annoy me—it'll work.

But all I truly wish for your future is happiness. For you to carry that infectious, optimistic spirit that defines you, right into your adult life. Find

the good in this world, son, there's plenty of it. But if life intervenes and I'm not there when you read this—ultimately, I have one thing to ask of you, and that's to look after your mum. She loves you more than you'll ever know. We both do.

Love Dad x

Stefan • 35-44 • London, UK • Digital Marketing Producer

To my boy,

I want to start with things that I love about you that I'll cherish forever. You're five now. You love playing with your cars and Spider-Man. We ride our bikes together and adore playing Super Mario Brothers. Your blond curly hair is the talk of the school. You're my best friend.

Now to something I want to really think about and remember. Having your two older sisters, I thought I knew everything about what it meant to be a parent. To be a 'Dada'. I knew how to be a 'girl dad'. But when I first held you I knew that there was an untold responsibility that came with being the father of a boy. I don't want to put you on a pedestal and tell you I felt like it was more important a job, or more special an experience. It wasn't like that (not entirely anyway).

You see, your sisters never had to prove how strong they were in the playground, or how 'hard' they were, or whether or not they could withstand pain. They never felt like they needed to hide their tears like you have, worried they'll look inferior. You've been at school for two years now and I've noticed that you have this additional burden to navigate. I want you to know that I get it. I've been there. In many ways, I still am there. It doesn't go away. Society, social media, movies, TV shows. It's there in droves. I want you to know, my son: you don't ever need to prove anything to anyone. Be yourself. Show people that the bee sting hurts. Tell people you cried when Bambi's mum died. If people ask? Yes, you use a really great conditioner for your hair to bring out the curls. You'll be appreciated far more. It took me decades to realise it, but you'll be happier for it.

That's all I have to say for now. Oh, and be kind to your sisters; they're going to need you.

x

Dean • 35–44 • Leicestershire, UK • Senior Digital Designer

Dear son,

It has been nearly a year since you came into our lives, and I know that my life will never be the same and that I am changed for good. You have been a lightning bolt that has struck down deep into some of my core beliefs, challenging my own perceptions of what it means to be a man and to be a father. I want you to know that I love you for the unique, fiery, hilarious, strong, sensitive, resilient, brave and adventurous individual that you are.

I always knew, from a very young age, that I wanted to be a father. It seemed like the natural way of things, to enjoy having a family and to have your children around you, to experience the ultimate love and to give your life meaning and purpose. I always thought that providing for your family was a noble duty, and the ritualistic selflessness of fulfilling that duty above all else was the mark of the man. The men around me were broad-shouldered and carried responsibility like stones in their rough, work-worn hands. They, like all of us, were flawed and emotions were rarely shared, often confined to male-only spaces to which I didn't feel I belonged. Male passion was reserved for shouting at goals scored in football matches, and compassion and empathy were a wordless language, traded in knowing looks from steely eyes that I couldn't read.

As I grew into myself and away from the man that I thought I should be, I found a whole host of conflict; a paradoxical duality of shame and sadness mixed with adventure, ambition and pride. I realised that I was gay on the brink of enormous change. The new millennium was glittering with metallic promise, but notions of traditional fatherhood and masculinity were stubbornly etched in immovable stone. Fifteen-year-old me could not see that you would ever exist, and I was heartbroken. I would never be part of that group of men with their families, their comradery closed off and unavailable to me.

It took a lot of time, patience and self-reflection, qualities you know I struggle with at times, to accept myself. Eventually, I became excited to forge this new future for myself and to allow new dreams and possibilities to come forward, to ditch fixed plans and pursue happiness and fulfilment, wherever they may present themselves. With years and experience came

new rights for LGBT+ people and my newer ambitions and hopes started to trickle and blur into my old dreams. You started to become a possibility, but I dared not hope. For a long time, the idea of fatherhood was still confined to that imaginary musing of ‘one day’. I have never considered myself much of an activist. A big believer and an advocate for change, yes, but I always assumed that I would assimilate into society and that I would largely plod through life with unquestioning gratitude. I would be able to bend the rules just enough to allow me to be myself and carve my own way, but never truly break them for fear of upsetting an order that brought me a familiar sense of comfort. Embers, sparks and cinders of change rather than blazing technicolour fireworks of glory.

I can see now that is wrong—go for the glory, you deserve it all and shouldn’t settle. Be the change you want to see in the world. Part of being a man is finding your own way and celebrating your own journey with pride. Before we adopted you, I had visions of the father I wanted to be. I saw myself as nurturing, aware of my vulnerabilities and strong enough to help you through the more difficult elements of your past—I would have the broad shoulders and the capacity to fulfil my duty to you. I am not ashamed to say now that there have been times that you have shone a light on parts of me that I didn’t know I had, awakened dormant fears, and I have often questioned whether I am good enough to be the father you need. I hold hope that you will be able to forgive me for the times where I have got things wrong and that you know that no matter how challenging things have been and how difficult they may become, I will always stand with you, my commitment and dedication to you will be unwavering and I will love you always and forever.

I would prefer to share my hopes for you, rather than give advice on how to navigate being a man in our world. I hope that you will respect yourself and others always, knowing the difference between what is right and wrong. I hope that you will be generous with your time, love and money. I hope that you will show people your best efforts. And accept when you and they fall short with humility. I hope that you will learn and practise forgiveness. Try to help others. I hope you will be a person that builds trust and understanding. I hope you will be curious about the world. I hope that you will always find learning in your experiences, the good and the bad, and that they help you to make your own way. Take responsibility for and

ownership of your choices. I hope that when you make mistakes you are kind to yourself and others. I hope that you always seek to build rather than break a bridge. I hope that you believe in teamwork and togetherness. I hope you always know belonging. I hope you know your limits and accept yourself for the amazing person you are. I hope you know when to say yes and open yourself up to all the amazing things life has to offer. I hope you know when to say no and to keep yourself safe. I hope you stand up for what you believe in. I hope you are proud of yourself and your life, for I could not be prouder of you.

And when you come to love, love fiercely, but always remember that you too are deserving of that same love in return. I hope that you have hopes. I hope that you have dreams. I hope that you become a man far greater than I, and that you get to share in the wonderful gift of helping others to understand what it is to be a man with your own shining example.

I love you, son, more than words can describe. Always and forever, to the moon and back, to the sky and back.

Daddy x

Sam • 35–44 • London, UK • Teacher

Aim for the stars; if you reach the moon, you've still left the atmosphere.

Ian • 55–64 • Cumbria, UK • NHS Senior Manager

Dearest _____ and _____,

It probably won't surprise you to learn that I always wanted girls. All my students agreed with me that this would be best; 'real girl-dad energy' was the consensus of my class. Before you were born, to my mind, the job of a parent raising girls in the patriarchy seemed simpler somehow: love, validate and empower. But boys? Love them—of course. Validate them—naturally. But how to empower boys when, despite having chosen neither the bodies nor the environment they were being born into, by virtue of those chances, they would now already be imbued with the privileges and responsibilities of the powerful?

So, when your mother and I found out at your twelve-week scan that we were having not twin girls, but twin boys, I needed some space to process. My dreams of taking my teenage girls to Chappell Roan concerts appeared to be shattered. What would I do with them instead? Would I need to suddenly develop an interest in the Premier League?

It took your mother (of course) to spell out the obvious: you still can take them to Chappell Roan (subtext: you idiot...) Perhaps my fear of raising boys was due to a buried belief now resurfacing that I myself wasn't a 'real' boy. I don't like sport—I've never shown any particular aptitude to it; I'm naturally quite sensitive and risk-averse—not a conqueror or a dominator; and I'm generally more comfortable discussing emotions and feelings—traditionally more 'female-coded' spheres.

In the hazy days after you were born, all the amazing midwives at the hospital who helped care for you seemed to reinforce my pre-parenthood preference for girls. 'Boys or girls?' they'd ask us. 'Identical boys,' we'd reply. 'Aww,' they'd say. 'Mummy's boys! Never mind, Daddy, maybe a girl next time.' Outside the hospital, an overheard conversation from a father followed a similar theme: 'Yeah, I think, if he was a girl, I'd go easier on him, but because he's a boy, I see myself in him, so I'm harder on him.' It wasn't just me then who found the idea of raising boys a more complicated or intimidating prospect than raising humans of the opposite sex.

Why?

In those early hours and days, falling head over heels in love with you both while learning how to care for you, that question of why kept bouncing around my dopamine-filled brain. I started to wonder whether it was because on some unconscious level there are actually very few people who feel like they're a 'real' boy, or indeed a 'real' girl. Loving yourself—truly loving yourself—is maybe the hardest lesson that any human has to learn. When you have a child who shares your sex, it's easier to see yourself in them, and, if you're not careful, be as 'hard on them' as you probably are on yourself.

Slowly, through the mists of sleep deprivation and adrenaline and bottles and nappies, my job as a new dad of twin boys crystallised: I needed to accept myself, maybe even love myself and my own version of being a man. In doing so, I could try to give you both a non-traditional male role model fit for 2025. Instead of worrying that I was weak, I wouldn't stop myself from crying for joy in front of you. Instead of worrying that I hadn't 'made it' in my career, I'd take pride in being your primary caregiver. I'd push myself to see my sensitivity as my greatest strength—I'd kiss you all the time, tell you that you were beautiful, that you were my amazing, caring, sharing boys.

So I did. Your magic mama went back to work after about four months, and I became your primary caregiver. We learned what makes each other tick. Which noises mean you want water, and which mean you want a breath of fresh air, or a cuddle. We've sung together (lots of Chappell Roan interspersed between the nursery rhymes), swum together, played peekaboo together, snuggled together, and laughed together. Not that there haven't been challenges—parenthood is hard! As is being a baby. But raising two baby boys has been a wonderful reminder that life is never one thing or the other—it's usually everything, all at once.

In films and books, if the main characters are lucky, by the end of the story they will have managed to get not what they maybe first wanted, but what they needed all along. I wanted girls. The universe gave your mother and me two difficult years, and then, two beautiful baby boys. Thanks to you both, I've learned to love myself and become proud of my version of masculinity. I'm the happiest I've ever been, and I feel like the luckiest man in the world.

I love you both with all my heart, and I always will, my boys.

Dad

Rob • 35–44

Dear son,

Showing courage as a man is to be able to stand up and help, support and where necessary provide a voice to those who don't have one.

Being a man of colour, I understand some of the aspects you will face being mixed race. You will carry the privilege of being a man but then be marginalised by the colour of your skin. Although hard, this will give you a unique view of life which you can use to positively impact those around you. Educating your friends and holding them to the standards you measure yourself against is courageous and requires bravery to set the tone of what it means to be a man.

Equal to not acting is silence. I was once on a night out for a friend's birthday; someone used a racial slur against me, and what did I say? Nothing. I just put my head down and felt pain and discomfort. Avoiding conflict and letting that person and his mates chuckle to themselves, going home proud of their racism. I'm not saying to go in all guns blazing, start a fight and put yourself at risk. But to have the courage to ask calmly and respectfully, 'Why did you use those words?'

Having the strength to do that could have stopped another person getting hurt, or made someone think twice before speaking. This has the power to change behaviour and have a positive impact on society. As you grow up, I hope you find this courage. That it's something you develop in time and constantly work on and exercise.

In this life, the things that have made me feel good about myself, and proud to be a man, is when I have been able to freely show love and help those who truly need it. There will be nothing that would make me prouder. You are only a toddler now, but I see this within you and can't wait for you to positively impact those around you.

Love you always,
Dad

Jason • 35–44 • Surrey, UK • Business Consultant

To my son,

I hope masculinity finds you in your softness, and that you never lose it. The bravery it takes to be unapologetically you, to move forward with kindness. I hope you absolve the parts of me it took me almost thirty years to find. I wish someone had told me sooner that real men cry, we tell each other we love each other, we hug. I hope you feel safe with me forever, and in turn others feel safe with you. My precious boy.

Lucian • 25–34 • Inclusion Consultant

dearest son (hope my daughter reads this too)

i have been putting off writing this for ages, not because i didn't want to, but because im not very good at important things like this.

i feel im much better at telling you how much you mean to me in the moment, and i'm much better at helping you through your problems when they appear. id rather remind you that you only get better with practise, in the park, cycling beside you as you fall off your bike for the 100th time that day. i'd rather tell you to take it slow when you fall in love as i watch you falling in love and tell you stories about my heartbreak as i watch you fall out of love. id rather teach you how to love by taking you and your sister with me when i take your mum out for dinner, and teach you to respect women by letting your sister and mother tell us both how they see the world and how they feel the world sees them. id rather show you how to stand up for what you believe in by marching by your side in protests through the streets. id rather push you to go further in the things you love when you begin to find the things that bring you joy. id rather show you how to be yourself, by showing you the whole of myself. id rather explain how good mo salah was to you, in the car as we drive to your games. i'd rather remind you of the worlds dangers at 2am as i pick you up from someone's party and tell you that actions have reactions as i put frozen peas on your black eye. id rather teach you about your history as we float with your grandfather along the essiquibo river and teach you the importance of patience under the shade of a tree in your grandmother's garden.

id rather tell you life's short (but long!) as we mourn together in black suits. i'd rather teach you the power of words by reading to you. i'd rather show you how to listen by listening to you and i'd rather show you how to love by loving you !

id rather spend every second of my time on this planet, next to you, listening to you, laughing with you, playing with you, crying with you, sleeping next to you, teaching you, learning with you, learning from you, eating with you, drawing with you, swimming with you, starting fires with you, dreaming with you, reading with you, flying with you, loving you. than be sat somewhere else writing about you. (and your sister)

because i love you !!!!!!!!!!!!

dad x

Loyle • 25–34 • London, UK • Musician and Actor

My dearest boys,

For years, I never thought I would, or should, have children. I would cite the state of the world, the loss of freedom, the reduction of life into a clichéd, monotonous parental role—all the logical reasons I could think of—but really, I was scared that I would just be really, really bad at it. Not at any of the practical parts (though when I discovered that we were having twins, I did spend days panicking about not having enough space or time or money and how to look after two of you at once), but emotionally; I was worried that I wouldn't be able to love you and show that I loved you like I should. The feeling and expression of love that I knew would come so easily to your mother—who has such a huge heart and has such strong and demonstrable emotions that keeping them from spilling over is the challenge—I have always struggled with.

The first of those now seems so, so stupid and ridiculous: I love you so much, to a degree that no words can explain. You are by orders of magnitude the best of me, and when I see you smile or laugh or even when you are upset and I can comfort you with a hug—things that have happened every single day since you were born—what I feel is stronger than anything in my life before you.

But the second of those—to show you how much you are loved—I still worry about. Your grandfather, who you never got to meet, my father, was a good man: kind, generous, clever, mischievous, a man who would do anything for his children. But I know that some of the traits I have as an adult come from him. I never saw my father cry; I have not cried since I was eleven (the cause, absurdly, was England getting knocked out of Euro 96). My father would get us presents, and plan trips and build toys and all manner of practical things to make our lives easier and richer, but words and physical expressions of affection were far rarer commodities.

I know that I try to compensate for what I see as my emotional illiteracy and constipation with those same 'acts of service', and with presents. My father had a temper, and though he never hit us, there was a rage inside him that, as children, I and my brother and sister, and in hindsight, my mother, at times were afraid of. I am afraid of that rage in myself. Triggered by

frustration, a feeling of failure, of impotence, by hurt pride, and coupled with shame, I know that sometimes it all comes out in the ways that society has taught men they are allowed to show emotion—in rage. Even at you, whom I love with all my heart, and who I would fight to protect from anyone else's aggression with an all-consuming fury.

When you were tiny, in those long, dark winter nights as you were waking and crying to be fed every couple of hours and your mother and I slept in shifts, I kept a diary of sorts. One entry reads:

> 'Sometimes when my sons cry I want to hurt them. It sounds awful, and it is awful, but it's the truth, and I really don't know whether this is a normal thing that loads of people feel or whether I'm a monster. One thing I've found in my short time as a father so far is that I seem to be very different people at different times of the day and in response to different behaviours from the babies. Lots of the time, in daylight especially, even when they're crying and throwing up milk on me or squirming or I'm changing them against their will because somehow they've managed to become covered in piss despite what I thought was a perfectly well-fitted nappy for the fifth time that day, I can be patient, positive, calm: I talk to them in soft tones, tell them they're doing great and it's all OK, kiss them, stroke their heads, and all of this genuinely and with a heart full of love for them, because I do love them and think they are amazing. But. There are times, more often at night-time and almost always when at least one of them is crying and has been for more than a couple of minutes, when something inside me flips, my hands tense and my body floods with rage and the urge to shake them or squeeze them or slam them into a wall and, probably most fucked-up, to bite their crying faces is something I have to control, and obviously afterwards, when the crying has stopped and they're once again the tiny, beautiful, fragile creatures I would die to protect, I feel terrible.'

Some of this is a bigger societal and cultural problem: the lessons we unwittingly (or in the darker corners of the internet, where insecure

misogynist fuckwits exploit the loneliness of young men for fame and profit, purposefully) teach boys about what emotions are allowed, how we deal with frustrations, about how ‘strength’ and stoicism are the same. But I also know that we inherit these things from our fathers, because as a father now, I see, for better and for worse, so much of my father in myself.

I want you to be better at this than me. I want you to be able to ask for help, to allow yourselves to be vulnerable, and to cry, and to not be OK, and to recognise and express your feelings. Even at not-quite-two, ironically, you are in many ways more emotionally mature than I am. Your joys, your sadnesses are expressed so purely and intensely and without self-censorship or shame, and while they fill me with admiration, I sometimes feel jealous of your freedom, and it is that unselfconscious recognition and expression of feeling that I hope you never have to learn to hide, to self-police, to push far down inside, as I learned, and my father learned, and so many fathers have learned as they grew up.

But I do have hope. Already, you, my beautiful boys, have taught me so much more patience, more willingness to show my love than I was ever capable of in my life before you. I am, I think, kinder to myself than my father ever allowed himself to be and than I allowed myself before you were born. Societally, things that were shameful to talk about like mental health and shame and sadness are starting to be more discussed among boys and men. The fact that I am writing this letter, which my father never wrote for me, is, I think, progress. Now, of course, it is easy because you are small and so affectionate and emotionally open (because you have not yet learned not to be) and you leap into my arms when I come home from work, to tell you and show you that I love you.

My mission is to continue to tell you and to show you how much you are loved as you grow up, and what I think my father realised late into his life, and what I am realising in these early years of your lives, is that to do that, we need to be willing to accept love ourselves. The fierce, pure love that you give me, the love that sometimes makes me feel ashamed that I don’t deserve it, inspires me to believe that I can be loved and love as much as you love and are loved. My sons, you are the best thing that ever happened to me, and I hope by the time you read this I have been able to show you even a tiny fraction of my love for you.

Love,
Dad

Thomas • 35–44 • London, UK • Teacher

My son,

I've been so scared. Before you were born I felt I wasn't ready. I wasn't the accomplished man I'd always hoped I would be before I had kids. How could this joker be a father to a child? And then you came, and for a while all I knew was love. I thought maybe that was it. That maybe there was so much love that it would all be OK. There was so much to learn, and I gained so much respect for anyone who's ever raised a child, and it was hazy with the days and nights blurring into one another, but the fear was gone.

Then it came back. Every time I felt I didn't know what I was doing—which became every day. Every time I screwed up a nappy or I got your nap times wrong or I couldn't get you to stop crying when we were on the high street. I was a fraud and everyone knew it, and they weren't laughing at me, it was past being funny. They were disgusted by me. It pains me so much to say this, because you are the most beautiful thing the universe has ever known, but I was so scared of . . . you. That fear manifested into anger. And anger breeds more anger. I was furious at everyone and everything, bilious and bitter. I lived constantly at boiling point, and it created a tense energy I clung on to and dragged with me everywhere. I'd turned into the thing I'd sworn I never would. I'd become the epitome of all the masculine ugliness that generations of men had poisoned our family tree with, rotting it to the roots. I truly hated myself. And I knew you deserved better.

Then, with so much help and support from your mum, who is astonishing, and the best person I know apart from you, I started talking. To therapists, to friends, to family. It didn't go away, but it got so much better. I became patient. I became empathetic. I became free. Freedom means no fear. Through the darkness, you were the light that guided me home.

There are still things that scare me every day, but I know it'll be OK. I'm worried about the world we've brought you into, and how the people of my time, and the people that came before us, have failed you. The hatred and division driven by the few to control the many, the normalisation of isolation, the destruction of the natural world. Yet I have an unshakeable faith that somehow we will make it through, you and I, because we have a

love in our lives that makes us stronger than anything you can imagine. Whatever happens, even if we feel we're losing the battle, love always triumphs and we will win the war. And if we don't? If we falter? If you can't muster the fight for revolution? Well, you are already all I have ever wanted you to be—my son.

Ash • 25–34 • Doctor

Son,

There’s something I want to tell you, and I’m writing it down so you can read it whenever you want to. On quiet days, on happy days, and even on days when feelings feel big. Inside every person is a tiny lantern. My lantern, your lantern, everyone has one. My lantern doesn’t always shine the same way. Some days it glows brightly. Some days it feels tired or flickers softly because I’m carrying big feelings. But because of you my lantern never goes out. Every time you laugh, every time you hug me, every time you try your best or show your kind heart, a spark jumps into my lantern to help it glow again. You brighten my days in ways you might not even notice.

I want to tell you the things being a dad have really taught me about life and being a man. Being a dad has taught me that my lantern is mine to take care of. That’s something I want you to learn as early as possible, so I’ve written down a few things that might help you do this:

1. It’s OK to have big feelings. Lanterns flicker sometimes. That doesn’t mean they’re broken. If you’re sad, angry, excited, scared or confused, you can always talk to me.

2. You don’t need to be perfect. Even lanterns with tiny scratches and big bumps still shine. Trying, learning and being kind is what matters.

3. Be kind to yourself. This is something I’m still learning. Make time for yourself. And when you make a mistake, it doesn’t mean your lantern stops glowing. It just means you’re human.

4. Ask for help when you need it. Lanterns sometimes need another light nearby. You never have to carry things alone.

Your lantern is your own. As your dad, I’ll guide you, love you and walk

with you—but you’re the keeper of your own lantern. I want you to grow up knowing how to care for yourself with kindness and courage.

With all the light in my heart,
Dad

Andy • 35–44 • Manchester, UK • Organisational Development Practitioner

Please look after the boy that you are, for the man you are yet to become.

Paul • 55–64 • Aberdeenshire, Scotland • Retired

My son, my light, my echo of grace,

You came into this world and changed my pace. Before you, I walked with half a map; now every step, I take with purpose, every breath, a promise whispered between us. I want you to know . . . I love you. Not in the fleeting way the world speaks of love, but in the way roots love the soil, how oceans kiss the shore. Becoming your father taught me how to father myself. To unlearn hardness, to soften the edges of my pride, to face my reflection as both man and boy, and to ask . . . What does love look like in motion? It looks like showing up. Even when tired. It looks like holding you close, your small hand pressed to my chest, feeling your breath syncing with mine, our own quiet conversation beyond words, beyond time.

I learned that strength isn't silence. That masculinity isn't the absence of feeling, but the courage to stand in it. To cry when your heart trembles, to say 'I'm sorry' when you must, to lead not by fear but by compassion. The world will tell you that a man must never bend, but I've learned, my son, that bending is how we grow. That even the tallest tree sways in the wind yet never forgets its roots. There will be days you'll see me fall short, I ask only that you watch how I rise. Because you're watching everything: how I speak to others, how I listen, how I hold anger, how I release it. You teach me every day that emotions aren't enemies, they're guides. And you, my guide in miniature form, have shown me what it means to feel again.

Fatherhood has changed me. It made time real. It turned chaos into calendars, and dreams into discipline. It showed me that sacrifice isn't loss, it's love in action. That providing isn't just money or toys, but presence, laughter and stillness. You've made me redefine what a man is. He is protector, yes, but also human. He is provider, yes, but also nurturer. He stands tall not because he never breaks, but because he rebuilds, over and over, for those he loves. When you rest your head on my stomach, listening to my breath, I feel the same peace a mother must feel when her child feeds, a sacred rhythm between us, a reminder that love is ancient, and we are only its vessels. The toughest part of being a man is carrying the noise of the world and still making room for your own song. But with you, my boy, I've learned to hum again.

So when life grows heavy, remember this letter. Remember the lessons written between its lines. Be kind. Be patient. Be bold enough to love out loud. And never forget, you are the best part of me.

Love,
Daddy

CJ • 25–34 • Artist

Hey buddy,

My favourite part of this year just happened. I was driving you to your mum's, and we were having one of our discussions. As always you listened, asked questions and gave me your own opinion before insisting I shush so we could go back to the audiobook. This time though I had a thought. I realised that one day, you might actually tell your own son what your dad taught you when you were young. I loved my dad, but I don't think I can say that about him. And it made me so happy and proud we have this relationship.

And that's the lesson I want to give you in this letter. It's the secret to a happy life: just be curious, learn lots and love freely. Take a pause right now. Look around wherever you are. The world is filled with wonder we won't ever understand from our own era and those gone by. How did they make that sofa? Where did roads come from? Who built that building? How does a light bulb work? Spend your life open to learning—and teaching—and you'll never be bored. Knowledge is a gift shared with everyone.

Take a second to look at the people around you. Every individual with their own unfathomably large web of family, friends, colleagues and more. Every one of us is the unique protagonist of our own life but incredibly we're also background characters in thousands more. Every single person you see will have the ability to make you smile, think or grow. Some are harder to like than others, but be curious about people and who they are. Life is about the company you keep so much more than it is about the journey itself. So try to enrich and enlarge the lives of the people in your life and remain open to love from the most surprising of places.

If you're outside reading this then even better. Whenever you feel sad remember nature will always centre you so make spending time outside your default. Almost everything in life that makes you the happiest is free—despite what capitalism is teaching you—and most of it is nature. Spare a moment to watch that squirrel forage for nuts, take a walk on the beach, stare at the sunlight through the tree branches, feel the grass with your bare feet, stand in the rain, laugh at that pigeon, look at the moon, admire that sunset, stroke the fat cat on your lap.

Ask a friend for a hug. Laugh with your stepmum. Play a game with your dad. These things don’t require money or even much time. Not much we do really matters, so just focus on what does. Loving and learning. Take comfort in the fact that we are insignificant mammals on a tiny planet in one of a million solar systems in a billion galaxies in a minuscule moment of time. What a miracle it is that we exist!

But if that ever overwhelms you, take a deep inhale for the count of four, a deep exhale for the count of six (because everything seems better after a big deep breath), and remember for me that you’re meant to be happy, and that you are loved so so much. And then go find a dog to play with—no matter how old you are it will always make you smile.

Dad

Chris • 35–44 • Kent, UK • IT Manager

Dear son,

It took your mum and me a very long time to have you, with an awful amount of tears and heartbreak along the way. You were our last chance of becoming a family. By the time you were born I was in my late forties. Unfortunately, in my mid-forties I was diagnosed with young-onset Parkinson's disease. Despite this, your mum and me still wanted a family and when you came into our lives we couldn't have been happier. As you sit on the sofa next to me as I type this, you are now just over three and a half years old. All parents' lives change completely when they have a child, which we fully expected, but what we didn't expect was how much more difficult this would be made by my Parkinson's. My condition has deteriorated quite considerably since you were born and I think you are starting to notice things. At times I struggle to speak or speak slower or less clearly, my walking has slowed a lot and I know you've noticed the tremor in my left arm. You were dancing to music on the TV the other day and you asked me to dance with you. I stood up but couldn't move much at all, though my left arm was shaking a lot. You spotted this and stood rooted to the spot and started to shake your own arm, as if I'd just created a fabulous new dance move. It brought a tear to my eye.

I worry that as my condition progresses and my symptoms worsen, I may be unable to do more of the things you want me to do and I won't be able to be the dad I always wanted to be. In my eyes I had the best dad in the world, and if I could be just half the dad he was I'd be happy, but I don't think I will be. I just hope you think I'm doing a good job, and as the years go by I give you all the love, care and guidance you need. I may not be able to be the dad that runs around in the park playing footy but I'll try my best to. What I will do is give you everything I possibly can, while I still can. I love spending time with you.

Working from home has given me more time to see you as you're only at nursery three days a week. There's lots of things we enjoy doing together, but there's one thing I love more than anything else. Your mum and me love music, music plays a hugely important role in my life and I couldn't live without it. As you know full well I am obsessed with the music of Bruce

Springsteen. You were two years old I think when I played you a video of Springsteen performing ‘Waitin’ on a Sunny Day’, at a gig in Hyde Park in 2009 that your mum and me were at. As time has gone on your love for this song continues to grow. Although it was never particularly a favourite of mine, I love it now. You come home from nursery and ask for it to be put on as it makes you happy, and you sing it all the time. As soon as it comes on you wave your arms and the smile it brings to your face melts my heart. I think people believe I’ve brainwashed you into liking Springsteen, I may have a little, but you genuinely love this song.

You’ve also now become hooked on ‘Glory Days’, or as you call it ‘Gory Days’, and ‘Bobby Jean’, but they have to be the versions from the same gig in 2009, where at the end of ‘Glory Days’, Bruce asks Stevie, ‘What time is it?’ and he responds with, as you do too now, ‘It’s curfew-breaking Boss time.’ It’s always Boss time in our house. If your love of Springsteen doesn’t last forever, I hope your love of music does. My dad took me to my first big outdoor gig in 1989, Bon Jovi at Milton Keynes Bowl. I just hope that I’m well enough to take you one day. That you’re old enough to go to a Springsteen gig while he’s still playing gigs and I’m still well enough to go. It’s a long shot, but if not we can still sing and dance at home.

I hope as my condition worsens and you get older and are more aware of things, that me having Parkinson’s never embarrasses you. Some people have already thought that I’m your grandad. Who cares if other people think that. You have made me a very happy man. I may not always show it, with my blank expression-less face, another Parkinson’s symptom. Despite the difficulties Parkinson’s causes, the struggles that being a 52-year-old father causes, the tiredness and the behaviour sometimes displayed by toddlers, I love being your daddy.

I will always do everything I possibly can for you; I will take care of you and love you with everything I have, my whole body, heart and soul. In the future I may not be able to smile or laugh as much as I once did, I may not be able to move as well as I was once able to, I may get upset or frustrated when I can’t do the things I want to do, I may not be able to walk as well as I used to, I may not be able to eat or drink as well as I used to, I may not be able to speak as well as I used to, I may not be able to write as well as I used to, but no matter how tough things get whenever I’m with

you I am always smiling on the inside. I will ALWAYS be able to give you cuddles.

I love you, mate.

Jamie • 45–54 • Bedfordshire, UK • Police Staff

I wanna start with this quote—‘It’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.’ I was young when I had you. Fourteen when ur mother was pregnant. Fifteen when you were born. You are now four I’m nineteen although I’m not with you everyday because of mistakes I made ur with me everyhour and second of the twenty-four hours in a day. Even at the young age I am being blessed with you is the the greatest thing that has and will happen to me. When my days are bad and they mostly are I look at ur pictures or hear you laughing with Nanny and it makes me wanna see life thru. I’m living for you. It’s deep but it’s true. I won’t make a bunch of promises I can’t keep but one I will make and keep is no matter what, literally doesn’t matter, im on ur side little man. Let me give you some truths of life –

- It’s hard.
- It’s unfair.
- People lie.
- We all do wrong things.
- But it could always be worse.

These things will happen but you can not let them become a poison in ur mind but a lesson to learn from. This is hard for me to say but don’t do what Dad did, do you and be you. Remember Nanny loves you and may seem strict but she’s doing the best job and we both love her. Although the times are hard when im home ill do whatever I can to give you the life I didn’t have. I love you so mych mate and I always will. Your my world, motivation to be better, Saviour and my son. It’s okay not to be okay sometimes don’t forget that.

Keep smiling, cant wait to get a high five and hug xoxo

Leo • Prison letter

Try, try and try again. Never quit. Show us all that men can do better.

Sebastien • 35–44 • Consultant

To my dear son,

You are reading this now at some stage within your life, maybe a teenager or a young man, but right now, while I am writing this, you are still tucked away safe within your mummy's tummy. You are probably thinking 'Dad, why have you written a letter for me to read?' Well, son, if you are anything like me and you like the sound of your own voice, that's why.

On a serious note, son: my dad, your grandad, is no longer here, mate, and by god I wish he was here for me to say things to him I never had the chance to say. He was my best friend. I hope you have that relationship with me.

Son, life is so short. Me and your mum hope and pray that you grab it with both hands and snatch all it has to offer; this is the only time I will accept you snatching anything.

Son, please know that no matter what life throws at you, no matter what struggles you face, no matter how scared you feel, you can and always will be able to talk to me and us completely judgement-free.

We hope you and your sister always have each other's back, always talk and be truthful, always remain open and principled, and always try to keep your side of the street clean. Your relationships with your family are so, so important; I didn't understand that importance until it was too late and your grandad had passed.

We love you, son, always remember that. Use this letter to know that your dad and your mum are proud of you and who you are and always will be. Remember you can be who ever you want, never forget that, mate xxxxx

Joe • 35-44 • Leicester, UK • Addiction and recovery support worker

Dearest son,

There is this picture of you, which might be my favourite picture of you as a kid I have. We're in Italy on a road trip, you must be three about to turn four. The picture is of you, top off with a bare, golden torso, your skin shining having spent two weeks in the sun. Your hair all curly and loved by the sea. You are in your own bed right next to mine and your mum's, on my side—over an arm's distance away. You're sat up looking at me with your favourite book in your hand, about to read it all alone, before you doze off. If I remember correctly, it's a short book about the seaside which made noises depending on what you pressed—the boat, the seagull, the sea. No words.

Up until that evening you had yet to put yourself to sleep. That alone was a major moment. To see you lie down, grab a book, get the covers over your legs and look sideways to us with total independence was amazing. It still makes me cry thinking of the beauty in that intimate moment.

When I was seventeen years old, your uncle, out of nowhere one day, gave me a book called The Black Album by Hanif Kureishi. He said I should read it. Up until this point he was the person I looked up to most—six years older, he always had the best music, clothes and ideas. I read the book and my life was never the same again. They say real love finds you when you're not looking for it and they also say, when you know, you know! I truly had my first taste of total intoxication. I'd never successfully finished a real book and nor had I ever really enjoyed one. I understood then the power books have—they help you understand your interior world and exterior world unlike anything else out there. They have the ability to get you through the hardest of times, the most confusing of emotions, the most existential of crises. Books can be your friend when there is no one else to talk to.

When I read The Black Album it became a sort of support structure around me. There were things I was experiencing that I couldn't talk to anyone about. I was confused by my body and my brain. I was confused by my sexuality, I felt like I was betraying my family and my culture by being interested in what I was clearly being pulled towards—music, clubs, girls,

dangerous ideas about who I might become outside of the norms and expectations of a young Muslim, second-generation immigrant boy growing up in northern England.

Since The Black Album I have never stopped reading. It became an addiction I could never satiate. More importantly, though, the best books became friends and helpers when I needed them most. To make matters even more celestial, I also have this theory that the right books find you at the time. They come along just when you need them, usually just before you realise you need it. If it wasn't for Giovanni's Room I would never have married your mother and you wouldn't be here. If it wasn't for The Alchemist I would never have had the desire to travel which ended up defining my adult years before you came along! If it wasn't for The Autobiography of Malcolm X I wouldn't have fallen in love with activism. The list is endless.

The universe has often given me books when questions were being asked, or answers were all too mysterious. There is no pride in dealing with things alone. If you want to go far, we have to go together. There will be things you want to talk to me about, or your uncle, or your friends or your mentors. I can say wholeheartedly no conversation is ever off the table for you and me. There will also be things so deep inside you that you won't want to talk to anyone about because you won't even want to face them yourself. Becoming a man is full of these feelings—sometimes they're disguised as shame or pain. There will be times where you will have to face something inside you that you are scared of. In these moments, know that you can always pick up a book and lose yourself in that search for wisdom, direction and comfort. Know that across those pages there are many many centuries and generations of stories being told that have all had to deal with similar things. You are never on your own when books are around.

I can't wait to get into these conversations with you, and if I don't have the answer, I'm sure I can find a book that does!

I love you, son.

Kazim • 35–44 • Berlin, Germany • Creative Director and Artist Manager

Robbie and Phoenix,

One of my biggest dreams growing up was to become a parent. I imagined reliving what I had with my dad and hoped that one day I could be even half the parent he was to me: someone who was always there for me at all of my competitions, waving a massive Union Flag.

As I learned more about myself, I thought that dream might never become a reality. But the two of you have brought so much love and joy into your papa's and daddy's lives. With so much love, and with the help of your amazing 'tummy buddy', what once felt impossible became real.

We have always tried to be as honest and open with you as possible, answering your questions whenever they come. And if we have one piece of advice to give you, it's to continue to stay close to your incredible tummy buddy, the wonderful woman who helped make our dream of having a family come true.

I cannot wait to see the people you grow to be, although not too quickly, because time already feels like it's moving far too fast. You make me so proud to be your papa every single day.

I love you both so much,
Your papa

Tom • 25–34 • Los Angeles, US • Olympian

My dear boy,

You've been born at such a strange time, and not one of your choosing. The nights before your birth we watched *Adolescence*. It's a short TV series about the growing isolation of many boys across the country, of the hateful voices filling their ears, and the violence towards women and girls that can follow in their wake. I'll never forget lying there, feeling your mother's big pregnant body, warm against mine, and, knowing that you were to be our first boy, thinking, 'Oh shit, this time it's on me.'

I grew up as part of a generation of boys aware that in so many cases not only had men failed in their role as protectors, but that time and again men were the danger. Masculinity became toxic and the only thing that was clear to me was what I should not be. Some days I think I could write a book on 'how not to be a dickhead'—I guess it takes one to know one. Writing the story of what it means to be a decent man would be a harder challenge by far, and still, what matters in the lives we live is to try. It matters because so many men are struggling.

I was pushing you along in the buggy when I got the text. You were three months old and even then couldn't sit still. I'd push you along in the park lying on your belly so your little head could pop up and peak around, bobbing to and fro as we walked. Honestly, if you'd seen the looks I'd get from passers-by thinking, 'There's a moron who doesn't know which way up his baby goes.'

Anyway, it was full summer, a gorgeous day, when a text came in from an unknown number telling me that 'T took his own life last Tuesday'. I looked at the sender's tiny picture, realised it was my best friend from childhood's sister, and then the pieces came together. T and I hadn't seen each other in years but were inseparable as kids, from the time we were your age.

I went back home for the funeral and stood in the car park outside Legends, loosening my tie to try and get some air while waiting for the reception to start. A black car pulled up and T's family climbed out. His mum and I locked eyes, fell into a hug, and through the tears I heard her say, 'No one knew, he didn't say a word, was busy helping everyone else.

It’s this thing about being a man.’

T isn’t alone. Suicide is the biggest killer of men under fifty and for every awful end there are so many trips to the emergency room, so many men talked down from moments of crisis—myself included. We’re struggling because the world and our place in it are changing, and we’re struggling because of the story we’re telling about what it means to be a man.

I had so little to show for myself when I walked out of my first marriage. I’d spent a decade working to try and prove myself a hero. I left the flat with one silver suitcase only half full. There were some clothes, a battered laptop, an old gaming console. The suitcase had been a wedding present. People will tell you being a man is about being strong. I want you to find your strength and find it strong enough to face that you won’t always be able to do it on your own. My dad was there to drive me to my childhood home. My brother and best mate called me every single day for three months.

People will tell you being a man is about being responsible. I want you to own your life—no one can study, work out, meditate for you. And I hope you can face, better than I ever have, the hard fact that so much of life is beyond our control. I hope you have your mother’s eye for what’s not your responsibility and the grace to accept it. I’ve been cheering on your every step since before you could walk, and still I want you to know that the most important relationship you will ever have is with yourself. At this age you find your own reflection hilarious—stay on decent terms with it. You and your sister are the most astounding gifts, given not to me and your mum, just into our keeping. I am so sorry for all the times I’ve already let you down, for the times I’ve been less gentle or less present than I should.

And thank you. Thank you for teaching me patience, and thank you for reminding me why it matters to try.

With all my love,

G

George • 35–44 • Tech Worker

You may not go where you intend to go, but you'll end up where you need to be.

Sion • 35–44 • Caerphilly, Wales

Dear son,

I am sitting in the living room of our mid-terraced house on a cold afternoon in January, with the goal of writing out to you what I think it takes to be a man in the current world. The truth is, I don't know. I also don't think anyone really knows. If they tell you otherwise, chances are, they're full of shit. But, I will try to write down some thoughts that I would like to pass on to you regardless, so that some day, when you are searching for answers and meaning, my words might have some calming effect.

Here we go. First of all, I want you to know how much I love you. That much I do know. I feel it deep within me. The day you were born and I held you in my arms, I felt like Jim Carrey in The Grinch when his heart grows three sizes in one go. I felt floored by the tsunami of love that suddenly sprang up within me. You, by just existing, were enough to change another human. This is the first sentiment I want to articulate to you. That within every person is the capability to enacting positive long-lasting change in others. You don't have to be a world leader, CEO or another high-society individual to achieve this. You just have to be you, the best possible version of you, and you will have the ability to make the world around you that little bit brighter.

Furthermore, being a man in this world means you have a great deal of this power, more so than a lot of other humans coexisting with you on this planet. This brings me onto my next point. It is a man's world (unfortunately). And you, as a white Irish male, have been born already near the top of an unfair global pecking order. You will have more comfort, control and agency from your first 'til last breath than so many millions of children, who are not white, who are not European, and who are not male. This is a fact. I haven't worked out what to do with this information myself. I don't expect you to either, other than always remember that you have more power to do more good than you will often realise. It can feel like a heavy pressure at times, and the expectations laid on you, as a man, can feel quite suffocating and burdensome.

Speaking of expectations, you will have to learn to navigate a lifetime full of them. Humans like to presume and make patterns. A lot of society,

from the playground, to the media, to the workplace, all have expectations on how males should act, should speak, should react, should behave. For example, when I was growing up in the 1990s in West Belfast, you had to have a certain haircut, a certain brand of trainers, a certain way of talking, a certain way of thinking, etc. I could go on and on. The message is, expectations on male behaviour are everywhere and apply to everything you do and don't do.

While I'm on the subject, I was given a book on a hundred things every man should know. It had chapters on how to order steak, how to do your tie, how to shave, etc. It was a load of balls. Here's some other things that do not make you more of a man. Having facial hair, eating meat, drinking loads of alcohol, having a deep voice, having loads of muscles, being a good fighter, not crying, not smiling, enjoying football, betting, dating women, being able to fix a car. These are all pressures to be more of a 'manly' man that I have experienced growing up.

As you can see, it is easy to be suffocated by these pressures. I know I certainly was for a long time. When I think of what it is to be a man, I don't think of the above attributes, but rather I think of the men in my life who had high moral values. My granda, your great-granda, was the number one. This man grew up poor in the Lower Falls ghetto during the Troubles in Belfast. His brother was shot dead in a sectarian attack. He experienced so much adversity and strife, and yet, he embodied the kindness, warmth and caring nature that only a free man, unburdened by foolish external pressures and expectations, can live. He set the best example I can think of. Time and time again I use him as my reference point.

I will try to articulate some of the characteristics which I have tried to teach myself, and will hopefully instil in you going forward. Being a man is doing the right thing, not the thing that is expected of you. Being a man is being kind to those less fortunate than you. Being a man is embracing your full spectrum of emotions, and treating them all as equals. Being a man is using your power and time on Earth to leave a legacy of love and of cherished memories with your nearest and dearest. Being a man is all the above and so much more of which I am still to work out myself. I hope you can get some support from reading these words.

Truthfully, I worry so much for you and the world you will inherit in eighteen years' time. If climate breakdown or AI-overthrowing of society

doesn’t get to you first, then you might meet your end as so many young males throughout the history of Homo sapiens have—through war. War is the ultimate male dick-swinging contest, with young males sacrificed on the altar of ego, bravado, showmanship and intoxication with power. My promise to you is that I will try to make the tiny changes I can to hand over a world to you which is a little bit more kind, more bright and more stable. I promise to teach and guide you as you grow and navigate this manscape. I won’t have all the answers, but I will do my best to lead by example, and be the man that you can think of when you are in your thirties, and asked to write about what being a man means to you.

Grá, i gconaí,
Da x

Gearóid • 25–34 • Aontroim, Northern Ireland

I still love my dad. Even though he’s not here. Even though he had a troubled life that troubled mine.

You always want to love your dad. I say this, but I didn’t really have a dad—I lost him to alcohol. He died when I was twenty-two—still a kid. I decided to become ‘the man’ without having a ‘man’ to emulate. It was hard. I made things up, I blagged it, like we all do. I bottled everything up: my grief, my fear, my pain. It felt like when you shake a bottle of Coke and put the lid on as tight as possible. I could feel the fizz in my chest.

At some point I got lost with all this—and the only thing that felt certain was that I wanted to connect to my dad, even though he wasn’t there. So I reached out by doing the things he did. I repeated the patterns I saw when I was younger. I knew it was wrong, but it felt right. It felt comfortable. I did that for a bit. It felt good and then it really didn’t.

But then you came along and I knew I needed to change. It was hard, so very hard, but I did it. I reached out, got help and guidance. I filled the void in a positive way. I took action, listened and changed, because you always can. You won’t know about any of this, because the dad you have now is

me: totally imperfect and very silly but there for you always.

I sat down beside you this morning and absent-mindedly pulled my pyjama leg up and started scratching my knee. When I looked down you had rolled up your pyjama leg and were scratching your knee. I love that. I have created new patterns and that is all you will ever see. The man I hoped my dad could be. This is my gift as a dad, to you. I love you.

Dafydd • 45–54

My dear son,

You are seven now. It is hard to tell what I feel, when during the time you need me more, I can’t be there for you. Maybe one day you will understand, maybe not! One thing is sure: I will not quit trying and sacrificing for you, because you are the only motive I still breath.

Life is not fair sometimes. We can’t control some events, which may change our future. I would love to give you some advice that I think are valuable for you:

1. Always smile. You have an amazing smile. Use it. It opens every door.

2. Be greatfull of what the universe brings to you.

3. Do not make compromise against the truth. Always fight for it.

4. Losing is not the end of the world. Remeber that if you lose you become wisser, because you learn something you didn’t know.

5. Share your love, especially to them who you think do not deserve. Love changes people for good.

I hope one day you will read my advices. If God gives us a chance, I will love to tell you in person, while having a cup of hot chocolatte in Liverpool City Centre as you like :)

A lot of love,
Dad

Anonymous • Prison letter

Hello, my little mate.

I’m writing this letter to you laid beside your beautiful mummy while you sleep! Today I picked you up from your first real parents’ evening at your new school. And mate, I genuinely cannot tell you how proud it makes me hearing how you are taking to this new big school like a duck to water.

You surprise us every day. Your smile, your laugh, your hair and your beautiful soul shines through every single moment you’re with us.

You have reminded me how important it is to be patient and to be grateful for everything we have. You inspire me to work hard and make sure I’m the best version of myself. You have changed my life in so many ways and what’s so amazing is you have no idea.

Next week we go to Disneyland in our campervan and I’m so so so excited your teacher gave you the school bear to take on our trip! It’s going to be the best holiday ever, little man, and I can’t wait to share these memories with you forever.

Keep smiling. Keep dreaming. Keep being cheeky and most importantly keep being yourself.

Thomas • 25-34 • Grimsby, Lincolnshire • Actor

Hi mate,

The poet Ted Hughes once wrote a letter to his son in which he said everyone the boy would encounter throughout his life was actually—on the inside—still eight years old.

You're now eight years old so I better get some advice in before it's too late (according to Ted—very clever bloke but miserable so-and-so).

I am clumsy, giddy and vulnerable. Clumsiness was apparent from my first days at school. I was a disaster with a pencil and to this day write illegibly and cannot draw anything recognisable to another human eye. I longed to be good at football and played every lunchtime despite being picked last every day. It was the same story in all sports, and whenever physical endeavour is required in my work it takes me twice as long and exhausts me five times as much as everyone else.

Giddiness takes over my being. Often during social situations with feelings of joy and fear pushing against each other. My conversation intensifies, my laughter seems to emanate from every cell in my body, my brain races for the next anecdote or the next topic of conversation—frequently before anyone is ready to move on from the current one.

Vulnerability is near constant. If plans change, if bad news arrives (personally or globally), if I forget something, if my work is compromised in some way, or if I am reminded of an incident where I wasn't the person I wish to be.

Clumsiness, giddiness and vulnerability have caused me great dismay and blighted my existence for more than forty years. Only after you arrived did it occur to me that I might be reacting to my feelings in ways that weren't useful as a father.

I was ashamed of my clumsiness and believed it meant I was defective, particularly as defined by the models of masculinity I had as a small boy. I have realised late in life that everyone is clumsy in different ways—I've reconciled myself to my clumsiness and instead built a life of art and creativity that, without the early disappointment of athletic inferiority and physical ineptitude, I may never have discovered and thrived in.

I could be ashamed of my giddiness, but the channelling of that

giddiness into performance and humour, the intoxication of company, of creativity, of connection, means that I get to experience life with an intensity that the non-giddy will never know.

I was so ashamed of my vulnerability and became so adept at masking it that my career as an actor was forged by playing gangsters, tough guys and hit men. I think I was so disappointed with the actual character I had been born with that most of these roles were fuelled by self-loathing. It was just a matter of turning the hatred outwards and destroying whatever was in front of my character in the drama.

The greatest enemy to my happiness, connection to those around me and enjoyment of the fleeting years of life was shame.

I now see that my clumsiness, giddiness and vulnerability are as intrinsic and defining as any of the traits I take pride in, and I celebrate them in ways that would have been unimaginable to me before you were born.

This is my typically long-winded way of telling you that you make me happy.

Most of the revelations contained above have come to me as a result—alongside therapy, an ADHD diagnosis and daily meditation—of watching and being with you. Your clumsiness, your giddiness, your vulnerability are the most precious things in the world to me. I cannot separate those parts of your make-up from anything you might be conventionally skilled or adept at. We are whole people and our jumble of attributes, idiosyncrasies, eccentricities and attitudes are what make us individual and unique. I want every aspect of you and I want you to know every aspect of me.

Notice and acknowledge the presence of shame and attempt to reduce its power where you can. You won't always have the strength or the presence of mind but awareness is the key to making peace with yourself and with others, and this is, of course, what I want for you more than anything else: peace.

Love you, mate,
Papa

Neil • 45–54 • Antwerp, Belgium • Actor

You're falling asleep next to me, cuddled up to your teddy which used to be Nana's. I wouldn't tell your mates that, though—course I wouldn't. You keep drifting off . . . then waking up and snuggling into my side again. It's my favourite thing in the world, this. A few pages of your book, a six-month-old episode of Match of the Day, and then sliding into dreamland. I'm not particularly interested in Wolves against Bournemouth, but it's just what we do. It's one of our things.

I'm not daft; I know this won't last forever. It'll be a blink of an eye and it'll be you doing this, with your own little man drifting off to sleep next to you. Before that, there'll be sleepovers, mess-ups, celebrations, dreams, and every emotion going as we hammer into that teenage period of your life.

I need you to remember though, pal, that this is the best thing in my life. You are the best thing in my life. There's no shame, embarrassment or bashfulness in saying it. I suppose that's one thing I want you to take away: if you love something, say so. The world is too crammed with bad news, sadness, trouble and heartbreak to hold on to something that's important to tell someone.

I will never forget the first time I told your mum I loved her, at the entrance to the pub down the road. I don't know what it was about that moment, and I certainly didn't know it would lead to you a few years afterwards. I remember being dressed in a black suit which didn't really fit me, that I'd been at a funeral about an hour before, and I really clearly remember thinking that it felt like a big moment—one I wouldn't forget. Now it's etched into my memory. More than anything, it felt right. It taught me, in one short second, that owning what we say is massive.

It's easy to believe that we live in a world just saturated with bad news, sad news and that only negative things happen. They don't. Remember that. Before getting fed up with the negativity of people, be part of the solution. There's lots of light if you look for it. Every day, wonderful things happen. Every single day, you do wonderful things. In a time in life when it's easy to be defeated by the news around you, be a torch to light the way for people. Open a door, say 'good morning', help someone out, have a kind word in your mate's ear. Don't talk about people behind their backs. Text your mum and tell her you love her. It's so easy to spoil someone's day, but all it takes is a few kind words to make someone's week.

I hope people do that for you, too. Within all this, don't forget yourself.

You, my dear boy, are in charge of your life. I'll be here (I hope) for many, many, many years to help you, but the older you get, the more decisions you'll have to take yourself. There'll be times when your batteries are feeling drained. Don't be scared to take a moment to charge them up. Run, walk, laugh, smile, relax, play footy. Lay down and tune into the telly for a couple of hours occasionally. You're not lazy if you're looking after yourself. There'll also be times when you just don't know what's right. Advice is only ever a question away.

You're brave, funny, clever, kind and thoughtful and you make me so proud. The hard thing, at your age, is in being consistent. I see you getting frustrated sometimes, when you want to be a little older than you are. Let's not overdo it, though. Nobody's expecting 100 per cent every day, in all you do. Don't rush. I'm proud of you beyond measure—and nothing you do, day in, day out, changes that. It's okay in life to give yourself a bit of a break and realise you can't do everything for everyone all the time. As you grow up, more people will pull at you for this and that—you're the type of chap people want to be around. Do what you can, but don't be scared to say 'no'. I think I could probably do with following my own advice sometimes.

There's loads I could say, my dear, sweet boy, but the most important thing is for you to be honest, be kind and give it everything. Look after people, be brave, and know that the life you end up with is the life you put up with. Nobody is going to give you the future you want—you have to graft for it. It won't always be spectacular—the walk to the top of the mountain is tough—but the view, my lovely little man, is worth it. You know I go on about it, but just, you know . . . do the basics, and do them well. Be nice. Work hard.

Oh, and always clean your teeth.

Love you, big man.
Dad

Matthew • 35–44 • West Yorkshire, UK • Head Teacher

Oh and listen, I’m no expert on genetics but moisturise the back of your upper arms; my skin there, and maybe yours, gets bumpy when it’s dry.

Paul • 45–54 • Hampshire, UK • Programme Director

To my boy, a young man of eight who is such a strong beautiful boy sorry, I should say handsome but it just doesn’t convey the true feelings I have for you so yes, you beautiful boy im so proud of you mate. I can remember the day you was born like it was today, the moment you looked up at me with them little eyes, the little cry for comfort it was the best day of my life dude and the scariest becasue the realizeation that you you were mine, man I had to grow up quick and if you ask your mum that never happened quick :) When you was a toddler i was terrible at getting you to sleep it was like you knew i was a child at heart so your mum was the main one to get you asleep, but the day you fell asleep in my arms when we walked back from the park was the amazing, the feeling of you going limp on me, your head resting in my neck was absalutly lovely it will be a memory i will forever cherish and hold dear to my heart.

I have to say how sorry I am that I cant be with you mate. Im sorry my selfishness my stupid actions have led to you feeling so much hurt and pain mate, to hear you call me an idiot is heatbreaking and more so because it’s your strengh the way you have comforted your little sister when she misses me the little things you do for your mummy shows me you have heart a big heart and i know you will grow up to be so much better than me dude you have a special little sparkle in your eyes son, it makes me so happy to be your Daddy.

I love you Butthead.

Callum • Prison letter

To my son,

The place I would always rather be is with you.

I know it can be hard to feel that when I have to be away so much to work. I can't promise to always be there physically, but I promise you're always on my mind and in my heart. You are what drives me forwards, and brings me back to anchor me.

No matter what, I am always with you. Always.

The love that I feel for you is unlike anything else. Putting you on my back is my deepest joy. Long after you're too big for me to carry you, I hope I can still give you that feeling. That you are able to stand taller, see further, and climb higher, because of the love that supports you.

Being a man means many different things. You will work out what it means to you. You don't need to follow anyone else's template. Just remember the non-negotiables. Self-respect, respect for others, respect for our environment.

It also means facing challenges. That's part of life. And when you do, remember it's okay to share your feelings and reach out. Draw strength from your family, friends, and community. Vulnerability is brave, beautiful and powerful. We aren't supposed to pretend it's all okay. Taking off the armour helps us connect.

Each obstacle is an invitation to deeper connections with others, but also to grow, and to unearth the deepest parts of yourself.

More than anything our challenges are a reminder that life's river is one we don't control, and that there is a greater current guiding our lives. Surrendering to its flow, swimming with the current can sometimes bring us more peace, power, and purpose than fighting it.

I'm always here for you, proud of you, and grateful to be on this adventure with you.

Please make time for joy. Seek it, share it, create it for yourself and others.

You are beloved and worthy of love.

Baba

Riz • 35–44 • London, UK • Actor and Rapper

Dear son,

On our fourth wedding anniversary, during a delightful woodland walk, your mum suggested that we get couples therapy. There was a global pandemic on at the time and all live performance had disappeared, along with any certainty about the future, so I felt like my relationship with your mum was the one solid thing in my life. To have this suddenly called into question as well completely floored me. In the days that followed, the conversation shifted from couples therapy to me perhaps trying solo therapy first—an indicator of where any couple issues might have been stemming from. While I maintain to this day the initial suggestion could have been timed better on her part (!), I now look back on this as one of the kindest and bravest things anyone has ever done for me.

After picking a therapist from a database almost entirely due to the fact that they were wearing dungarees in their profile picture and therefore seemed approachable, I was sent a form to fill out listing things I might want to discuss, and invited to a 30-minute taster session. It was only at this session, when she said I had filled out the form more comprehensively than anyone ever had before and it seemed like perhaps I just wanted to talk, that I began to realise just how badly this was needed.

My world had been shrinking, and I had been shrinking with it. I didn't feel like I had a right to complain or disagree in my closest relationships at the time, and was growing increasingly frustrated when those people weren't seeing things from my perspective, despite me never explicitly telling them what that perspective was. This would only lead to me retreating further, seeing myself as a martyr sacrificing my own desires for those that I loved.

Slowly but surely by talking things through in therapy I started to try and talk them through in the real world too. And it was terrifying. And it was awkward. And it was messy. And it was slow. And it was everything I feared it would be. And it just about saved my life. While I still don't love conflict (although surely only warmongers do?), I have learned it is always worth voicing when you are feeling uneasy about something. That sometimes the very act of speaking up is enough. That sometimes it won't

change anything. That it is worth doing anyway. That even if they don't agree, those who love you will at least hear you out. That if they won't, then perhaps that itself is the answer you need.

At the time of writing you have no such issues with letting your inner thoughts be heard. Whether it is waking up at 6am chanting Baked beans! Baked beans! or letting everybody in the train carriage know one by one that out of the window there is another train, the world is already so much richer for you telling us how you feel. While I hope that this continues for as long as possible, I also hope that on the days you're not so sure you can at least come back and read this: that you matter, and your feelings matter too. That vulnerability is a superpower. That hard conversations are by their very nature hard, but they are always worth it. That dungarees are as good a judge of character as anything else. That your mum is (almost) always right. That you can talk to us about anything, and that if you'd rather not, I will at least pay for you to go to therapy.

And finally, because I swore I would tell you at every chance I get—that you are the best and I love you.

Love,
Dad

Harry • 25–34 • Margate, UK • Poet

You can’t put toothpaste back in the tube. Mistakes will happen—face them, fix them, learn from them. That’s how life is lived.

Stewart • 75+ • East Sussex, UK • Trainer

Son,

Let me tell you about my dad. He only cared about a few things: gambling, women and himself—not his kids. Birthday cards were occasional and even then he'd spell my name wrong. Saturdays were our day with him and they were spent waiting outside the bookies then back to his, watching him lose the usual hundred quid on the horses. 5 p.m. and a lift back home couldn't come soon enough. He did win a few quid now and again, and maybe he'd spend the winnings taking us swimming or to the footy. But that just gave me hope. Hope that maybe my dad could be like the other dads.

I held on to that hope for a long time but it's gone now. I'm still waiting for him to tell me he loves me and to kiss my forehead and to give me a hug and tell me he's proud. It's easy to see why the hope has gone.

Since you arrived, I don't speak to him any more and I never will do again. But I suppose I do owe him a thank you, because he taught me how not to be a dad. I promise you I'll not be that man. Yes, I might make mistakes but I know I'll always be there for you, to support you, to encourage you, to love you, to hold you and to be your dad.

Anonymous

To my boys,

Always take the stairs. You might think the elevator is quicker and easier, but this is not always the best choice. It depends on machines and others to determine your destination. By taking the stairs, you control your pace and decide how far you climb. The journey will strengthen both your body and mind, teaching lessons that help define you. It may be harder in the short term, but the long-term benefits will be invaluable.

Apply this metaphor to your life and don't get stuck in an elevator following the crowd, looking for the easy ride and controlled by others. You don't always have to go to the top, choose your own floor. I will always be proud of you.

Love you always,
Daddy

Jamie • 35–44 • Devon, UK • Carpentry Contractor

Son,

The world has a way of telling us who we should be without asking us who we are. I am far less interested in telling you how you need to be, and far more interested in asking you who you are, and what you want to be. In times of self-discovery, your thoughts, feelings, beliefs and words are far more valuable than mine. Whatever I tell you will likely infect and suffocate all of the wonder and curiosity that I see already in you. I want to help nurture who you are. I want to support you in growing all of the beautiful things that you already are, rather than tell you to be what I think the world expects you to be.

People love to tell you who you should be. This is what you should be as a Black boy (work twice as hard, be polite, be damn near perfect, look presentable, talk to every adult in the room and make sure they like you). This is what you should be as a dual-heritage boy (be Black in this environment and be white in this one, just fit in, don't rock the boat and for goodness' sake be likeable, because likeable means safety). This is what you should be as a boy when money in the family is tight (again, dress immaculately, do not show any signs of being hard up, and no slang please, speak properly for goodness' sake). This is what you should be as a 'bright' Black boy (don't be lazy, don't waste your potential, always do well at school, don't let your brain go to waste, work twice as hard, represent your community). This is what you should be as an undiagnosed ADHD Black boy (sit still, calm down, be quiet, use your brain, stop tapping, don't draw attention to yourself, GET ON WITH IT!). This is what you should be as a boy (don't cry, don't be emotional, don't overreact, don't be dramatic, BE A MAN!).

All of these ways of being create layers, and the layers form barriers to your core sense of self. These layers made me feel scared, angry, confused and frustrated. I think all of these feelings create certain behaviours which could possibly be described and understood as being 'a bad man', or having 'toxic masculinity'.

So, I can't tell you how to be a man, or what masculinity means, but instead I'm going to ask how I can support you in being you. Support you

in knowing what your feelings mean, where they come from and how to respond to them. Support you to be curious about what is happening to you in any given moment, rather than reacting to the layers created by the world telling you how to be a man, and how to be masculine. So, in contradiction I want to tell you to do one thing. Don’t be that, be you.

Love you,
Dad

Gareth • 35–44 • Dorset, UK • Counsellor/Therapist

To my lads,

You are my greatest achievement, not because of anything you'll ever win or accomplish, but simply because of who you are. You both have such beautiful hearts—kind, curious, funny and full of life. I see your courage in the way you face new challenges, your compassion in the way you care for others, and your joy in the way you laugh.

No matter where life takes you, please always remember this: I will always be behind you. Through every success and every stumble, I'll be your biggest fan, your soft place to land, and the person who believes in you without question. You will never have to earn my love—it's yours forever, unshakeable and endless.

As you grow and find your own paths, hold on to your kindness. Be brave enough to be yourselves, even when the world tries to tell you who to be. Dream big, work hard, and treat others—and yourselves—with respect and compassion.

And when life feels uncertain or hard, know that you are never alone. My love for you will always be your foundation, something you can stand on no matter how far you go.

You are my heart, my pride and my purpose. Thank you for making me the luckiest fella in the world.

With all my love,
Dad

Joseph • 35–44 • Merseyside, UK

Dear son,

I’m writing this just after we’ve returned from Christmas. Recently you had a birthday, and I can still see the unadulterated joy in your face as you prepared to blow out the candles. Yesterday we built a giant marble run. You stayed in your pyjamas all day and told me you were so happy.

That ease with happiness has been with you since the beginning. You have taught me something essential about what it means to live well. At a time when many people equate success with striving and accumulation, you remind me that contentment often comes from attention rather than effort. I hope that as you grow into a man, you resist the idea that your worth lies in what you achieve or acquire, and instead learn to value presence, curiosity and kindness.

While on this trip, my mum told me that after more than thirty years of living with Parkinson’s, she was losing the will to go on. We sat together, and I understood. Eventually, life asks all of us the same question: did we live in a way that was true to who we were? For me, being a good man has less to do with strength or certainty than with endurance, honesty and care. It’s a journey I’m still on, and an end point you can never wholly reach.

It is worth the endeavour nonetheless. I’ve grown up in a time of relative peace and prosperity, yet the world now feels increasingly volatile. Too often, masculinity is expressed through dominance, self-interest or withdrawal.

I hope you choose something different. The joy you carry so naturally is not a weakness. It is a quiet form of strength, and one the world needs more of. Whatever the future holds, know this: nothing makes me happier than being in your presence.

All my love,
Dad x

Anonymous • Switzerland

Default to kindness, especially when it's the more difficult choice . . . Being an arsehole takes nothing but both get noticed.

John • 45–54 • Winchester, UK • Entrepreneur

To Josh,

My son, my little monkey boy. Before I saw your face for the first time, I was adrift and without any real purpose. I've made mistakes, made wrong decisions, and paid the piper for them all. You became my purpose, my pride, my joy, my greatest achievement (and . . . OK, your mum deserves a little recognition here too!).

You have it within yourself to become whoever and whatever you choose. It just takes hard work and discipline. Very little in life is easy, regardless of how it may appear. Success is not measured merely by financial wealth. Happiness can be gained simply by living your own life, the way you choose it to be. It's OK to say no sometimes. It's also OK to disagree with those you love. You can speak your mind and express your own opinion when it matters most to you. To that end, you must also be willing to make sacrifices for others. This may very well be your time, your money, your desires—and on occasion your patience! This is how relationships are forged.

I have tried my best, son. Truly I have. I may not have always been there when I wanted to be, and I am so sorry if I have not always been there when you wanted me to be. Sometimes, I have stayed in the background and watched from afar when I felt it was warranted; you must learn your own life lessons too. I've given you my support as much as I possibly could and will continue to do so without falter. I will be here for you. I will never expect anything from you (although a birthday card once a year isn't too much to ask!) but I will always look forward to a hug from you.

My love to you . . . my son, my little monkey boy.

Dad
xx

James • 45–54 • Bagworth, UK • Computer Analyst

A man steps forward when others retreat. A man stands tall when others

take their seats. A man lives with purpose while others drift by. A man never gives up while others fail to try. A man deals in kindness when others choose bitterness; he provides with honest hands while others chase easy wins.

A man does this not for fame, fortune, favour or fleeting glory to his name—a man does this because he overcame. Remember this—hold fast, stand free and you will be a better man than me.

Anonymous

To my sons,

The realisation came around, full circle.

When I was a young boy, my dad—your granfer—set the bar. I remember one moment so clearly. I was twelve. He'd just finished a long shift in London, probably dreaming of getting home and crashing into bed, when he heard that the England Rugby Union World Cup-winning squad were due to arrive within the hour. Instead of crashing, he drove all the way back to pick me up, turned around and brought me—and my autograph book –into London so I could meet them. I lined up, watching in awe as every player signed their name.

But there were little things, too. I used to find notes left around the house—not for any special reason—just telling me he was proud of me. I still have a few of them tucked away somewhere, written in his unmistakable ALL CAPS handwriting. I played rugby most weeks, and after every game, he'd wash my boots, stuff them with newspaper he'd picked up on the Tube, then shine them with black polish. They were always ready for the next match. My teammates used to joke that I must be colouring them in with permanent marker! At first I felt a bit self-conscious, but halfway through the season, their boots were falling apart while mine looked brand new. I only ever needed new ones when my feet outgrew them —and honestly, they'd probably still shine today.

Looking back, those small acts were everything. When I hit my early twenties and left for university, it slowly started to dawn on me just how much I'd taken for granted. I'd get these sudden waves of guilt, realising how much he gave, and how rarely I said thank you—'I didn't say it when it mattered.' 'What if he thought I didn't appreciate any of it?' And I don't know why I didn't say anything. That's always stayed with me.

But then I had you two. And now it's my turn. I polish your school shoes and lay out your uniforms on the kitchen side as often as I can. I once made an entire costume from scratch—despite having no clue what I was doing—just so you could go to school as your favourite Pokémon. I've written you an album of lullabies to help you sleep. I've given you both everything I've got—my time, energy, love—in every way I know how.

And somewhere along the way, I learned something: you never need to feel ungrateful. You have my full permission to expect all of it from me. I don’t need your thanks or anything in return. Doing these things for you is my joy. Watching you grow into strong, kind, confident young men—that’s all I ever need. I don’t carry guilt any more as a son. Because now I understand. My dad gave from a full heart. He was never looking for applause—just love. And one day, when you’re fathers yourselves, you’ll understand too—what it means to be a father, and what it meant to be my sons.

I love you both.

William • 25–34 • Essex, UK • Paediatric Physiotherapist

A gentle soul is not there to be chipped away at until hard edges form; it should be polished until the armour of confidence is built.

Marc • 45–54 • Bristol, UK • Project manager

Our beautiful boy,

We did not know our time with you would be so short. I am still your dad, and you are still my son. You teach me how indestructible love can be. In the raw agony, after your life snuffed out as you slept, I had an intense feeling that you were talking to me. I like to believe that you said: ‘Be brave, Daddy, be strong, Daddy.’ Thank you. In that brief moment, it felt like you were still with me.

You were so brave and strong in your tiny life with us. You were funny, cheeky and kind.

It is important to us that your name is spoken often in our family home. Your younger brothers who never met you know you through stories and pictures. I like to think you are able to know them too.

Your older brother goes from strength to strength; he keeps you alive in his heart too, not because he is told to, it comes naturally. I hope you see the traditions he has started, writing your name in the sand if we are near the sea.

I love you,
Daddy

Anonymous

There’s a saying from an All Blacks rugby coach that I’ve loved since hearing it: ‘You’re only the caretaker of the jersey.’ I love it because it reminds me that my time is temporary, but my impact doesn’t need to be. Like a stone dropped in a still pond, the ripples from where we hit the water will continue to travel to the edges long after we disappear beneath the surface. Your life will be full of chapters, and in each one, you will hold something that others will one day carry forward. The aim isn’t to cling to it, but to leave it better for those who come next. You shouldn’t be upset by

the idea that they may improve it further or do things better. That isn't a reflection of your inadequacies, but a testament to your strengths.

With everything you approach in life, try and ask yourself one question: 'Am I leaving this space I'm occupying better than I found it? Whether it's a place, a job, a team or a relationship—leave it better at the end of every day. It's not about perfection, it's about contribution. In fact, you'll often doubt whether that contribution was good or not. Sometimes you'll feel like you're making things worse. The reality is, you won't always get it right. Nobody does. But it won't be the mistakes that define you, it'll be how you respond to them once they've been made. If you messed up... own it... make it better.

This is what it ultimately comes down to. Leave the space better than you found it. I genuinely believe in taking this approach you'll have healthier relationships, you'll have a richer quality of life, you'll invest your time more appropriately, and you'll love your mind and body more completely. So take pride in your part, but never hold on too tightly. When it's your turn to pass the jersey, do it knowing you've made it better—not for recognition, but because that's what good people do.

Goodnight. Sweet dreams. I'll see you in the morning.

Dad

Joel • 35–44 • Manchester, UK • Chief Operating Officer for a military charity

My dearest son,

Having been asked to share some pearls of wisdom from my roller coaster of a life, here's what I'd say to you. Ten polished, punchy and possibly tattoo-worthy ideas, tried and tested, that will keep you motivated, inspired and alive. Enjoy, our kid.

1. Never Lend a Friend Money. Unless you enjoy awkward silences, ghosted blue-tick WhatsApp messages or the agonising death of a beautiful friendship, keep your wallet holstered, son. Even your BFF can turn into Houdini when repayment day rolls around. Instead, help them brainstorm other ways to make the cash they need—like selling off some of their Funko Pop collection or finally monetising their weirdly popular foot pictures.

2. Don't Buy Stuff When You're Drunk. If you're six Stellas deep on a Friday night and suddenly think buying a jet ski is a great idea... just stop. Close the eBay app, put down your phone and hide your credit card. You are not in the Billionaire Boys' Club, you're just tipsy and emotionally vulnerable. Financial decisions require a sober brain and not one marinated in sambuca and poor impulse control.

3. Try Not to Break the Law. I get it, son, sometimes life tempts you with a little bit of 'rule-bending'. But unless your dream is to star in a gritty prison documentary on Channel 4, maybe skip the life of crime and keep to the straight and narrow. The fewer laws you break, the fewer grey tees and sweatpant combos you'll need to don. It's not a good look and they stain terribly when eating soup.

4. Avoid Discussing Politics or Religion. Starting a chat about politics or religion is like blindly juggling flaming swords at

a family BBQ. Sure, you could impress someone, but odds are you'll just set Uncle Chris's eyebrows on fire again. Most arguments start because someone dares to have a different opinion, and spoiler alert: not everyone in life is going to agree with you, even when you're obviously right.

5. A Friend's Eye Is a Good Mirror. Ever heard the phrase 'show me your friends and I'll show you your future'? Your mates are like human mood boards for YOUR future. If your bestie spends their days dodging responsibilities like they're charity collectors on the high Street, then guess what, that chaos might rub off. That colourful hair and quirky fashion they carry about doesn't cancel out their toxic vibes. Choose your friends like you choose your avocados: firm, reliable and not secretly rotten inside.

6. There's Always a Bigger Fish (And It Probably Drives a Volvo). You might feel like the big koi in your pond, but somewhere out there is a bigger fish with a private jet, a six-pack and a Nobel Peace Prize, so don't get too cocky. Life isn't a leaderboard, it's more like a group project where everyone's pretending to know what they're doing. Be kind, stay humble, and remember: even sharks get eaten by orcas, sometimes.

7. Talk to Strangers. Strangers aren't just background characters in your life, they're potential sources of wisdom, laughter and mildly interesting gossip. That pensioner in the bus queue might've wrestled a bear in the sixties so say hi and compliment their hat. Ask about their day. Worst case? You brighten someone's mood. Best case? You get a new friend who bakes space cakes and likes sharing.

8. Love Is a Battlefield (With Landmines). Falling in love is like downloading a dodgy phone app without reading the terms and conditions. It might look amazing but it may also

steal your emotional data, kidnap your dog and crash your system. Dip a toe before cannonballing into romance. Look out for red flags, not just red roses, and remember: even charming people can be emotionally carnivorous.

9. Alcohol is a Truth Drug. Forget polygraphs. Just hand someone a few shots of Glenfiddich and watch the truth spill out of them like a broken bathtub. If your mate turns into a karaoke-loving philosopher or a rage-filled gremlin after a few ales, that's their soul showing its true colours. Drunk words are sober thoughts with bad grammar. Pay attention to what you witness when someone's had a few: you'll see who they really are.

10. Work Out Daily (Before Your Knees Betray You). Exercise isn't just for gym bros and Instagram influencers—it's your ticket to not groaning every time you stand up. Treat your body like a cherished car: polish it, fuel it and take it for a spin daily to keep it ticking over nicely. If you don't, one day you'll sneeze and pull a muscle you didn't know you even had.

Matt • 35–44 • North Lincolnshire, UK • Sales Executive

As we take our seats on the Superloop 7, you ask me where we are going. I tell you that we are going on a journey to meet all the men that came before you. I want you to meet them and hear their stories. You are the eldest son in a line of eldest sons that stretches back five generations. I think it's time you meet the men whose shoulders you stand on.

The bus takes us from your birthplace in Surrey to mine near Heathrow where we take the next flight out. We land in humid Singapore where your grandfather was born and head to the port for the next ship out. I watch you

while you doze on me and I think you look like the men that came before, the same large eyebrows and thin legs, and I think about all the other ways you will be like us. The ship docks in the port of Kochi and we take a bus, following the river. We travel in the same direction our ancestors did 2,000 years ago when they left their fathers and followed the Christian apostle inland. The bus bumps to a stop and we take the track that leads uphill to our ancestral house.

The teak structure sits five storeys tall, eaves stretching out into the rubber forest. The eldest line of our family all live here. Me, my father, my grandfather and great-grandfather. Son, one day you will build your place here as well. Are you ready to meet your fathers? My great-grandfather rises from the veranda when he sees us approach. He is wearing his crisp white shirt and sarong and holds his tall staff. He is huge, you exclaim. He is. At six foot something he is the tallest of us all. He takes three banana leaf packages from my tiny ever-smiling great-grandmother and beckons us to follow him into the rubber plantation. As we walk through the trees I tell you that he worked these lands with his workers from sunrise to sunset and owned all the land up to the river. His muscles are drawn tight over his long frame, his bare hands and legs look like the dry husk of a coconut. We pause at the river and he opens up the banana leaves with our lunch. Fat red rice, shredded coconut and chilli balls and diced beans, all grown on our terracotta earth.

He died before I was born but hearing about him I think he would tell you that being a man is to do your duty.

When we return to the house, my grandfather is on the veranda dozing in our plantation chair, a newspaper lying closed on his well-ironed Marks and Spencer’s trousers. As we approach, he rises and embraces you. His moustache burns your face like a wire brush, leaving your cheeks raw and warm. He playfully shouts at his wife that there is food to prepare and the children are hungry. He is restless and always on the move, unlike his father, the giant who never left his land. We follow him upstairs into a cramped kitchen galley filled with the heavy smell of shallots frying and chicken simmering, my grandma and grandad back to back cooking, a many-limbed culinary god. I tell you to help bring the Charles and Diana commemorative plates out into the dining room. Heaped high are fresh English garden beans pincushioned in fried onions, rice cooked with

cardamom pods and ration-issued corned beef fried with garam masala and ginger. Your grandfather beckons and a cast of relatives and friends crowd into the room for a slice of the action. To add to the mayhem the football World Cup is on. His old team Singapore did not make it this year. To be a man, he says over the mayhem and football, is to provide.

My dad beckons us towards the stairs. With each step the clamour fades. When we reach the third floor it is quiet and intimate. Each of us is a mirror of our father, I think. He grew up surrounded by people and so in life he prefers the peace of his wife and children. Our dinner is formal and, as always, begins with a prayer. Everyone's eyes downcast and closed except mine and yours. I grin at you as we both stare at the heat rising off this bastardisation of a mee goreng: Barilla linguine sauteed in the oil and fat diced prawns and chicken doused in Amoy soy sauce. It's his memory of a memory of a childhood in Singapore he left behind and it tastes fantastic. All night he tells us stories of the men that live here. To be a man he says, as I take your hand and lead you upstairs, is to listen.

Son. I always compared myself to those great men. They were men, strong and tough, tree trunks of men who never yielded. I used to think their sacrifice gave me a better life and made me soft. Under the weight of their legacy, real or imagined, I felt imprisoned. I felt like a boy. So I left this house and its shadow and ran far away from our culture, our faith, our family and all the men that live here. I ran and ran and ran, until a long way from that house I found your mum. Son. When the world went quiet she helped me build a quietness in myself and I found a slice of peace. In her love, away from the long shadow of that house and the crowded canopy of legacy. I let my hair grow long, pierced my ears and fell in love with her. We fought millennia of culture, faith and family to be together.

In lockdown when I cooked your mum the dishes of your fathers, I realised I had not told myself the stories of the women that lived in that house. In loving her I realised why they carried out their duty, who they had provided for and whose ears had listened to their worries and fears. The house I had built had forgotten the stories of the mothers that had made it a home. They were the soil and water that kept those trees grounded and strong.

And when we made you, another son in a line of sons, I found their stories and my way home.

Son. I am writing this letter so I cannot go back on my word. Leave this house and its histories and the weight of what has come before. You have a duty to be your own man before you face this world. Do not compare yourself to the men that live in this house, be different, be better. Provide for yourself so you can provide for your family and your community. And when you want to talk I am always here to listen. Son. When you return, me and your mother will be here for you, waiting in this house, eager to hear your stories, taste your food and watch you start to build your space here, in your home.

Aaron • 25–34 • London, UK • Engineer

Get a dog.

James • 35–44

Dear Elliott,

So I wasn’t particularly good at being a kid. In fact, I wasn’t very good socially until the age of thirty-two, and even now my effect on people isn’t exactly thrilling.

I am autistic and that has something to do with it, but I don’t think that has everything to do with it; I just never quite developed the tools to reach people. In conversation, I know what I want to do—I know how I want to engage people and be engaged by people—but my brain frequently leaves me floundering. My mind has already processed and dismantled an encounter before the encounter has even happened. I wasn’t especially bullied at school, but I don’t think I was liked either. Liked by anyone really. I was just there—the outsider—bobbing along in a cloud of noxious fumes of my own unhappiness. I like people immensely, I like thinking about people, I’m a writer because I like writing people, and I watch people endlessly, but I don’t really like being in company. I like the crowd, I just don’t like me in the crowd. I prefer being with you, or your mum or on my own.

You are much stronger, brighter and more interesting than I am. You are happy in your own company but you aren’t afraid to join in. Just recently on holiday a group of kids were playing in front of the place we were eating. We worked out they were a group of cousins. You decided you wanted to play with them and fearlessly joined in. I watched you and thought ‘he’s going to be alright’. You played with them for about half an hour, then they were called in for their dinner and you came back to our table breathless and happy. You knew none of their names, you’d just played for a bit. Such a small thing in a large life but to me it spoke volumes as to who you are. I remember grinning like a bear watching you. You see the world I think as a happy and inviting place. You think about the world so generously and the world seems to smile back. And you seem to do so instinctively. When you were a baby you woke up on Christmas morning and the first thing you wanted to check was not whether you had presents but whether Father Christmas had eaten his mince pie and the reindeer the carrots we left. You liked the idea of helping the magic happen. Fuelling the ride.

Your mum—Rachel—helps with all that. She's the kindest person I know. The sort of person who does the little things right. Secret acts of generosity. We've both loved being parents—seven rounds of IVF meant that we meant it—but she's such a natural mum. It gives me huge pleasure when I see the her in you emerge. You've her eyes and perhaps her way of seeing the world.

But I can't help being scared. You're nine and about to hit a whole new world of pain. I remember being ten and thinking it possible I'll never have friends again. I remember that exact thought. Then soon after comes the teenage years and everything that goes with that. I'm scared you've got too much of me in you, that it'll come pouring out at some point and you'll end up as lonely as I was. I am also scared that my fear of your future will pollute you and that you'll feel my concern (which I do generally try to keep hidden despite laying it all out here—Stephen made me, blame him) and end up being damaged by it. And that's aside from all the technological traps you might end up falling into as a kid engaged in the modern world. The traps which no one seems concerned enough about in Britain right now. But I don't think this is the place to go on about such things (right, Ste?).

I want you to be you. I want you to be the teenager who is grown up and sophisticated but still cares about the reindeer's carrots. But I know that parenthood is a science experiment, that both Rachel and I have had and will have an impact on you whether I like it or not. That my subconscious and conscious will help form the ears by which you understand the world. I hope I do OK by you. I'll keep working so hard at it. I hope you find your way despite and because of me. I know I love you more than I ever thought I ever could love anything.

Jackxxx

PS If you're wondering—why thirty-two? Why so specific? It's when your mum and I got together. I know. Sickening.

Jack • 45–54 • London, UK • Playwright and Screenwriter

Dear son,

There comes a quiet, unmistakable moment in every parent's life when they realise their child is no longer a child at all. The questions grow heavier. The laughter sounds different. The world stops being so safely small and instead becomes vast, complicated and occasionally unkind. And somewhere inside that change, the magic steps back without ceremony. This letter isn't written out of guilt. Instead it's born from gratitude and thanks.

Because once, not too long ago, you believed the world might occasionally lean more towards kindness than the alternative. You still believed that reward was earned based on an effort that was unseen and magical. You believed in gifts that arrived without any witnesses other than a magical red-suited bloke who had watched and judged your reward level based on your behaviour and your continued faith in kindness. You believed that goodness, in some small and steady way, was all that mattered. And, of course, as your dad, I let you believe that. Not because it was convenient. But because I wanted to protect you. I wanted your early years to be warmer than the cold the world can sometimes be. To ingrain in you a sense of wonder before life's responsibility hit.

So yes, son . . . to get you there I told stories. White lies. Fibs even. I staged scenes. I planted weeks of clues. I told the same annual lie with absolute confidence. And you believed. Completely. With the fearlessness certainty only children ever manage. So, here it is. My confession, said plainly at last:

Sorry, son, but I was Santa.

Yes, I ate the mince pie you put out for the big man. Yes, I drank the whisky you topped up too high (with my steering and encouragement of course!). Yes, I even ate the raw carrot you left for Rudolph. Yes, Santa's handwriting was suspiciously similar to mine, albeit with an intentionally shaky left hand. Please take heart that this was done with loving optimism, not criminal genius.

But here is the truth that outlasts the costume: the magic never vanished. It just changed hands. Because real magic is not about impossible light-speed flight or mystery responses to letters sent to the North Pole. It's not

your overheard secrets whispering last-minute present requests to your cuddly toy/best confidant. Really it’s so much more. It’s resilience when life becomes a little heavy. It’s generosity when giving costs you something you might not have. It’s integrity when no one is watching. It’s choosing goodness and kindness when the world gives you every excuse not to.

And this is the lesson I hope you carry forward. You were never meant to grow out of believing in magic. You were meant to grow into becoming it. So when life tests you, and it will, stand steady and tall. When you can give, give without needing applause. When the world feels hard, be soft in the ways that matter. And when kindness feels risky, choose it anyway. Do that, and you’ll never stop believing in the very thing Santa was always meant to teach.

With all my love always,
Dad/Santa

Paul • 45–54 • Hampshire, UK • Programme Director

My son,

In my favourite picture I ever took of you, you're ten days old, asleep on your other dad's tray table as we fly home to New York City for the first time. Pink sunlight pours through the clouds and settles on your head while you sleep. You're wearing a football onesie your birth family gave you. They wanted to be sure you brought a bit of them with you to your new home.

They chose Dada and me to raise you, but I spent most of that flight worrying about messing you up somehow, even as I couldn't stop looking at how perfect you were. While we were waiting for you to be born, I read about pregnancy and learned that by the third trimester you could already recognise your birth mom's heartbeat and the sound of her voice. On that flight home, I worried about taking you away from that first sense of safety. You were so brave to leave your first family and come with us.

Legally, we weren't your parents yet. We had to wait six months for a judge in Brooklyn to make us official. Being chosen to be one of your dads is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I grew up a closeted kid in the 1980s believing I could never love the way my heart told me to. I never let myself dream of being a dad. I was the tallest kid in my class, but I was always hiding. In junior high, a kid I rode the bus with every day kicked me down the Up Only staircase while calling me a 'fag'. I didn't know what the word meant yet, but I knew it was meant to sting. It taught me, early on, that people like me were supposed to live lonely lives.

You just turned ten years old. Lately you say 'Dad' in nearly every sentence you say to me: 'Dad, can we go get some vanilla ice cream?', 'What time will you be home from work, Dad?', 'Dad, don't work on our puzzle when I'm not here.' You hold on to the 'a' in Dad in a sing-song way that lets us know you mean me and not your other dad. Every darn time you name me as your dad, I feel a surge of warmth and strength, something like what Clark Kent must feel when he becomes Superman in the movies we just started watching. I don't know why you started saying Dad so much, but I don't want to ask you because it might make you stop.

My son, you, along with your birth parents, made me a dad, and I want

to say thank you for that. Guiding you through growing up has helped me find a more peaceful side of myself and see that the world is safer and more beautiful than I once believed. You don't remember this anymore, but on your first day of preschool we walked into a building filled with over 800 kids, smelling of institutional cleaners and waxy crayons, and through a classroom door painted with a big orange butterfly. Your new teacher saw my scrunched, sweaty face and said, 'Dad, is everything okay? Don't worry. We got this.' She gently helped me see that I was the one afraid of school—and you were ready.

Your first-grade teacher told us that you stopped her in the middle of reading a story about dog adoption. You stood up and told the whole class you were adopted. I remember being picked on mercilessly by third grade, so when you reached it, I asked you if kids made fun of you for having two gay dads. 'It's not a big deal, Dad. There's every kind of person in my school, Dad.'

Growing up, I spent a lot of energy hiding. I practised carrying my school books down by my hip instead of holding them up to my chest 'like a girl'. I forced myself to go to wrestling matches and pool parties where I was supposed to meet girls to date. Even in college, I wouldn't allow myself to go to the Counselling Center because I was convinced the counsellors would out me. Being your dad has helped me see how much that hiding kept me from fully being myself.

You and I have played peekaboo with couch pillows and with the newspaper on the subway. I've watched you play hide-and-seek under church pews and find places to tuck yourself away in our apartment. But I can tell: you are not a hider like I had to be. The world handed me shame, and it's time for me to put that down now, like a baby toy you've outgrown. I don't want you to inherit my shame. When you think you're carrying something no one else could possibly understand, remember you come from so much love. You don't have to disappear to belong.

Chris • 45–54 • New York, USA• Advertising

Dear son,

You changed everything. After two strong, determined daughters, you arrived when I was fifty—quiet, smiling, soaking up the world like it was made for you. I thought I knew myself by then. Turns out, I was still learning. I see myself in you—the double crown, the stubborn food quirks, the shorts in winter, and that shared hatred of collars and ties. Thank god the world has changed that you don't need to choke yourself with a strip of ugly material to be deemed respectable, trustworthy, legit.

But I hope you don't inherit everything. My start was rough. Born with pyloric stenosis, I was written off before I could even cry properly. Last rites were read. My parents refused to accept it—they fought, they rallied, they made noise until someone listened. That fight saved me. Never give up on what matters. But surviving childhood was the easy part. My teens? A battlefield. West coast of Scotland, Catholic school, rival gangs waiting in the park I had to cross twice a day. Every day was a gauntlet. I learned to fight because I had no other choice.

Then I fought because I wanted to. It made me big, loud, untouchable—or so I thought. Football terraces, punk gigs, fists flying. I wore violence like armour because the world told me that's what strength looked like. Truth? It was fear dressed up as power. I ended up in court, paralysed by the possibility of prison. But I got a lifeline—I had to leave town. My last act before I left? Smashing a centuries-old stained-glass window. Why? Because anger felt easier than admitting I was scared, clueless and free-falling. That's the toxic mix of poverty, religion, gangs, son—when pride shouts louder than reason and you end up having no clue what you are fighting for.

Change saved me. New town, new job, new life. Warehouse work led to computers. Someone said, 'Blue collar boys don't do white collar jobs.' That was all I needed. I passed the test, and worked like hell learning a skill. Lesson? Don't let anyone tell you where you belong. Music kept me sane. Punk band as a teen, then again in my twenties, that led to albums and tours. Chaos and melody became a positive way to channel what made me angry.

Already, you share my passion for music—always make space for it in your life. I climbed ladders, set goals and hit them, but I always stayed true to my gut—even when it cost me. Trust yours. If something feels wrong, it is. If something feels right, chase it—even if the world says you can't. You'll fly, son, I believe in you. The kindness and love you express so freely at eleven years of age, makes me so proud. Don't let anyone diminish these superpowers you have.

And as you navigate the inevitable challenges and challengers, remember: being the last man standing can be lonely. No one really knows you if you present a bravado-fuelled version of the man you think you should be. Always love. Always lead with heart. Always stay you.

All my love,
Dad xx

Iain • 55–64 • Argyll, UK • Musician

My dear sweet son,

You are my heart, my hopes, my dreams, and you will continue our footprints long into the sands of time. I have led a beautiful life to date, in no small part thanks to being raised by kind and caring parents who gave love and leeway in equal measure, letting me carve my own path, knowing in full confidence they were there for me at every turn.

This is how I shall hope to guide you. Remember to keep kindness as your North Star. Kindness heals. Kindness allows growth. Kindness lights a flame in others and spreads a warming joy. This world can at times be cold and cruel, which grows from fear, greed and the darkness. So be the shining light.

Whatever path you choose to lead, what passions or interests ignite in you, know that I will always be your anchor, right behind you, you give me strength and meaning, know that I shall forever be your harbour.

All my love,
Dada

Dáire • 45–54 • Cork, Ireland • Artist—Painter

Score them goals, make them saves, write those songs, sing them loud and stand tall and proud.

Dominic • 45–54 • Birmingham, UK • Bricklayer

Dear Isaac,

Hello, son, I can’t believe I’m writing this letter to the older you while you’re laying fast asleep right next to me. In my bed by the way; you must like it more than your own.

I love you, Isaac, words can’t describe how much I do. I’ve loved watching you grow in these first years of your life. Doing things for the first time, like your first words and steps, your first day in school and your first game of footy. I can’t wait to watch you experience lots more things growing up, like us going to watch the Reds, your first pint with your old man and maybe even your first girlfriend.

Now I’m not wishing the time away because I don’t take these years for granted but you’re growing so fast and I get excited thinking about what the future has in store. Life is full of experiences, some good and some bad, and we all have our own path in life but I will do whatever I can to make sure yours is as smooth and as happy as can be.

I’m not worried about you, son, because I know from seeing you in these first few years that you’re such a resilient boy you never let anything get in your way, any little obstacles you’ve had you took in your stride, got on with it and came out smiling. And that makes me so proud.

I hope when you’re older you think I’ve been a good dad to you, son, because you and your sister are my pride and joy and nothing on this Earth is more important. You are such a wonderful loving boy with a beautiful bubbly soul, I can only begin to imagine what the future holds for you.

I love you, son.

Nathan • 25–34 • Liverpool, UK

They tell me I’ll miss moments like these—lying on the floor beside your cot, my arm stretched through the bars so you can hold my hand, because that’s the only way you’ll fall asleep. And I know they’re right. Even now, as the hours press into my back and my arm begins to ache, I can feel it—

that quiet knowledge that one day, I'd give anything for another night like this. Because somehow, holding your hand makes your whole world feel safe and steady. And if I'm honest, it makes mine feel that way too.

But like you, your small world will grow. The glow that lights your face won't come from the night-light any more, but from a screen. And I carry a quiet fear that you'll lie there, scrolling through a world that hums too loudly—measuring yourself against the mirage of curated perfection. I wonder how that might shape you, how it might tug at the edges of your confidence. I wish I could shield you from it all. But I know I can't.

All I can hope is that I won't need to. That the times I've had to be your parent first and your friend second have helped you build the strength to stand steady when those whispers grow loud. And I have faith that you will. You have this beautiful way of making sure no one feels left out, as if you already understand that joy is bigger when it's shared. That is a rare and precious thing. You are still so small, and yet there's something in you that shines so brightly.

So when that day comes—when you find yourself alone in that glow—I hope you remember this: you are enough. You don't need the world's applause to matter. You just need to keep being that kind three-year-old who would share his light, dancing and singing, making his little sister laugh and feel seen when she was upset.

Sleep now, keep that gentle heart safe, and carry it with you as you grow. When the noise of the world feels too heavy, remember the warmth of this hand, the quiet of this room, and the truth that has never changed: that light inside you is what's real. Don't ever let the flicker of a screen try to dim it.

Dad

Edward • 35–44

OceanofPDF.com



ADOLESCENCE

We stood there, side by side, staring at the waterfall like two cavemen who'd just discovered running water. You were transfixed. Mouth open. Eyes wide. Tonnes of liquid thunder crashed down the rocks, fizzing into mist, roaring downstream like it was late for an appointment. I said something profound. 'Pretty amazing, huh?' You nodded. Still mesmerised. Then you said, 'Imagine peeing off that.' And just like that, my poetic father–son moment went swirling downstream with the foam. The air was heavy with spray and the smell of eucalyptus—fresh and bright and alive. You did a little happy dance—pure joy, the kind that warms your heart like Nana's chocolate fudge pudding. Rainbows flickered in the mist. Frogs croaked from secret puddles. A kookaburra laughed from a nearby tree. We didn't say much after that. We just stood there, watching the endless falling—the constant movement, the loud chaos, the quiet beauty of nature's hidden poetry dancing in the droplets.

That's when it hit me. Life is like a waterfall. Endless motion. Roaring mayhem. Moments of wonder hiding in the fog. That's why I'm writing this letter. Because one day, you'll be standing in front of your own waterfall. Big decisions. Big changes. And when that happens, I want you to remember a few things I've learned along the way.

If life is a waterfall, laughter is how you survive the sudden drops. Trust me, kid. If you can't laugh at your own mistakes, life turns into a long, dull documentary—no jokes, no colour and definitely no popcorn. And nobody wants to binge-watch that series. A recent family trip to Vietnam taught us that. We were eating dinner in a small restaurant in Saigon. The food was glorious—sizzling, fragrant, colourful. The kind of flavours that elbow their way into your mouth shouting, SURPRISE! You were feeling brave. Adventurous. A culinary Indiana Jones. So you dunked your spring roll into a generous puddle of spicy dipping sauce. A very generous puddle. And then came the sequence every parent knows—the chilli catastrophe of a first-timer. You took a bite like a proud food critic discovering new horizons. For a moment, calm. Too calm. Then the chilli struck like a lightning bolt. Your eyes popped like champagne corks, your legs tap-danced under the table, and a sputtering, red-faced 'HOT. HOT. HOT!' erupted as tears streamed down your cheeks. You made noises normally reserved for startled wildlife. A passing waiter looked alarmed. You lunged for water and sculled it like an explorer who'd been lost in the desert.

And yes—we laughed. Not to be cruel. But because it was one of those universal human moments. Like the time I was swooped by a magpie. If it's you, it's terrifying. If it's anyone else, it's oddly hilarious. Or the day you rode straight over a black snake on your mountain bike. You got the fright of your life. Fair enough—so did the snake. It coiled up, furious, like an angry piece of liquorice. It took me twenty minutes to shoosh it safely off the track while you stood there white as a ghost, convinced you'd just cheated death—but certain the snake was coming back for round two. Luckily, all three of us—you, me, and the snake—lived to tell the tale. And we laughed all the way home at the absurdity of it.

Back in Saigon, though, you did not find any of it funny. You went completely silent. For the next twenty-four hours, you refused to speak. Not a word. You communicated entirely through hand gestures and hastily scribbled notes like a monk undertaking a vow of silence. But here's the thing—now, months later, we can look back and laugh. And that's the whole point. If you can find humour in your own disasters—your chilli catastrophes, snake encounters, magpie attacks, your what-was-I-thinking moments—life becomes lighter. Softer. Easier to carry. Laugh at yourself, mate. It's how you keep your footing when the ground suddenly drops away.

After laughter comes curiosity—the thing that keeps you moving downstream. Curiosity is your superpower. It's the spark that turns ordinary days into adventures and boring conversations into treasure hunts. It's the itch that asks, what's waiting beyond that mountain? And the whisper that says, what if? Curiosity is the passport that never expires. The compass that never falters. The flashlight that makes dark corners interesting instead of scary. Your mind is a question factory running at full speed—and I love it.

The questions are endless. And so are the stories. Keep asking, kid. Curiosity is how you discover the world is bigger, stranger, and more wonderful than you ever imagined.

Back at the waterfall, the weight on my shoulders wasn't just my backpack—it was the quiet fear that one day I won't be able to do this any more. My body aches. My right leg drags like an old rusty anchor. My balance is sketchy. I stumble. I limp. I compensate. I overcompensate. And beneath every step is a whisper of worry: How long can I keep up with you? Nearly twenty-five years ago, my surgeon looked me in the eye and said,

‘Mate, I’ve seen people with tethered spinal cord syndrome end up in a wheelchair. You won’t be running marathons—but it’s possible to live a healthy, active life.’ Possible. That word has never left me. It’s been both hope and haunting. A dangling maybe. But hope has carried me further than fear ever could. So I follow you. Across fallen logs. Over boulders. Up trees. Into rock pools chasing tiny crabs and sea critters. I kayak beside you. Cast fishing lines into winding rivers. Pedal up rocky trails. Camp in the rain. Hike until my joints scream for mercy. We’ve been eaten alive by mosquitoes. Soaked to the bone. And we’ve enjoyed every minute of exploring the world together.

I do it because I can—for now. Because nothing makes me feel more alive than seeing the world through the wide, wondering eyes of a boy who loves to explore. I love the way you notice everything—the colour shifts of lichen on granite, the sharp tang of eucalyptus after rain, the way moss grips the edges of fallen logs, the distant echo of a lyrebird’s call, the footprints of kangaroos pressed into the mud, and even the odd-looking square shapes of wombat poo. Every time we explore together, something in me rewires. My body may creak and groan, but my mind feels younger with every step. Gratitude hums quietly beneath the pain. Because this—this—is what I carry that you can’t see: the thrill of fatherhood, the ache of uncertainty, the stubborn fire of possibility and the determined hope that I can keep going. All because of you.

And so, my boy, here’s what I’ve learned. Life really is a waterfall. Sometimes you drift gently along, enjoying the scenery. Sometimes you hear a distant roar and think, Uh-oh . . . what now? And sometimes you go right over the edge—arms flailing like a startled pelican—wondering how you got yourself into this mess. But the fall isn’t failure. It’s movement. It’s momentum. It’s proof you’re still alive. Water doesn’t argue with gravity. It doesn’t negotiate with rocks. It doesn’t file a complaint with management. It just finds a way—over, under, around, through. And somehow, it always keeps going.

That day we stood at the waterfall—you in awe, me pretending to be wise—I realised something. Life is made of brave leaps. Sudden drops. Quiet pools. Surprising turns. And sometimes, you need to stand completely still just to understand the view. So, when life gets loud, or messy, or turbulent—remember that waterfall. Remember the roar. Remember the

spray on your face. Remember that even the biggest drop ends in calm water. Stand still. Take a breath. Then keep flowing. Because that's life—unpredictable, wild, beautiful.

Pretty amazing, huh?

Craig • 45–54 • New South Wales, Australia • Writer

Work hard, save hard, never fully trust a dog (too many teeth) and most importantly a chip sandwich is in fact a superfood and great at bedtime. If by any chance you got this book as a present, sorry, it should have been an Xbox. But here's the thing, the person who bought it for you probably loves you.

Good luck.

James • 55–64 • London, UK • Garden Centre worker

Aright, boys,

I remember one of you saying to me when you were younger that you were confused by the idea that some boys were raised thinking that men shouldn't cry. You were raised by a man who cried all the fucking time.

If anything, you probably wish I didn't cry quite as much as I do. You've seen me cry at funerals, of course. And when my heart was broken or filled with pride. But you've also seen me cry at films and TV shows and moments of heightened emotion in any book I ever read you.

I'm proud that I did that. Proud that I raised you to be unafraid of your vulnerability and unafraid of your hearts and unafraid of being able to show it. The best men I ever met were defined by gentleness and emotional openness. I count you two among them.

We have lived through a time when men and masculinity have been associated with the greedy, the violent, the sexually aggressive and the snide. I love that you two exemplify the opposite. You are generous and caring, gentle, compassionate, and you listen to those people you love with an alertness that inspires me. Keep doing that.

If I were to tell you one thing I haven't yet, it might be that it's OK to fail. It's OK to fuck up. It's only when we fail and fuck up that we learn anything. As a father, as a husband, as a lover, as an artist, this has always been true. The experiences that have taught me most have been when I have failed. So embrace your failures with the curiosity of a scientist. This is how penicillin was discovered, or 'Yesterday' was written. Always be curious. Never be ashamed.

Always remember that life is hilarious and it is beautiful.

Like other of parents my age I worry that I have left a world that is harder for you two than it was for me. I hope you know how much faith I have in you both to navigate the difficulties of that world with grace and care. You will do this by cherishing the beauty. By cherishing the hilarious. Keep sending each other jokes you find on the internet. Never let anybody else see them. Look after each other. Look after your sister. Look after yourselves.

They told me to write a letter I may be too shy to share with you. It

won’t surprise you that I am of course sharing it with you straight away. It won’t surprise you either that I am tearing up a bit as I write it.

I am so predictable.

I love you boys.

Pa x

Simon • 55–64 • London, UK • Playwright

Dear C,

The day you arrived you were eleven months old. We were all so desperate to hold you, to play with you, to love you. Those big brown eyes stared at us as we smiled and cooed. Eyes that had seen a different world, one we weren't part of. We were naive. We thought we could cuddle and stroke and soothe it all away. But you had so much going on in that head and that heart, and we didn't always understand. We overwhelmed you with our own expectations of you. As you grew, you hid. You wore your hair long, your hoodie up and your walls high.

We stopped trying to make you fit into our world and tried instead to understand yours. Thank you for teaching us patience. Recently you've started to peek out a bit, to show yourself. Just a little. You punch the air when you get a strike bowling, you smile when a teacher selects you for an award, you let your heart swell when Fritz picks you to run around the garden with him, you ask your mum to listen to your favourite song.

Keep sharing yourself with us, because you are right to trust us. It doesn't matter how you find your people, as long as you find them. And when you do . . . you let them in, you let them hold you and you believe them when they tell you they love you. We are your people. There will be more people for you . . . you'll know them when you find them . . . trust yourself and let them in.

My hope for you is that one day you'll see what we see . . . a capable boy with a beautiful heart, a wordsmith, a comic, a survivor, and that when you're ready you'll have a little venture into the world. As your grandad said, it really is a wonderful place.

We all have different stories, different starts, different paths. You were asked to climb mountains before you could even walk. That was hard. But it led you to us and we are so blessed to call you ours.

Never forget I'm here to climb the mountains with you. We all are. Lean on us. Because one thing I'm certain of, son, is that you belong with us. I love you.

Marwa • 45–54 • Brighton, UK • Gardener

Dear Danny,

What is a man is such a complex question, yet there's a simple answer—don't be a twonk.

Understand that as a young white man you are in a position to support and help so many people around you. You are not a representative of all white men, but be aware you have a few things going for you that others may not.

Being a man can come with the expectation that you should always know what to do to in every situation. This can feel stressful and daunting, and of course you won't get it right all the time. Trying your best is what matters. And always be willing to apologise when you get it wrong. It's quick and easy, avoids lots of upset, and stops you looking like an idiot and defending things you realise you don't actually believe.

Don't try to impress others too much. Surround yourself with mates who don't care about outward perceptions and can talk about anything, including their well-being and emotions. Because the biggest piece of advice I can give you is to talk. Letting others know how you are is vital. You don't have to unload everything at once onto one person, but know who you can talk to. It can be a scary and complex world, and none of us has all the answers, so we need other people whom we trust to help and advise us.

The people who you want around you will love you for who you are, so do what you enjoy and don't worry if it's not fashionable or cool. Doing your own thing and being passionate about something is what's cool. Don't get hung up on what other people might think and whether it's boys' or girls' stuff, manly or not. The most interesting people are the ones who have a range of things they are into and can talk about anything, so always be open and curious about the world.

Avoid being selfish and self-indulgent. You might feel better in the very short term, but the effect never lasts and it's never worth it. Similarly, don't fall for flashy, temporary things. Invest your time, money and energy in substantial items which reward you. Immerse yourself in culture, music and art. Test yourself, stretch yourself. Be open and embrace differences—

they are a strength not a weakness. Travel as much as you can. The world is set up to encourage men to part with their money, whether it's records, trainers, fancy beers or a plastic bobble head of Diego Maradona at only £39.99. It's a trap! We don't need these things, but we still want them. You know I struggle with it still. But the only things that really matter are people, and we should concentrate on them. Because once they are gone, people can't be replaced by anything from Amazon or eBay. Love people not plastic!

Being a man comes loaded with so many opinions on what we should be. Lots of noise focuses on us being tough, strong, all-knowing. Knowledge is important, but it's what you do with it that matters. Strength is important, but it's how you show it that matters. Toughness is important, but it's who you shield that matters. Real courage is the ability to love others and to show your vulnerability.

Real courage is also about being brave enough to tell the truth. Lies cause untold damage. I know from personal experience that they poison your relationships with the people you love the most and make you feel ashamed of yourself. Sometimes it's easier to lie and sometimes you will get away with it, but this is where the danger lies. Because you think you got away with it, you feel a false sense of power within you and you believe you can get away with anything. But that's wrong. You've poisoned the well and created a barrier between you and the person you have lied to, even if they aren't yet fully aware of it. Telling the truth can be hard and can cause hurt. But people will respect and trust you more. Because when the lie is discovered—and it will be—the damage is insurmountable and people will find it hard to ever trust you again. So be brave and tell the truth.

Be generous and big-hearted. Love those you know and try to love what strangers stand for. Everyone has goodness in them, even if they don't know it. But this does not mean being a pushover. Sometimes men can think that there are only two settings on the dial—passive or aggressive. That is just not true. The best thing is to be assertive. Stand up for yourself, back yourself and believe in yourself. Be confident enough to stand your ground when you need to, and back down when it's right to. Always respect yourself, and respect those who deserve it. Love the world around you and it will love you back. Always remember that you have the

right to be here and so does everyone else.

I hope this helps you to live a good and wonderful life. Always know how immensely proud I am of you, and know how amazing my life is with you in it.

Much love, always,
Dad

Rob • 45–54 • Brighton, UK • Teacher

Go forth, young Jedi, the universe is yours.

Rajan • 45–54 • Selangor, Malaysia

Son,

I want to tell you about the most difficult time in my life which, as you know, was when you were five years old and we were hoping to bring home to you a baby brother from hospital and in the end we came home empty-armed.

I wish I could talk to you about the strength and love of your mother but words would never do it justice. Instead, I want to tell you about some of the things my mates did for me . . . There was the friend at work who took the call with the sad news and took responsibility for passing that on to my colleagues at the school I worked at. He was also the only person at work that asked if we had any photos of your brother, and he looked at them with love. There was the support of my two brothers-in-law who, at each and every family meeting that followed, gave me the nod, the pat on the arm and asked how I was and listened. There was the mate who took a morning off work to come and register the death with me and took me for a coffee afterwards. There was the mate who brought his whole family to see us when many others were staying away and keeping their distance. There is the mate who has messaged me on the anniversary, without fail, for eleven years.

And among it all, there was you. You drew pictures for us of our family. At five years old you were able to tell people what happened. At the funeral you gave a speech that we never expected and that came out of nowhere and made every single person there cry. And 367 days later when your sister was born you wrote her a letter telling her how much we loved her, about your brother in heaven, and that you promised to play with her and be a good brother.

I am telling you all this because these are things that the best men do and the type of man I want you to be. Men who support other men and men who are not afraid to care even when it’s uncomfortable to do so. It’s ten years from that time now and you’ve grown into the caring young man that was already there in the five-year-old you.

Keep it up, mate. I love you.

Jonathan • 45–54 • Cheshire, UK • Teacher

Be kind, be calm, be caring

Be strong and have passion in what you do

Dream big and follow your own path

Be thankful for all that you have

Shine brightly sunshine

Love is all you need

UTFT

P.S. Have you fed the dogs? x

Ian • 45–54 • Dorset, UK • TV Producer

Dear E,

Some of the hardest lessons took me a lifetime to understand. I learned them through mistakes, losses, bad decisions and moments I wish I could redo. That's why it means so much to me to see that you already carry so many of these truths in your heart. You are already the kind of person I spent years trying to become, and I'm deeply thankful for that.

You are not in competition with anyone. Not with your friends, not with the world, not with some imagined version of who you think you should be. Your path is yours alone, and it's enough just as it is. Walk it at your own pace, with your own values, and trust that you don't need to prove your worth to anyone.

There is real magic in this world. You'll find it in quiet moments in nature, with animals, in the things that light you up, in laughter, curiosity, and wonder. Pay attention to what brings you joy; those are clues from the universe pointing you towards the life you're meant to live.

I am so incredibly proud of you. Proud of the way you make everyone around you feel seen and heard without expectation, the way you care, and the way you show up and face your challenges as yourself. More than anything, I want you to know that I love you always and without condition. You can talk to me about anything. No subject is too big, too small, or too messy. I'm here to listen, to support you, and to walk beside wherever I can no matter what.

Always remember: you are enough, exactly as you are.

With all my love,
Dad

Jon • 45–54 • Leicester, UK

Know that I love you and will always be there for you. No matter what, I've

got your back. You are my son and always will be. I adore you, and there is nothing you could possibly do to change that. (But if you could stop referring to me as a ‘flipping dickhead’ it would be much appreciated.) There may be times as you grow older when we will not always see eye to eye, but that will not change how much I love you.

Don’t be afraid to show your love to the people you care about. Treat everyone equally and respect each individual regardless of race, religion and gender. Always be polite, honest and humble, and stay true to yourself.

I will always support you in whatever ambition you have and I hope you turn out to be just like me—a ‘flipping dickhead’.

Ali • 45–54 • Leicestershire, UK • Postman

Football was invented so dads had something to talk to their sons about . . . But I don't want football to be all we ever talk about.

Anonymous

Dear son,

You are not a scientist. You are not a deep thinker or a philosopher. You are not a hard worker. You are not a reader of books. You are not going to be working in the world of finance (not in any legal way). You are not going to invent a cure for ailments based on years of research and self-sacrifice. You are not at this rate going to buy me a house like you have promised numerous times. You are never going to be an asset in a team game of Trivial Pursuit. You are never (happy to be proved wrong) going to understand that it is a good idea to clean one's teeth twice a day. You are never going to perform life-saving surgery on me or anyone else. Realistically, son, there are a million things that you could have been that you just will never ever be.

But. You are amazing. You are the greatest gift a father could have. You are funny. You are a good person. You can climb mountains, metaphorically and literally. You are a hero to your brothers. You are a brilliant footballer and I can claim no credit for that. You still hug me and tell me you love me and I believe you. You are my son. You can make mistakes. You are happy. You can feign belief in my relevance to modern society and you can use your phone to look up what that sentence means. You are safe. You can improve personal hygiene, you've proved it. You have time in your life to exceed anything expected of you and still be worshipped if you fail. You are one of a kind. The best kind. You are my son. You are my teacher. I am proud that you can do things I can't. You have introduced music to me that I am too old and wise for. You are my superior at console gaming. You are my life. You are both the lion and the mouse in Aesops' fable.

You are my son. I wouldn't want you any other way. You are my son and I love you. You are my son.

Dad x

Paul • 45–54 • Film Writer and Director

I want to avoid us replicating what happened between me and my dad, your grandad. We are all products of our upbringing, without realising it is happening. Only later when you look back on your life do you realise how the die was cast in childhood, and it is so hard to break that as an adult.

Despite all our time spent going to watch football, or having a meal somewhere or travelling or walking, one thing never changed: there was no physical expression of love. I know he loved me. And yet we never did more than shake hands to say hi and bye. We never once hugged. Why? I can only say for myself that I would have felt awkward changing that habit of a lifetime. Maybe he felt the same. The die had been cast. Our routines established.

And so to his death. You know the story, how he called that Friday (yes, in the park when you found me crying). And how I saw him one last time, on the Saturday. How I had no idea he was about to die the next morning.

But did you know that as I left to come home that evening we hugged for the first and last time? He gripped me tightly as we did which caught me by surprise. I drove home feeling pleased we had broken the spell. But there would be no more hugs, no more affection. That was my one moment. Am I happy that we did hug at least once, or am I sad that we only hugged one time? I still ask myself that today and I don’t know the answer.

So I want to make sure that we always do something so simple but easily lost. I want us to always hug, whether to say hello, goodnight or goodbye. And I resolved that day that I would be different with you, that we would keep hugging. And yet already I feel that slipping away, it becoming just that bit more awkward as you get older. But you are still young and we can still recast the die before it is set.

Whoever it is, me or anyone else, never feel awkward or embarrassed by showing those you love that you do love them.

Dad x

Dominic • 55–64 • London, UK • Business Owner

Note to readers: *My son is autistic, so the letter is broken down into short paragraphs and a list as this is the best way for him to read and understand what I am communicating.*

Dear XXX,

You have grown up so much since you were just a little baby. You are not just getting taller (you're nearly as tall as Mummy!) but your amazing brain is growing up too, and the way you experience the world is changing. You are twelve now and nearly a teenager . . . and one day, you will be a fully grown man just like me! I can't wait to share the journey with you.

I am writing you this letter to share some thoughts that I hope you find useful to help you live the best and most fun life.

Our world is precious and I know you love space and the planets, so the first thing I want you to know is that our little planet, spinning in space, is a precious miracle. The Earth is the only place we know that has life on it, so it's important to look after it and respect everything that lives (all the people, animals and plants!).

Laugh through life. You are really great at having fun and making other people laugh. You might call it a 'superpower'.

Lots of people that know you, in our family and at your school, say how lovely you are and that you are kind and have a great sense of humour. Keep seeing the joy in things.

Isn't it a nice feeling to laugh? And when you laugh, the people around you smile too. And everyone loves feeling happy :-) Watching funny things on TV, making silly noises and listening to music are great things to do if you want to feel happy, and you will always be able to do those things.

Be kind to people. The world around us can be complicated and difficult sometimes. People see things in different ways—and they might see things differently to you. That's what makes everyone who they are, so we should try to understand how they feel (which is called 'empathy') and not get too

cross or sad when people don’t agree with you or want something different to you.

Some people can be mean—like bullies. You don’t need people like that in your life. Seek out kind people who like having fun the way you do and love you for who you are.

Ask for help. Never think that you can’t ask for help. Believe it or not, most people love helping other people! It is what makes us humans.

Part of my life as your dad is to be there when you need support and I will always help you with anything for as long as I live. You can talk to me about anything that you are worried about and we can make a plan together.

Learn from your mistakes. It might look like grown-ups know what they are doing . . . but we are all making it up as we go along and just trying our best to be good people. It is not always easy, and everyone gets things wrong sometimes (including me!).

Do what makes you happy. My dad (Pop-Pop) always said to me: ‘You only live once. Do whatever makes you happy and you can’t go wrong’—and he is right.

When you find things you love doing, do more of them. When you meet people you like, spend more time with them. If you are lucky enough to fall in love with someone, then commit to sharing your lives together and maybe one day you will write a letter to your own child just like this.

I know you love lists and rules to follow, so here is one that you might want to keep handy:

1. Look after the planet—it’s the only place with life that we know of.

2. Laugh and the world laughs with you.

3. Be kind to people, and they are more likely to be kind to you.

4. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

5. Learn from your mistakes.

6. Do more of the things you love.

I love you so much and you light up my life every day.

Daddy xx

Sam • 45–54 • Sussex, UK

Dear son,

A few pointers for the Road of Life:

Treat people the way you’d like to be treated.

Wait your turn.

Apologise if you’re wrong.

Be honest and talk things through, even if it’s embarrassing or icky or difficult.

Listen to the other side of the argument—communication is the only way to understand what’s going on (even if you don’t like what you hear).

Don’t be a bully and call out such behaviour if you see it.

Don’t make hurtful personal comments about people, especially about anything people can’t change—skin, hair, accent, height, size, etc.

Get your round in when it’s your turn.

Incoming traffic has the right of way in the gents.

Don’t lech.

Give up your seat on a train or bus.

Offer to help others who could do with a hand, don’t wait to be asked (this goes for household chores like loading the dishwasher too . . .).

Question authority.

Learn to cook.

Put the loo seat down.

Most of all, be kind.

Love you!

Carl • 55–64 • NHS Worker

Son.
I’m sorry I took the guitar
back. I love you. I miss you.
Dad.

Anonymous

Dear son,

There are parts of you that you haven’t met yet. They’ll appear in moments of pressure—when you’re exhausted, afraid, or in love. Fatherhood showed me that. It revealed the younger versions of myself still living quietly inside. The angry one, the overwhelmed one, the boy who wanted to be seen. When they rose up, I didn’t always like what I saw. But over time, I learned to pause—to speak to those parts gently, to say: I hear you. I know this place. But I’ve got us now. That small conversation—between who I was and who I’m becoming—became a kind of practice. It steadied me.

You’ll find the same is true in life. It’s not about silencing the noise within, but learning to choose which voice leads. The world, my son, will often confuse loudness for truth. It will celebrate those who shout and punish those who move quietly. But never forget that the quiet ones—the patient builders, the quiet carers, the unseen helpers—are often the ones who keep the world from falling apart. There is a power in kindness that doesn’t announce itself.

But don’t close your heart to those who’ve been led astray. The world has grown cruel in places, and cruelty always makes people afraid. Fear teaches them to clutch what they have and to see danger in every stranger. Try not to meet that fear with scorn. Meet it with understanding, even as you resist its pull. We heal nothing by retreating into hate. The only real way through this life—politically, personally, spiritually—is through love. And love is not soft. It’s the hardest, bravest thing. It asks you to stay open when it would be easier to close, to share when it would be safer to hoard, to believe in cooperation when the world tells you to look after only yourself. To give yourself to love, again and again—that’s the real act of defiance. And the liminal space where extraordinary things can happen.

With all my heart,
Dad

Ben

Let’s meet in the heart of the sea, in the eye of the storm, I will hold out my hand and tell you that you have always been my lighthouse, don’t change . . . just stay you and focus on growing from the light you spread . . . be a safe haven for your lovers.

Aba

Ami • 35–44 • Factory Worker

Gabriel Santer, 15, fell from a Liverpool Q-Park in October 2020. His dad Johnny is now campaigning to increase the minimum height of edge protection in car parks through the Multi-Storey Car Parks (Safety) Bill, known as Gabe's Law.

Yes da boys! My G . . . son; there's nothing here that you won't already know (being as you are, where you are), but this is my opportunity to share the insights you have taught me, spread the love and the light, speak from the scars as to what it might mean to become a man.

It's hard to know where to begin; but after you left us, so suddenly, so unexpectedly (so preventably), the shock and pain were immediate: overwhelming and all-consuming. Trying to process what had happened was impossible; instead the sympathetic nervous system takes over: adrenaline and cortisol the fuel that would sustain me for the foreseeable future. (It is worth noting here that the non-linear nature of time started to reveal itself, as seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months are interchangeable, sometime simultaneous, but always with an awareness of you.) All we ever have is this moment, now: carpe diem, as tomorrow is never promised.

To try and ameliorate these effects, the routine of varied physical exercise, frequent open-water swimming in salt water, more considered eating habits, letting food be thy medicine, and trying to regulate my sleep pattern, prove to be a potent antidote. I work hard to maintain and prioritise these practices, giving gratitude daily for my health, as it truly is wealth. I have also come to learn that the importance of this physical, bodily self-care is paramount: if one is not looking after oneself, it makes it so much harder to look after and care for our loved ones.

The day after you transcended, a pandemonium of parakeets descended upon the monkey puzzle that fascinated you so intently as a small boy, in Bubbe and Zaide's back garden. There were fifteen of them in total: one for every year you shone, chattering noisily in the late-afternoon twilight. They perched for a long time, making sure we knew you were there. That was the first beautiful, serendipitous moment that reawakened my awe and wonderment of the natural world around us, and my connection to Spirit. We are spiritual beings having a human experience, the consciousness of

the cosmos, self-aware and reflecting back on itself through our individual lives.

The senior coroner recorded an open verdict at your inquest, but eloquently reminded us that life is miraculous, and that we all share the same humanity, echoing the sentiment that I'd tried to commune through your eulogy a few months prior. The beauty of humanity is we have individuality; you are a unique and individual person that made and will continue to make a mark on society in which you live, and on family and friends. Your life is so precious, in fact, that you will alter the course of history. What a wonderful conclusion and wisdom to carry. This has now given me my life's purpose and I feel blessed that I have at last found what the Japanese term ikigai.

Not long after that oration, I was called upon to reflect on your beloved godmother's earthly endeavours. She was a true Alchemist: that is someone who transforms things for the better. And as any student of earth sciences knows, energy can neither be created nor destroyed—it can only be changed from one form to another. But the purest and most powerful energy in the universe, as some other Scousers let us famously know, is love, and ALL you need, is, of course, LOVE.

You are so loved; you spread love, and continue to live on through that love, unconditionally and forever.

Dad x

Johnny • 45–54 • Liverpool, UK • Founder and Campaign Director

Dearest Mylo,

It all began with the shock of a pregnancy test being placed on a coffee table in front of me in a rented first-floor flat in Crouch End, north London, in what now feels like another lifetime ago. Cue insurmountable worry, a tidal wave of panic, lots of cigarettes being smoked out the window, uncontrollable, frenzied laughter, the insistence of another test being taken, another fresh dose of anxiety, more smoking of cigarettes and one or two stiff drinks to calm my nerves on my behalf.

What did this mean? How could this happen? Surely I'm too young for this? What about my acting career? What does this mean financially? So wait, this means they'll be three people in this relationship now? Wait a minute, Mum and Dad are over the moon about it! I wish now in hindsight, which of course is a wonderful thing, I could sit my 25-year-old self down and say 'Pull yourself together, you soppy sod! Every bloke asks these questions of themselves at a time like this. It's LIFE-CHANGING, bruv! But also, mate, let me let you into a little secret . . . the best is yet to come!'

Because the truth is, Mylo, the moment you were born, the moment I held you in my arms for the very first time you have enriched my life in ways I could never have imagined. A ball of light, energy and laughter from the word go, you have grown into a kind, creative, incredibly talented and thoughtful young man.

It only feels like yesterday you were breaking out your velociraptor impressions, mimicking Dad do his Michael Jackson dance routine and shining up there onstage as the Scarecrow with no brain in The Wizard of Oz and naughty Nigel in Matilda the Musical. Oh, to go back just for a day. Music is now your passion and it fills my heart that you have found something that gives you so much purpose, drive and joy. Keep going, son. Work hard, follow your dreams and they will repay in return. Life will have its ups and downs for sure, but I'll always be here to help and guide you the best way I can. Your mum and I are not only proud to call you our son but so proud what a fantastic brother, grandson, cousin and friend you are to those around you. Above all else I want to thank you from the

bottom of my heart for teaching me the most important lesson in life is to give love to others. It's not about being the most important person in the room but the people you share it with. How lucky am I that I get to share it with you.

Love you always and forever,
Dad

Daniel • 45–54 • London, UK • Actor

You have two ears and one mouth. Use it in the right ratio.

Chris • 45–54 • Berkshire, UK

Ay up, lads, I’m probably the worst person to be giving out advice, I wouldn’t wanna sit here and tell you about all the mistakes I made along the way, I don’t need to as you witnessed so many of them, if anything I should be taking life advice from you, as you’ve turned into the most amazing men despite your father, I can say this without feeling ashamed as I’m not that person any more, I turned my life around and you got to witness that too, all the advice I would like to give you like being selfless, humble, patient, to try and love unconditionally, it seems you already have in you lockers, I would tell you to dig deep when life shows up, something I’ve witnessed you both doing in your lives already, I’d tell you to share you thoughts and feelings no matter what, something I’ve had the privilege of being able to do with you both already, I think what I’m basically trying to say is keep doing what you’re already doing because it’s amazing to watch and be a part of, thank you for loving me when I couldn’t love myself, thank you for being patient with me, thank you for helping me be the man I am today.

Joe • 45–54 • Leicester, UK • Carpenter

Dear Rai,

I have been thinking a lot lately about how fast life moves. I remember the day you were born as if it was yesterday. That was the day I became a father, and my life changed forever. Now you are fourteen, growing into your own person and figuring out the world.

When I was your age, I thought adults had life figured out. The truth is, most of us are still learning as we go. I've made plenty of mistakes and learned some lessons the hard way. But those lessons shape who you become, and that's part of the journey.

As you know, I lost my father to cancer when I was twenty-one years old. I think I had a complicated relationship with my dad, especially in my teenage years, which is probably why writing this letter to you feels important to me. As complicated as our relationship sometimes was, there is so much I wish I could have asked him while he was still with us. Now it is too late.

So here are a few things I want to share with you—lessons I've learned over the years that I hope might help you along the way.

First, be kind to people. It sounds simple, but it matters more than almost anything else. People remember how you make them feel. Who you are as a person matters more than anything you achieve.

Second, don't be afraid to try things and fail. The trick isn't avoiding mistakes—it's learning from them and getting back up. Confidence is something you build by trying, failing and trying again.

Third, choose your friends carefully. The people you spend time with will shape who you become. Good friends lift you up, want the best for you, make you laugh, and help you become a better person. Be that kind of friend in return.

Another thing I've learned is to work hard at the things that matter to you. Take pride in what you do, whatever it is. If you put real effort into something—school, work, or anything you care about—you'll be surprised what you can achieve.

Also remember that it's OK to talk when things feel heavy. You don't have to carry everything on your own. No matter what's going on in your

life—good or bad—you can always come to me. I may not always have the perfect answer, but I will always listen.

Most importantly, know that I’m proud of you. Not just for what you do, but for the person you’re becoming. Watching you grow, along with your sister, has been the greatest part of my life.

Life moves fast. One day you’re a little kid, and the next you’re almost grown. But no matter how old you get, you’ll always be my son, and I will always be here for you.

Take your time figuring life out and always be true to yourself.

Love,
Dad

David • 35–44 • Sydney, Australia • Occupation Cast Driver (film crew)

Dear son,

What a joy it is to watch you grow up, safe and sound, spared the misfortunes that plague the lives of so many. A purely selfish feeling on my part, of course, but no less true for that.

I like that you recognise your good fortune and are conscientious about it, affording empathy and support to those less fortunate.

We are but a tiny dot in the infinite universe and yet love makes us all huge, strong and eternal. Take good care of this love. It's the most important thing we inherit at birth, and to be able to die with it means a sweet farewell.

I hope you can be a good friend to yourself. Look at the way you treat your closest friends and try to show yourself the same affection, offer the same support before challenges and difficulties, apply the same good-humoured but reliable touch, and above all else, have the same patience with yourself as you have with them. You deserve it.

I feel very proud in sensing that you are a good person, with no malice and no desire to cause harm.

Your free, creative and generous sense of humour makes me laugh until my belly aches. Being able to make others laugh is a real gift in life. Let your humour run wild but never make a joke out of other people's pain or misfortune. Only those who lack talent do that.

I would especially like you to recognise the greatness in small things and not be disheartened by the impossible. Joy is in the moment. Enjoy those moments but don't despair when they don't come. The sun will always appear no matter how dark the storm. Trust in this. And be your own best friend when times are tough. The worst will pass.

I love you for being the person you choose to be each day.

Thank you for choosing me to be your father.

Javier • 55–64 • Madrid, Spain • Actor

(Translated from Spanish by Jethro Soutar)

My boys,

Since the day you were both born (and your sister), and I had the honour to cut your cords, you've taught and continue to teach me what it is to be a man and a father. Undoubtedly, I fall short many times over, but you accept my apologies each time, and we move on, we are best friends forever. That's true love.

I watch you in pure admiration how you walk through life with open minds and love for everyone, humble in your actions but focused on your aspirations.

Mum and I are so so proud of the beautiful human beings that the three of you are becoming, and selfishly, I don't want you to grow up, but you are and it's beautiful to be a part of your lives.

My advice is stay true to yourselves and your feelings, never ever give up, keep educating yourselves, stay focused, honest, open-minded and willing to do the right thing. Be mindful of the distractions life can offer to take your attention, and keep loving each other through the good, the bad and the ugly.

I just want to thank you for choosing me as your dad, I'm so so proud and I love you with all my heart, forever and always . . .

Dad xxxx

Rob • 45–54 • Leicestershire, UK • Director of Engineering Company

My child,

I grew up without a mum, and that left a vacuum that never really fills up. So, when I see how your mum cares for you quietly, without ever asking for praise I can see every day what real love and sacrifice looks like. Don’t ever take that for granted.

In our ‘Bhagavad Gita’, Krishna teaches that a strong man isn’t the one who conquers others, but the one who conquers himself. Remember we discussed the vices such as pride, lust, anger and ego. Real power comes from kindness. From choosing patience when it’s easier to argue, and respect when it’s easier to reject. I don’t want you to just be a man. I want you to be a good man. A man with a soft heart and steady hands. The world already has enough people fighting to be right. What the world needs is men who care, who are empathetic to others. I know 100 per cent that you’ve got that goodness in you. I see it, even when you don’t. Never lose it.

Lots of love and smiles,
Daddy

Vinay • 45–54 • Greater Manchester, UK • Journalist, Artist, Marketing Manager

I used to be obsessed with material things. All of those things don't matter. You can still be miserable in a Ferrari!

Gareth • 35–44 • Bedfordshire, UK • Chef

Dear Leo,

I’m writing you this letter to express how proud I am of you and to remind you of how much I love you. It may not always feel like it, but I truly am your number one fan, and I always will be.

The many training sessions and weekends I have spent watching you sink in them goals, living to see you flash that cheeky smile of yours, have honestly been the highlights of my week, since your very first session and match.

Two years ago, you and your mum could no longer live together and I was lucky enough to have you come and live with me, something I have always dreamed of! Finally, I had you under my wing.

See, when I was young, I had it tough too, son, and I never had a dad around. It has always been a fear of mine that you would follow in my younger footsteps. Now that I had you closer, I could be all that I wanted in a dad and help guide you and support you into becoming the amazing young man we are starting to see today.

At first I was scared! Becoming a full-time dad terrified me! Will I be able to hug him and tell him I love him? What if I get it wrong? The responsibility of it felt huge, especially as it is the most important thing I will ever do in my life and I could not screw this up!

So I gave it all I had, time, stability, presence and patience by the bucketloads, especially when getting you up for school. I know that sometimes it feels like all I do is moan at you, but I believe in time you will understand and know that it all stems from my love for you and wanting the best for you.

Fast-forward two years and we are closer than ever before. Somehow with perseverance and consistent love, support and guidance, you are growing into a young man who has turned all them negatives into positives. School sends its praises, you are polite, and mature, a young man who has stepped up and shows himself and others respect (we love your bacon and egg sarnies!). A young man with aspirations and who believes in himself. This makes me the proudest dad and I am so lucky to call you mine.

The magical moments, the jokes and daily banter, the gym, the movies, the sun, sea and sand, the day-to-day togetherness, this and all the above I have written is what I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Thank you. I love you and I got you—may you always know that, always and forever.

Love,
Dad

Anonymous

A letter to my non-verbal autistic son:

I still remember the day. The words from the consultant are etched into my mind. I looked over to your mum and saw the loss in her eyes. We didn't share a word but I held her hand as we left the room to face our new reality. You would never talk, never proffer a kiss, never have a normal family life. As a father I was consumed with all the things I'd lost in that moment. What little was left of my hopes and dreams was extinguished in your diagnosis. When we left that room, I wasn't even sure I could be the father you needed. I told your mum that I would find a way to help you, but it was more in hope than reality.

It's been fourteen years since that meeting and you've still to utter your first sentence, yet you've taught me more than I could have ever wished for. You've taught me patience, hope and resilience that I didn't know I had. You've taught me to love you and love life. Your moments of unadulterated bliss when you laugh and giggle say more to me than a thousand emails, texts or calls. You live in the moment and I love to share those moments with you. Most of all you've taught me that all I needed was to love. To love you for you.

Before you I was a closed book, stoic in the face of adversity and silent with those I cared deeply for. Your silence has opened a dam that I never want to rebuild. I tell you how much I love you whenever the opportunity arises. You show your love with a hug, a smile, a glance or a knowing nod. You were always communicating with me. I just needed to take the time to listen. For you, actions have always been louder than words. My hopes and dreams for the adult you would become are nothing compared to what really matters. Your health and happiness. It's all any child needs or wants.

The irony isn't lost on me that I can't write how deeply I love you and you can't explain how you feel. We say it all with our hugs. I no longer feel lost. When I gather you in my arms and you rest your head on my shoulder

—this feel like the best of fatherhood. I don’t need anything else and there is no place I’d rather be. I know I have to let you go but I see nothing wrong with holding on for a moment longer.

I love you, son.

Sean • 45–54 • Staffordshire, UK • Teacher

To my boys,

When I was your age, I remember being really let down by my dad, because of the way he had let down my mum, and it shook me to my core. Up until that point, I didn't think that dads could make mistakes. We didn't speak properly for a while after all that, but then my relationship with him got a lot better, because I then saw him for what he was—a flawed human being who loved us very much. It is partly because of this that I have tried to be as open and as honest with you as I can about my mistakes, flaws and doubts, and many of my flaws I have demonstrated without meaning to—but it all helps!

You mean so much to me. I have seen all three of you grow into different strong, funny, charming, kind and loving personalities, and every single day I look at you and can't quite believe that you are my sons. While I worry about how you are going to get on, and what pain you might feel in the future, and what heartbreak you might suffer, I never worry about what you are going to put into the world. You are three people who I couldn't be prouder of. Thank you for continuing to share your lives with me, it is my honour to be your father. And we are all incredibly lucky to have Mum!

I have been lucky enough to spend most of my working life doing something I love, and I would implore you to do the same. Work is hard even if you love it, but doing something you love or care about is one of the best ways to spend your life in contentment. I have never dreaded a day's work, and I really wish that for you. Choose something you care about and chase that thing until you make it happen, at whatever level that may be. We all get caught up in successes and triumphs, but the greatest triumph is doing it at all. The greatest gift I can hope to give to you is to get you to stop caring about outcomes, and throw yourself completely into what you're doing. That is much more enriching than any awards, fame, money or recognition.

More than that, though, the best advice I can give you is to show love and respect to everyone you come across. If you only think about bettering and helping yourself, I promise you, you will find life unrewarding. If you

instead spend your time looking to make connections, supporting people around you, showing people love whether they're your friends or not, celebrating their successes as if they were your own, you will find happiness follows. What you give to other people will come back to you many times over. That has been my experience, anyway. But please remember, most of the time I'm not sure I'm right.

I am sorry for every day that I spent not being with you. I am sorry for every moment that anything took me away. I have tried my best to maintain balance, but despite that, I regret any day that was not with you. You are my best friends and I would trade every single achievement I have ever made at work for a breakfast together. Maybe not a breakfast. A holiday. An all-inclusive holiday.

My sons—you have become what you are not because of me, but hopefully not in spite of me. A happy accident maybe. Plus, let's be honest, Mum is the better one, isn't she?—I know it's easy to forget, but please make sure you find some way to show gratitude to her. She has spent every waking moment since you were born thinking about the best and most supportive ways to love you. And I think we can agree, she's smashed it, despite being slightly obsessive about tidiness. I often agree with you on that, but don't tell her I said that as she and I have to present a united front.

Thank you for being who you are, and please continue to be who you are—kind, loving and almost-as-funny-as-your-dad boys who I'm so beyond proud I played a small part in bringing to the world.

With all of my love,
A flawed human being who loves you very much

Romesh • 45–54 • West Sussex, UK • Comedian

One of my biggest fears when you were a young boy was that one day my superhero disguise would slip, and you would never again think of me as superdad.

Steve • 55–64 • Manchester, UK • Radiographer

Dear Toby,

I look at you every day and words can’t fully express how proud I am of you, not just because you are my son: I loved it when you got your first Celtic strip, went to your first Celtic game and became a Glasgow Celtic supporter (even though when you were three you once wanted Rangers to win—I forgave you when I realised you thought they were the Power Rangers); I am proud of how you follow our crazy traditions like drinking Irn-Bru as we cross the border into Scotland; I am proud of the hard work you’ve put in to become one of the best players on your football teams; and love how much you like me being there for every game offering advice from the sidelines (OK, I made that bit up).

I’m proud of the way you make people laugh with your dry sense of humour. I’m proud of how you’ve faced your learning difficulties, even when the world around you must have felt confusing and overwhelming. The truth is everything you’ve done makes my heart swell with pride every single day.

My message to you now and always, even when I’m gone is this: believe.

Believe you are good enough.

Believe you are smart enough.

Believe it is OK to talk when things feel too much or over-whelming.

Believe in positive thoughts.

Believe your learning difficulties can be overcome with the right mindset.

The mind is a powerful tool. If you stay positive and believe in yourself the way I believe in you, you will fly, bud, in whatever you choose to do.

Remember this: you are an incredible human being with the best soul and the most loving heart, and I will always be with you, no matter what, to listen to all that you have to say and will always be your biggest supporter.

Love always,
Dad

Alan • 55–64 • Leicestershire, UK • Director of Sales

Dear son,

There’s so much I want to say and most of it comes from a place of honesty I wish I’d found sooner. I’ve made many mistakes in my life and I know I haven’t always been the dad you deserved. I learned from a man who wasn’t a good father at all and I’ve spent my life trying to be better than that version of him. But truthfully, I’ve always carried the fear that I might become like him.

I want you to know how deeply I love you and how proud I am of the person you’re becoming, strong, confident, funny and kind. That confidence, that steady heart of yours, comes from your mum more than me and I’m grateful to her for that every day. I’m sorry for everything you had to witness, for watching me leave your mum and break the home we built, for seeing me spiral into addiction, for enduring my breakdown when I was sectioned, for watching me marry someone who wouldn’t let me put you first and for getting a criminal conviction for drink driving.

You also had to see me become homeless, moving from hostel to hostel, not being able to visit me or understand why your dad had fallen so far.

Each of those moments showed you a version of me I wish you never had to see, and I’ll be forever sorry for that. When I had the pills in my hand, the knife at my wrist, or the bottle to my mouth, I wasn’t thinking of you and that was my greatest failure. I was selfish, lost in my own darkness, hating everything about myself. In those moments, I believed you’d be better off without me. Seeing the blood from my self-inflicted wounds felt, at the time, like watching my negative impact on your life ebb away. I see now how wrong I was, you were never the reason for my pain, you were the reason I should have fought harder to live.

But I want you to take something from all of this: life is never over, whatever trials you’ll face. No matter how dark things get, there’s always a way forward. There’s always a chance to start again and set things right. I’m living proof of that. I started again. I’ve got my own place now, I’ve been through the criminal justice system and I now work for it, with the Probation Service. The same system that once held me accountable now

lets me help others find their way back, too. That’s how I know redemption is real, not just for me, but for anyone willing to face their truth and move forward.

Life isn’t straight or simple. It’s a roller coaster, full of ups and downs. Not every high feels good, and not every low is bad. You live and you learn and sometimes you learn by living through the mess. Mistakes are not all bad and are the fortune of the brave, the proof that you dared to try. Experience is the reward for taking the risk, and memories are the wealth you should chase.

Never hold a grudge. Own your mistakes. Apologise honestly and earnestly and never let what others think of you stop you from living the life you want. Every step I take now, I take with you in mind, hoping to be the kind of man you can still be proud to call your dad.

I love you, son. Always have. Always will.

Dad

Mark • 35–44 • Cheshire, UK • Probation Manager

Dear Silas,

You asked me recently if there was anything my papaji did as a father that I thought I would do differently when I became a parent. There were a few things. My parents were both immigrants; coming from Kenya and Norway they were blending their own cultures while raising a mixed-race child in a new country. They were very strict, which now at fifty-two I understand why. But they just didn't go about it in the right way for me. That's what I've come to realise. One size doesn't fit all.

You're very different to your sister and I didn't always allow for that. You came along full of energy, curiosity and such a strong sense of justice. You kept us on our toes. When we lived in Malaysia you used to get so wound up by a classmate, arguing about who was faster, who was stronger. I tried to persuade you to rise above it. I realise now you just wanted me to listen, to validate your feelings, before I leapt in with advice, sometimes you didn't want to be the 'bigger person', you just wanted to know I was on your side. I projected my fears about being judged onto you, a hangover from my own childhood where I was told I was different and had to be better to be accepted. You don't need to be better. You just need to be you.

I do have a few apologies to make to you. I am so sorry for unleashing torrents of my alternative views and opinions on you at the wrong time of your life. Too much too soon. I didn't let you come to your own thoughts, I projected mine onto you. I'm grateful that you and I share a love of nature, of being outside... our camping trips, collecting wood and building fires on the allotment for you and your mates are some of my happiest memories.

I tried to give you as many experiences as possible so you could discover what you liked and what you were good at, from pottery to snorkelling to music to sports, but I know I put you off things by being too pushy. I should have let you enjoy them instead of making you think you had to be better. When we built the Death Star Lego kit together, forcing you to do a bit every day until it was finished was a mistake. That was my ego taking over. After we finished it you never wanted to touch a piece of Lego again. If I could go back in time, I'd leave that Death Star unfinished.

I'm sorry it took me until you were seventeen to accept I was an addict

and to start my recovery. The road to recovery has led me to reflect on the past. I am glad I was around so much when you were growing up, though I do realise that I was there physically but not always mentally, unable to savour those times playing football, trekking in the jungle, even just picking you up from school.

Being present in the moment is something I am mindful of now and my favourite thing in the world to do is to watch a film with you and then listen to you talk about shots you thought worked, scenes that blew you away, dialogue that didn't resonate. I could listen to you talk forever, now I've learned how to.

Being a father is a big responsibility which I tried to skirt around. I could have been a better role model.

Never forget you are a powerful spirit, having a human experience. Never stop leaping out at me from behind doors and wrestling me to the floor... for one it makes you, your mum and your sister howl with laughter and that's a sound I'll never grow tired of. I hope you and your sister laugh like that together into your old age.

I love you, I'm proud of you and I'm so grateful that despite our tough times we have a strong connection.

Relationships take work, I promise to never stop working on ours. I can't wait to dance at a festival with you again next summer and yes, I'll pitch your tent for you.

And one bit of advice. Do no harm, to yourself, to others or to the world around you, and you will have a wonderful journey ahead of you.

Love,
Papa

Emil • 45–54 • Brighton, UK • Actor

This is a letter . . . a few words to you, my son. My only son. My son and heir. Unfortunately for your sisters you get the lot. All my readies. My hard-earned dough. What a result.

Just wanna thank you, really. For being a brainy little fucker. The smartest in your class. Never something I could claim to be. The way you can think logically is amazing to me. The way you can retain information brings a tear to my eye. Yes, you're on the spectrum but ain't we all. It's what makes us unique.

There's a lot of wronguns in this world. I know that you won't be one of em. I'd call you my prince. But as we've learned, princes can be noncey fuckers.

So proud that you've come from my nuts. It's the greatest thing my testicles have ever done.

Don't ever be afraid to be masculine. Always be considerate and kind and thoughtful to anyone you meet coz you never know what they're going through.

Love you, my boy. More than you'll ever understand.

Dad

Danny • Actor and Presenter

My baby, my big boy,

There are words we hold on to for a long time, within the silence of our hearts, words that beat softly, like a secret melody. Tonight, I want to share them with you, with all the love and affection I have for you. Fifteen years ago, when social services told me of the decision that would make me your father, I felt my heart bursting with joy—but with fear too, as I didn't know if I'd be able to look after a four-month-old baby. I became a single dad, and I still am today. You were so tiny, so fragile when I held you in my arms for the first time. Your arrival created both a gentle tremor and a major upheaval in my life. You shattered all my certainties, you taught me to love differently, to love better than before. My life is all the richer for your laughter, and for your mischief too. Your freedom to be and to become yourself give me faith in humanity. I remember it all: your teething pains, your first scrapes and bruises, your first steps, your first word, which was 'Daddy', your knack for making me chuckle, our dancing along to 'Rolling in the Deep' by Adele. You grew up without a mother, but never without love.

Perhaps it's because you've always watched me getting on with my routine tasks, and you've sensed the mental burden I carry each day, that you carry within you a respect for women and an awareness of equality. I know it's also because I'm there for you—both as a dad and as a motherly presence, someone to rock you to sleep and guide you through life. I'd like to believe that I'm your sanctuary, your point of reference and your guardian. Never doubt it: that's what I shall always be. The bond that unites us, my son, is indestructible—although, as you pass through these adolescent years, I remain vigilant, taking care to preserve the sacred thread that ties me to you and which, I hope, will remain between us forever.

I'm starting to turn into an old man now, and I know that life isn't always a bed of roses. The ordeals I've faced have toughened me, but the one I found incredibly hard to get through was the death of my father. I would have loved so much for you to have known him. He would undoubtedly have brought you so many beautiful gifts: his love of books, of the mountains and traditions. He would have been proud of you, as

much as I am today. I hope that, through me, you can get to know him a little, for I humbly believe that I am much like him. The love my parents had for one another, and for their children, reinforces my belief that only the power of love is essential and indispensable to our existence.

One day, you will become a man, a father. And I want to tell you what that means for me. Being a man isn't about dominating, or imposing yourself, or becoming tougher. It's having the strength to be sensitive and kind. It's about being like a reed: supple when facing the wind, flexing without ever breaking. Being a man is about having a gentle soul, capable of healing harsh words, bandaging invisible wounds. Masculinity has never led me towards violence, but towards being protective, listening, tenderness. And that is the path I wish for you: to be a man who stands tall, but is never narrow-minded; who is strong, but never hard-hearted.

May you never resort to violence; remain open to others, and build yourself a life that reflects you as a family man, with cherished friends you can rely on. May your strength lie in your intellect, in your knowledge and wisdom, and may you, in turn, pass on the humanity within you. I have given you roots so that you may fly. Because I want to see you free, happy and fulfilled. You are my Icarus, but I'm not afraid of you falling: your wings are made of love and respect. You are my Ulysses, roaming the world, gaining new insights, and always returning towards love. Become an artisan of peace: journey to the far reaches of the Earth, to encounter the different, the foreign and the unfamiliar, and forge a vision of life that mirrors our relationship, deep and enduring. I hope you find love—true love, the kind that knows neither gender nor borders, that defies reason, that brings us closer to God. Love is the most sacred, the most irrational, the most human thing there is. And you, you were born of that love.

I hope that you, too, will in turn become a father, if that is what your heart desires. For to be a father is to touch the infinite. It is to love unconditionally; it is to give without possessing. It is the most beautiful role a man can embrace.

You, my son, are my dream come true, my love made flesh. I loved you before you were born. I love you today. And I will always love you. Until my last breath, and far beyond.

With all my love,
Your dad

Blanc • 45–54 • Hautes-Alpes, France • Administrative Director

(Translated from French by Vineet Lal)

Roman,

Where to start? My first thoughts as I held you was an overwhelming sense of love. The smell of your child is a weird drug that bonds you together like a strange glue, it's a magical thing. It's hard to put into words the love I have in my body for you and your sister Harley. It's a sensation that overwhelms me if I stop and think about it! Sometimes you have to hold it at arm's length to make sense of it, like sparklers.

It was your nan and grandad who taught me how to love, watching them share their lives together, they had literally nothing but their boys and their love for one another, and hopefully me and Mum have passed that down to you!

From those early days as a schoolboy you were entertaining your mates, and of course entertaining us with your impressions of your teachers. People always said, 'Are you worried about your boy going into entertainment? Do you want him to go that route?' I always answered, 'Look at him, I have no choice.' However, in reality there was only one thing I wanted you to become, not a rock star, a footballer or even rich, it was a nice, trustworthy man who had a big heart.

There's one fun memory we had together; a snapshot in my brain that will be with me forever: when we had a chance to fly the old World War II planes for a television show. You were fifteen and I was searching the sky for you and from out of nowhere you came wingtip to wingtip. The yellow plane glistened in the sun, I looked over at you in your cap and glasses before you gave me the thumbs up and flew away into the blue. That will memory will never leave.

You were the born showman that could converse with anyone, super-articulate, and would always start your sentences with the prefix 'Trust me!' It's funny because the most important thing I learned from you as a father when it comes to parenting is about listening. Never just say 'No, my word is final!' Be prepared to talk things over because a lot of the time there are good reasons for your children's actions.

A warning though: the toughest thing about being a man is during difficult times people look to you for strength even when you don't have

any yourself and you have to tell everyone it will be OK when sometimes you don’t believe the words you’re saying.

The advice I give you is the same today as it has always been, which was given to me by your grandad: when good things happen to you in this life, make sure you breathe in as hard as you can, breathe in every last drop of that feeling . . . Life is a beautiful thing, enjoy it. Respect everyone, and they will respect you back.

I love you so much! Come on, you gunners!

Dad xxxx

Martin • 55–64 • Hertfordshire, UK • Musician and Actor

Try and switch off. From work, but from screens in particular. I know it's hard and I don't say this as a nagging parent; I say it as a parent addicted to bloody screens. I love you.

Anonymous

My dearest boy,

Sending you away to live in England has been the hardest thing I have ever had to do. When you were born, watching you grow up, I never imagined that this would be something that would ever happen or even be a possibility. When it did come to pass, I never imagined that it would affect me in such a way. You hear people who say ‘It’s like I’ve lost a limb’ when someone goes away. I’ve always thought that ridiculous and never thought such a thing could be true—until now.

In the months, weeks and days leading up to your move, I noticed that you were wanting more hugs or sitting closer on the sofa for chats. I sometimes brushed you off, as I was embarrassed. I avoided the interaction as I was worried that it would make you soft and you’d need to be tough in your new life away from us. That you’d have to stand up for yourself more. I wish that I had followed your lead. Without you here, I desperately miss our daily contact.

Thinking about it now, I’ve come to understand that as much as I’ve tried to teach you, you’ve been teaching me what it means to be a man, a father, a human, since the day you were born. You’ve been the one who has made this difficult move away with maturity, without complaint and with understanding. It wasn’t something that you wanted to do—to leave your friends, family and community here in Nigeria behind. You took on board the hard fact that your mum and I needed to continue working here to provide for you and your sister’s future.

However, this feeling is something that I hope none of us will ever get used to. There is so much that you’ve done and said that I am proud of and that I can learn from still. You have settled so well into your new routines and are finding your new path. I wish I had your confidence and bravery today, let alone when I was a teeanger! You show wisdom, kindness and courage beyond your years. Never lose that.

When we next meet, I will be the one wanting more hugs. I will be the one sitting closer on the sofa for chats. I look forward to hearing all of the new lessons you have learned and the new experiences you have gained—both positive and negative. Keep on teaching me as I try to keep on

teaching you. Although we are currently apart, we'll hopefully continue growing together.

You are missed. You are loved,
Your dadda xxx

Trevor • 45–54 • Rivers, Nigeria

Dear son,

This is my story. I grew up around pain, anger and violence, and then came the abandonment. I never really felt like I fitted into the world. There were times I honestly thought about leaving it altogether. My dad was a drunk. A violent one. Just like his dad, and the one before that. He thought he was a good father because he never raised his hand to me or my brother. And, in a strange way, he was right, he didn't fully become the monster his own dad was. But Mum took the brunt of it. When he left that bruise on her neck, my uncle told him to leave. We didn't see him for ages after that. I didn't even know what had happened until years later, when Mum sent me a letter before our wedding asking me not to invite him. Brilliant. More guilt. Invite him and risk a fight, or don't invite him and feel like a bad son. I did invite him. It kicked off. More guilt again.

As a kid, I used to hear shouting in my head, not words I could really understand, just noise. I was quiet, odd and anxious. I used to wet myself, even into my teens. I was a bit of a state, really. Growing up in a council house in Scotland with a young mum and a brother, life wasn't easy. We didn't have much, and no one expected anything of me. Mum just assumed I wasn't that bright. She didn't even know I'd passed my GCSEs until I told her I'd started a computer science degree in my thirties.

I left Scotland for Manchester when I was seventeen. Dad had some work down there, and I just wanted a fresh start. I got a job in a nightclub when I turned eighteen, moved in with a few mates I met there, and started drinking, properly drinking. That nearly finished me. I was turning into him. By twenty-three or twenty-four, I'd hit rock bottom. I realised I had two choices: carry on with the drink and drugs and probably die young, or walk away and start again. Try to live a normal life. Try to educate myself. Try to be something better.

It took time. I fell off the wagon a few times. But eventually, I managed to pull myself together. I got sober, started doing better at work, and began to build some sort of life. I moved into a shared house, away from bad influences, and started again. And then I met your mum. She came from a similar background, a council estate in Manchester, but her parents, your

grandma and grandad, stayed together. That's the secret, really: love, support, stability. It's mad how simple it is, and how many people still get it wrong.

Your mum's smart, kind, and she believed in me. She pushed me to study. I worked full-time while doing a part-time degree in computing and IT. It took eight years, but I got there, a 2:1, first in the family. Still proud of that. You already know your mum's story, she was adopted. So, when we found out I had fertility problems after the wedding, it didn't take long for us to realise adoption was right for us. The timing just worked. The stars lined up. And that's how you came into our lives. One of the biggest lessons I've learned is this: getting someone pregnant doesn't make you a dad. Being there, no matter what, with love, support and real sacrifice, that's what being a father is.

So, here's what I wish someone had told me when I was your age:

- Learn, always. Find something you care about and go deep. A little bit every day adds up over time, that's the power of small, steady effort.
- Be smart with money. Save a bit from every pay packet. Avoid debt (apart from a mortgage). Put money regularly into a mutual fund, in a stocks and shares ISA, small, consistent investments grow massively over the years.
- Look after your health. Move your body, lift weights, eat well, take care of your head. You don't have to do loads, small, good habits every day make a big difference in the long run.

If I'd known these things when I was a teenager, I might have had a very different life. But then, maybe I wouldn't have met your mum, or known you. And for that alone, all the pain and struggle were worth it.

I've already started your savings, so you can continue the habit when you're older and get your first job.

I love you more than I can ever say.

Dad

Anonymous

Hey bud,

Is this advice corner? If so, here we go, in no particular order:

- Always say yes to opportunity, unless it’s illegal. It’ll take you to awesome places!
- Take the path less trodden, it’s always more interesting.
- Always pack spare pants.
- Pay up fast, don’t be that guy who owes. And offer to pay up first.
- Enjoy your mullet, it’s unlikely it will last...
- Stay fit, don’t be lazy, take the stairs not the lift.
- Back yourself and take others on that journey.
- Read a few books, but learn from others who have done what you want to do.
- Be happy, as life is just too short to be grumpy. As far as I can tell, it’s a choice, by doing what you love.
- Surround yourself with positive people, mood hoovers are no fun.
- Don’t sweat the small stuff.
- Stay off your phone!
- Don’t be afraid to cry, it’s not weak.
- Be a hugger, but don’t be creepy!

Keep on smashing it, boyo, you’re my hero!

Dad x

Tom • 45–54 • Surrey, UK • Innovation Consultant

Dear son,

This is the letter I think I needed at your age, just some of the things I wish I'd known and that I wish someone had said to me. Some of this will make sense now. Some of it won't. That's alright.

I want to start with your name. You once asked why you don't have mine, or your grandad's, or his dad's before him. I broke that chain on purpose. Not because I rejected where we came from, but because I didn't want you carrying expectations that weren't yours.

Everyone knew my dad. Everyone loved him. He was bright, confident and good at sports. I wasn't. I spent years trying to be someone else. It didn't work. I didn't want that for you.

Growing up, my dad loved me. I know that now. He was kind, decent, and steady, but he didn't know how to say he loved me. Men like him weren't built that way. Wanting affection, saying 'I love you', or asking for closeness could be seen as weakness, as being less of a man. That wasn't his fault. That was the world he came from. I understand now how wrong that was. Love doesn't make you smaller. It makes you braver.

So I'm going to do this differently with you. No matter how big you get, how tall, or how old, I will keep telling you I love you. I will keep telling you I'm proud of you. And if you still want a cuddle, I will always want one too.

Some of my favourite memories with you are small ones. Walking to and from nursery together. Counting drain covers on the pavement. Making up rap battles for no reason at all. I loved that. I loved being in your world, where ordinary streets were full of danger and magic, and everything mattered. I hope you always keep a bit of that way of seeing things.

Here are a few things I hope you carry with you. Not rules. Just things that need to matter:

- You'll feel behind sometimes. I still do. You'll look around and think everyone else has cracked it. They haven't. Most people are guessing, faking it, even the ones who look

confident.

- The world you're growing up in is louder and more demanding than the one I knew, and it will tell you constantly that you're not enough. Be careful what you listen to. There's no finish line you're missing and no timetable you're failing.

- Make it a habit to respect and be kind to people regardless of their qualifications, titles or positions. Don't be distracted by the shiny car or flash watches. Pay attention to how people treat others when it costs them something.

- Stand on the frontline for what you believe in. Don't live your life on the sidelines. Buy the ticket for the holiday or gig. Hit the dance floor even when no one else is dancing. Shoot for the goal, wear the top. Make time for the people who matter.

- Tell them you love them while you still can. They are simple words to say, but mean a huge deal when you hear them.

- Do things that scare you sometimes. Honest fear, not the stupid, reckless fear. And when life feels heavy, ask for help before you disappear into yourself. I didn't. I stayed quiet too long. It cost me more than I'll ever get back. I'm still learning. I don't have all the answers. Staying curious matters more than being right.

- Understand that you are allowed to make mistakes. What matters is noticing them, learning from them, and trying again. I trust your judgement more than you probably realise, even when I worry. That worry comes from love, not doubt.

- I was the first person to hold you, feed you, and change you. You won't remember that, but I always will. You're bigger now, stronger, probably fitter than me already, but none of that matters. You will always be my baby boy.

- I won't always agree with you, but I will always back you. You're allowed to change your mind. You're allowed to rest. You don't have to earn either.

- If a girl breaks your heart, you can talk to me. If the bills become too much, you can talk to me. If your mental health gets the better of you, you can talk to me. If you mess up, you can talk to me, and we will figure it out together. No matter where you are in life, you are loved, and my home will always be your home.

I won't be here forever, but I hope the memory of this letter will be.

If you forget everything else, remember this. Your dad is and will always be your number one fan.

Anonymous

This is your dad, how are you both doing?

I am writing this for you to read now, but maybe it will mean a bit more later on in life when you have your own little herberts!

My dad was an amazing character—charismatic, funny, everybody wanted to be around him. He was in the film biz like me, and like me he lived and breathed it. It defined him. He was the ringmaster at the circus and the show was a sell-out.

I was super proud to be his son, and wherever he was in the world he sent me postcards . . . but when I played football, I never looked for him on the sidelines as I knew he wouldn't be there. He tried when he could to turn up—plays, sports, parents' evenings . . . but you know, he was busy.

Maybe I am less busy, maybe less sucessful, maybe it's just a different time . . .but when you run onto the field, boys, you do not look for me either . . . because you KNOW I am there—and not just on the football pitch . . .

I will be there watching (silently, since you told me to stop cheering!), in every move you make, in everything you do . . . because, yeah, it's important to turn up as a dad, but the truth is—there is no place I want to be more.

I love you boys, I am only truly happy when you are both OK . . . Life is tough and I am so proud you are both outraged by the atrocities in the world today, and what the adults have let happen. You two will make it better—keep fighting the good fight, and remember, when you have your own herberts: get a warm jacket, and be on the sidelines.

Jason • 55–64 • London, UK • Actor

If you are ever in an uncertain situation, if you're not sure what to do, be kind. You will never regret being kind.

Ben • 45–54 • Nurse

James and Charlie,

I am writing this partially because I was asked to by my amazing cousin, Jude, and partially because I think it will reinforce to you things I hope you already know. Firstly, why do I say Jude is amazing? There are many adjectives to describe her, but the most important here is ‘inspirational’. She inspires me as I am sure she does many of the other people around her. She tackles everything life has thrown at her with a smile. I would like you to look at the people who inspire you and think about what it is about them that is so significant. That could be a rugby player, a farmer, or just a friend. Hopefully in some way your mother and I inspire you. I know my parents inspire me. I’d like you to look at those people who inspire you and realise that what makes them stand apart isn’t any particular skill or talent, it certainly isn’t something they are born with. It is almost always an attitude towards things, a work ethic, a desire to do something. Once you realise this, you will also realise that you have the potential to be inspirational yourself. In fact, you already are. You both inspire me to be better. So my first request of you is to be inspired and be inspirational.

BE INSPIRED AND BE INSPIRATIONAL

At James’s leaving ceremony at school, the guest speaker spoke about how he adopted a penguin, and then dedicated his life to that penguin, learning about its requirements, going out of his way to make sure the penguin had everything it needed. His challenge to the leavers was to find your penguin. Find the thing that interests you, that motivates you, that drives you, that gives you happiness, and then relentlessly deliver for the penguin. That may be a job. It may be a hobby, or a sport. It may be travelling and exploring the world. It may be a relationship. Whatever it is, find the thing that gives your life value and then commit to it.

FIND YOUR PENGUINS

People talk a lot about the need to be strong as a boy or a young man, and I’m not going to say that is not important. In fact, it is very important. But strength comes in many shapes and forms. When we lost your brother, Harry, I thought strength was to ignore the pain, and push through for your

mum. Be the rock the family needed. Look after the family unit, be the man. I could not have been more wrong. I didn't process the grief, I hid it away in a box, but the grief grew. And the box grew, until I couldn't contain it any more, and ended up in a pretty dark place.

Not long after, a friend of mine lost a child. He dealt with it very differently. He was open and honest with not just those close to him, but with everyone. He said how he was feeling, he shared his story. His openness gave me strength to process things, and was definitely significant in helping me. The best way to demonstrate strength is to be honest about your weaknesses. And that starts with being honest with yourself, and then open with those you trust. It doesn't come from puffing your chest out and ignoring what's going on inside your head. So if you are ever feeling down, I beg of you, be honest with yourself as to why you feel that way, and share that with the right people.

I love you both in a way I hope you will get to experience at some point, and I am so proud of the amazing young men you are becoming. Keep being yourselves.

Phil • 35–44 • Cornwall, UK • Vet

My sons,

I want you to know that you have made me proud every single day. Being your dad is one of the greatest joys of my life, and I don't take that lightly for a moment.

We've gone through hard times together and as a family, and the road hasn't always been easy. Through it all, I've done my best to make sure you're set up to grow into strong, kind and capable adults. I may not always get everything right, and I know I mess up sometimes—but I'm still learning, growing, and facing every challenge head-on.

Everything I do comes from love and the desire to see you succeed, be happy, and live lives you're proud of. No matter what happens or where life takes you, know this without doubt, I will always love you, stand by you and believe in you.

I have always said to you 100 per cent or nothing. Keep doing what you're doing, boys, but if you want something always prepare, and give it everything, and never give up.

It's an honour to be your dad.

With all my love,
Dad xxx

Andy • 45–54 • Warrington, UK • IT / Telephony Analyst

I'm a dad of three sons and let me tell you of the back ground of who I am and how my sons are: Being a dad is the best thing ever but sometimes the parents break up and as a dad you have to stand up and be the father that your dad was before. Which I did with Michael & Joseph and I love them dearly as they love me too.

Rolling on few years later Harvey arrived which we was all overwhelmed I've always said to my lads always speak to me if you have a

problems occur I’m ye dad

I always tell them I LOVE YOU

Unfortunately for my youngest Harvey he lost his mum at age twelve and this is where dad had to become both mum and dad doing uniforms making sure he was safe happy loved always said if ye have a problem please tell me

All my sons have a good relationship with me

Until me & my partner took harvey on a holiday & he kept wanting photography’s saying g ye never know what could happen I found it a bit weird but when we returned home he tells me he has a problem in his private area & the kid was worried sick straight away I booked a doctors appointment was made I wa switch him all the way

After tests everything was fine I hug him & say why don’t ye tell me sooner he says I thought I was gonna die like me mum. So I took photos cos I wanted you to have memories he says I love ye dad

All my boys have grown up with respect around o there & im so proud of all three of them

I am their dad x

Mike • 55–64 • Liverpool, UK • Gas Engineer

Even now, I can find myself feeling the same fears and insecurities about sex as I did in my early teens. I share this with you not to burden you with my stuff or dishearten you about the journey ahead, but in the hope that it might set you free. For there is a crucial difference between who I am today and the young man I was: I am less inclined to hide these feelings out of pride or shame. They are no longer kept in the dark. It might be disappointing to hear that your dad has not conquered his fears, but instead is simply becoming better acquainted with them. Even putting these feelings into words here is one way I make better friends with them. One day, I hope to be able to say that I have befriended them.

Perhaps this does not strike you as such a heroic thing to say. There was a pressure around sex that I couldn't speak of when I was young. I didn't know who to turn to. Maybe there were people around me with whom I could have confided, but pride got in the way. The first time I recall my father talking to me about sex, he said, 'Sex is not a matter of wham, bam, thank you, ma'am! Do you know where the clitoris is?' This felt like it came out of the blue, and I squirmed with discomfort. I took it to mean: 'You'd better be good at sex. Real men satisfy their women.'

Although my father's intentions were good, I heard his guidance as a demand, setting an expectation of the kind of man and lover I must become. This pressure wasn't created by my father's words alone. Such ideas about manhood were also dominant in our culture.

By that time, pornography had already begun to shape my expectations. I had absorbed images in which men appeared defined by sexual mastery, power and control. My father's words coalesced with these images, and so I imagined that I needed to be more like the men in these films. With such expectations in place, sex felt high risk as if my manhood was on the line. But despite this anxiety, I rushed headlong into it. I felt like I couldn't afford to be cautious or tentative. I believed that having sex as early as possible would earn me the status I needed among my peers. I simply couldn't allow myself to be shy, which, reflecting back now, seems so cruel. Why not be shy? Shyness is just reminding us to go with care.

At a young age, I turned to drugs and alcohol to manage the pressure. By numbing myself, I cut myself off from much of what I might otherwise have felt. For many years, this was my only coping strategy. But the feelings I was trying to avoid didn't disappear; they returned heavier in the

cool light of day. Instead of the happy-go-lucky lightness and joy a young man is expected to feel after his first sexual experiences, I felt laden with shame and anxiety. Many boys carry a quiet sense of shame long before they have words for it.

So I want to say something very clearly to you now. There is no sexual milestone you need to reach, no level of confidence or competence you need to achieve, for me or anyone else who matters to consider you a man. You don't owe anyone proof in the form of performance. Your worth as a man is not waiting on some future version of you who is fearless and in control. This is not just a matter of self-respect, but also a matter of care for those you might meet in sex and physical intimacy. The more absorbed I was in my own insecurities, the less aware and thoughtful I was of the feelings and needs of my sexual partners.

Both men and women can feel vulnerable after their first experiences. This can be a precious time to bond and build trust, but instead, I contracted and withdrew. We had to guess at what the other person really felt, which left too much room for confusion and misunderstanding. Had I given myself space, I might not only have found more pleasure and satisfaction, but also strength and solidity. Free from the urgent need to get somewhere, and from the habit of dulling my senses, I would have been more present. I would have been more able to listen to myself and to my partners, not only to words, but to bodies, and to what was felt and evoked with touch.

I'm not sure who could have reached out to me back then to say what I most needed to hear. I've had relationships with women who have said things much like what I've written here. But it never quite freed me from my burden, even though I knew they were being genuine. Perhaps I needed to hear it from other men, men I looked up to and respected. And perhaps I needed to hear it spoken gently again and again, at different times in my life.

With this in mind, please keep this letter safe.

Love, Dad

Luke • 45–54 • London, UK •
Social Care Advocacy, Training and Consultancy

Choose love; choose someone who makes you shoot for the stars.

Jonathan • 55–64 • Renfrewshire, Scotland • Cleaner

To my children,

My boys, aged fourteen and nine as I write this.

This is a love letter . . .

Beyond everything, the most important thing that has happened in my life is becoming your dad. I silently say thanks every day for meeting your mum and that she saw fit to build a life and a family together.

As you know, I grew up in a ‘normal’ family with two active parents and one sibling. What you don’t know is that when I was between the ages both of you are now, someone I knew did things to me that they shouldn’t have. I was younger than my years and a very naive and innocent boy. In recent years, I was advised in counselling that this became my ‘vulnerable age’. That resonates with me as when I am feeling vulnerable, I see that boy again. At the time, however, understandably I didn’t know what had happened; I kept it to myself for six months, which felt like an eternity. There wasn’t a day that I didn’t think about it and feel unfounded shame and guilt.

From this remove, the overriding memory is a feeling of loneliness and isolation. I am not sure why I was hesitant to look for help or speak to someone, but I eventually shared what had happened with my parents. I am sure their memory of that time is different to mine though we have never spoken about it since. For me, sharing what had happened became worse than what happened itself. They didn’t have the ability to support me in the ways I needed. Their response to being told was to never speak of it again, and not seek any other help. That response changed me and is something I have carried throughout my life and into being a parent. As a younger man, I tried to suppress it; I tried to pretend it had no impact. Eventually I had to accept it although I don’t think I will ever get over it.

Yet, that experience still drives me every day, in positive ways, as it makes me think deeply about my relationships with you. I want you always to feel secure and safe. I want you to know that I will be there for you. I want you to talk to me about anything, and I will, until my last breath, do my utmost to help you. Together we can solve the challenges that you encounter as you continue to grow into men. You may have

wondered why certain things are so important to me and that I repeat to you often. The values of respecting others and being gentle, showing respect for physical boundaries. I want you know what consent means and never to hurt others physically or with words or other acts. This is especially true when it comes to your intimate relationships. These things are informed by my experiences, both positive and negative.

I hope you will take these as positive values to have; though I don't want them to be all that I impart to you. As you have grown (alongside your sister), I have learned that encouraging and empowering you is a part of my job as your dad. And knowing you, I believe you can achieve anything in this world if you set your mind to it. I want you to believe it too. You have such extraordinary talents and abilities, and I will support you in whatever way I can to reach for your dreams, no matter what they are.

Apart from loving every part of you and encouraging you, I know my role as your dad is to protect you from some of what the cruel modern world throws at people and particularly at young men. I'll try to do that while knowing that I can't shield you from everything; there will be hurt along the way and I want to show you that talking about things that affect you is OK. It is essential. I am a man who gets upset, I am a man who is emotional and cries. That is natural and healthy. You don't need to shy away from it, lean into those moments and they will help you realise what is important to you in your life.

Always remember, I love you. It is a privilege to watch you grow and flourish.

Always know, nothing is permanent or insurmountable that we can't face together.

Always look after yourselves. Love and support each other.

Always,
Your dad

Adrian • 45–54 • Cork, Ireland • Accountant

To my boys,

I've found this letter hard to write, not because I don't know what to say, but because I've been massively overthinking it. I felt like I was supposed to leave you with nuggets of wisdom, life lessons and profound advice . . . as if I've had any real clue what I've been doing myself. The truth is, I've been making it up as I go along.

So all I really have for you is love. My love. Forever.

From the day you both arrived in mine and your mum's world, everything made sense and everything became better. We couldn't be prouder of our lads.

And in the end, it all comes down to love, that's what I wanted you to know.

I'll leave you with this:

All we ever wanted you to become is the CEOs of being sound.

Love always,
Dad

Sergio • 45–54 • Leicester, UK • Singer

Right, my little fella mi lad,

As you're well aware, I'm not here any more. It's OK to be sad about that, and frankly I'm devastated I'm not going to be around. I would have loved seeing you and your sister grow from being amazing children into phenomenal humans. However, I know that I will live on—through you. Please try and remember all the good bits about me and try and forget about the shitty cancer stuff at the end. I am not gone and will be with you always.

You're the man of the house now, but I really want you to think about what it means to be 'the man'. This is an old-fashioned term that could really do with a bit of work. Look after your mum and sis but don't feel the need to be some macho prick. A wise man once said, 'It's nice to be nice.' It really is. Just be my echo and carry on ringing out my love for them please, son.

Don't be afraid to love. Don't shield your heart. Keep it open to all possibilities. Love your family, love your friends, love your footy team, love nature, love yourself, love life. Every one of these will hurt like a bastard at some point but they are all so worth it. Try and embrace every day but, if not, it's also OK to hide away occasionally. Everyone gets sad. Opinions are like arseholes, everyone has them, but make sure yours are informed and choose when to voice them wisely. Empathy is a really good trait. Try and nail that one if you can. Swear, laugh until it hurts, make mistakes, run, travel, learn, etc., but remember to be kind to yourself and everyone else. There is great joy to be had in dicking about so revel in it but try not to be a massive dick.

Ignore all of the above if you want to, just live. These are all just my ramblings. Just be yourself (cliché alert). If you're lucky enough to be a dad one day you will truly understand my love for you.

God, I wish I could see that, but my time is unfortunately up on that one. However, I will live on through you, and that gives me incredible comfort.

I bloody love you, eternally.

Dad

Dean • 45–54 • Civil Servant

Hello Sunshine,

I feel like you know most of this already, but so much (oh my god, sooo much) of parenting is about repetition. So, put down your phone and concentrate for a second.

I learn more from you than you will ever learn from me. Remember you were only five and you were already able to say you didn't want to go to football club any more, even though all your classmates were there. 'I'm just not that sort of boy,' you said. Admitting that 'weakness' was very strong of you. We had a hug and both our chins wobbled. Then we left football and went home to watch Strictly instead. You know how often I get angry and shout? That's weakness masquerading. You know how often I'm able to admit I'm wrong afterwards? That's more like actual strength.

Life is full of these vice versas and contradictions. Hard and fast rules should be treated with scepticism. Beware the rules with no exceptions. Run from the man who claims the monopoly on truth. BUT. Life with no rules at all is a confusing thing, so . . .

- If in doubt, tell the truth. (Careful now. Not all truths need to be told right away. I think you know what I mean.)

- Don't pay builders in full until all the work is done.

- When you're confused or in doubt, ask for advice. Don't be shy of asking. Most people are keen to help. (BUT be selective with whose advice you take. Good prospect—your parents, who've been alive for a combined one hundred years and are motivated by love and wisdom and your well-being. Bad prospects—single hit Google search, some bloke in the pub.)

- Be nice to your sister. She will be there for you when others aren't. Also, you love her.

- Linked to the truth-telling, if you find yourself in a quandary, say what's on your mind, especially with friends and family. Life is usually better with things out in the open. Eventually. Even if short-term disagreements may occur.

- Also, and conversely, know when to shut up. It's so important. Ask your mum—she'll tell you about me not knowing. Just shush sometimes and wait.

- You can't force people to be/do anything they are determined not to. And they can't

force you. Be open to change, but remember to stand your ground when necessary, and accept others doing the same. (Don’t flimflam too much. Know who you are and what you believe in.)

- Seize the day. You only get one go at life. Live it. (That doesn’t mean you can’t seize a nice lazy day every now and then, just don’t make dossing a lifestyle. Do stuff!)

- In conversation, ASK QUESTIONS. LISTEN TO PEOPLE Properly, with eyes as well as ears. And with your brain. (Put your phone down!) Be interested as well as interesting. This is important in all situations.

Harry • 45–54 • London, UK • Video editor

My dear son,

I've been seeing it in your eyes since you were a tiny flower, just a few months old. You can see right through me; you can see the grey barrier that separates me from the world. Unlike everyone else I've ever encountered in my life, you recognise it. From your earliest days you looked at me deeply, as though asking about me, saying you know things about me that nobody else does—reading me like an open book. The barrier that separates me from myself, from others, is not of my own making—it was created by my suffering. I'm struggling, trying to break through the emotional coldness that's eating my heart alive, but I haven't been able to yet. I wish that my eyes could embrace everyone I love, starting with my mother, your mother and you. How I wish my emotions could pour out without calculation or fear. But I find myself trapped behind the wall that I created to protect myself after all the pain and betrayal of my childhood and adolescence.

To you I am a father, a rock, strong and proud, but behind all that is a weak creature: frightened, insecure, anxious, cowardly, cowering from people's eyes, afraid to be seen. A person incapable of confrontation. All because of the pain. I had to hide my pain, tears, sadness and shame to be able to bear it all. My father used to beat me. He beat me often—with his hands, with his belt, with his shoes—until my dignity as a child was broken. He would hit me, verbally abuse me, and scream in my face in front of family members and strangers alike. I learned not to cry in front of him so that he wouldn't beat me harder and humiliate me even more. I learned to swallow my pain in silence. I couldn't stand up for myself; and even after all these years, I still can't. But I fought back in my own way: I built that wall to protect myself from pain, from harm.

I decided to take revenge by leaving, by travelling far away. I changed my life not just by building that wall, but also by immigrating. I crossed the surging sea and vowed never to come back—I had to reach a safer shore. I boarded a small boat filled with terror, a dinghy packed with death and nothing else. But my wish to change my life was great, and God granted me that wish, in order for your life to change as well. The most

important value that I hope to instil in you, so that you can become a real man, is to understand the deep wound that created me. Not in order to forgive me, but in order to have what I have never had: an easy understanding of and empathy for others. Maybe then you'll know that people who scream at and terrify others might be protesting an injustice that was inflicted on them, or seeking out the love they never had—just like I once did.

In order for you to become a good man, you need to be braver than me. You need to stand up to me if I'm being unfair, so that you'll learn not to fear anybody. Live like a man with a purpose, so that you don't tremble in the face of authority. When you speak the truth, your word is law. I grew up in the shadow of dictatorship—of my father, the political regime, society as a whole—but you live in freedom. Be generous with your courage, and support those who need your help; even words of truth can make a difference.

Don't live my life. Don't make fear the lens through which you view the world. Don't dwell on worst-case scenarios (which are unlikely to happen anyway): just live each day as it comes and try to enjoy it. Don't worry about tomorrow. You only have one life, and it should be full of experiences that you can explore without fear and dread. Plan your steps, but try to experiment, make mistakes. Your life is the sum of all the experiences you've gathered. Be open to life; don't approach it with fear and bleak pessimism, as I have done. Life loves those who meet it with an open heart; and it, in turn, opens itself to them, gifting them generously with its experiences so that they can live and learn and be transformed.

I don't know if you can see in my eyes how much I love you. My heart knows nothing—and will never know anything—but love for you. When you came into this world, I realised that all of the injustices I have experienced were over, because you were born into an environment far away from the one I had grown up in. That was a triumph over the pain, a triumph of my love for your mother and for you. I broke the cycle of violence, pain, humiliation and inadequacy that I was a victim of, and that my father was a victim of before me. Now you are free. You will not experience what we went through. And this freedom will make you not only a wonderful man, but a remarkable one.

Anonymous

(Translated from Arabic by Wiam El-Tamami)

Use technology as a tool, not a substitute for real relationships.

Billy • 25–34 • Merseyside, UK • Salesperson

Lads, boys, fellas, chaps, men.

It’s alright being a bloke. Let’s face it we don’t have the odds stacked against us like women do. But it can still be confusing. So here’s some words of wisdom. A few wise lessons I’ve learned through fifty-plus years of being stupid.

The first thing is, you can be who and what you want. It’s all good. Life is much more fun if you try things out from different angles and ignore the voices of the cool, telling you, ‘Nah, no way!’ I’ve passed you on a few things that you’ve accepted already. You know to respect others and to care about the world around you. This is good. I wonder how this will manifest itself as you grow and change, and the world grows and changes around you?

You stand up to prejudice. You’re basically decent and kinda left wing. You don’t like the Tories. Which is good, because that really is a red line. But back to the first point. I do like football. I also like motorbikes and beer and mountain climbing and other bloke stuff. And I know you quite like some of that too.

But I also like cheerleading and pole-dancing, long walks, drag, books, foreign films, fake eyelashes, art galleries, socialism, fur coats . . . I know you hate some of that and can be mortally embarrassed by me, but believe me, my life is much more fun and interesting for all of it. Try anything you might be intrigued by and sod anyone who tells you it’s weird. Weird is good.

My dad once told me that he realised too late that he was actually a good guy—someone he could like and be proud of. And actually quite good-looking. He told me that I was too. He told me too late and I believed him even later. I hope I haven’t told you too late and I hope you believe me now.

Believe in yourselves. Love and respect yourselves and others. Stand up to injustice and ignore ignorance. Be who and whatever you want to be.

I love you.

Mick • 45–54 • Sussex by the Sea, UK • Trade Union Organiser and

Cabaret Performer

To my son,

This letter is very hard for me to write and you won't be able to read it until you are a few years older because of the things I am going to talk to you about. Since you were born, all I have ever wanted was to make you proud. I want you to be proud to call me your dad. I loved you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. You make me laugh and bring me joy every single day. I know I can get angry sometimes and shout but I'm trying to be better and keep on top of my emotions and what I try to do every time I lose my temper or I'm grumpy is explain to you why I'm grumpy or why I shouted at you when you didn't deserve it, you never deserve it. I hope I have made you see that I hate shouting at you and getting angry at you and that you should never be shouted at.

What I wanted to tell you though, and the point of this letter, is something that I did this year. After over thirty years of being addicted to porn, through help and support, I gave it up and have been sober from it for eleven months now. It has been the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. The reason I am telling you this in letter form and not in person is because I don't think I can tell you this in person, the shame of it is too great.

I never wanted to be addicted to porn and for most of my life, since it started around the age of twelve, I always thought I could stop whenever I wanted to. But I never could. I also hope that you never become addicted to porn because I know what it can do to you; what it can do to your brain, your sex life and your perception of women. Maybe some people can watch porn and be absolutely fine but when you have an addictive personality like mine, it becomes a problem, a problem that I couldn't fix on my own.

Slowly through sobriety, I am trying to rewire my brain but it's not easy. Like everything else that is addictive, there is a constant pull that I need to fight every single day. The difference with this addiction to most others is the shame factor. If you say to someone that you are an alcoholic or have a gambling addiction, people seem to understand and empathise. However, if you say you are addicted to porn or sex, most other men either

laugh at you or they are horrified and won’t speak to you again.

I will try and talk to you about all this one day when you are older because I hope that I have been able to cultivate a relationship with you where we will become friends as opposed to parent and child when you become a man yourself. I wanted to mention all this here as well because if I can’t talk to you about it when you are older, maybe reading it will help you to understand what was going on in my life at this time and I hope you will be able to understand and empathise. Also, maybe this will help someone else who may be going through the same thing and can’t talk to his son about it.

I love you with all my heart and can’t wait to see the man you grow up to become.

Your dada

Arsalan • 45–54 • UK • Business Owner

Dear boys,

Let me start by saying how proud I am of the men you have become, of the lives you have carved for yourselves and the paths you have chosen to take. When I was growing up things were different, ‘you just got on with things’, no talking about feelings, worries or fears. I just tackled everything as it came along. I left school at sixteen, got a job, bought a house, got married, and bang, I was an adult.

Then I became a dad, the scariest, most exciting and happiest time of my life. Within seven years I was a dad to four sons. Life passes by so quickly and now I am a dad to four wonderful young men. But it’s never too late to give you advice and these are some of the things I want to share with you:

- Never stop being yourselves. All of you are ambitious, kind, considerate and wonderful human beings.
- Continue to see the funny side of life and please carry on sending me those WhatsApp stories and pictures I could never show your mum.
- Always treat our house as the local Co-op when you have run out of something and the ‘Open all hours’ restaurant when you are hungry and of course keep nipping down to the brook at the bottom of garden for a ‘wild wee’, I never want that image of four bare backsides ‘crossing their beams’ into the water to ever leave my mind!
- Please always be there for each other. You have your spats, but when one of you is struggling I know you will come together to support.
- Time is the most precious thing you can give to your family. Make sure you make as many memories as you can.

I will always be here to listen, and give advice. Please share your worries, no matter how small, there is nothing in this world that cannot be sorted.

Dad

Nigel • 65–74 • Leicestershire, UK • Retired Electrician

I failed you, dear son. I need to tell you something I should have said earlier, and I need to say it without excuses. I failed you. Not because I didn’t love you, or work hard and want the best for you. But because somewhere along the way, my love became mixed with fear, and my fear became a voice you heard too often.

I grew up with enough, but never with excess. I learned early that nothing was guaranteed. So when I began to work, my driving force was simple: my children will not lack. I wanted you to have excess, opportunity, confidence, doors open that were closed to me. That desire came from love. Looking back now, I can see where I went wrong. In trying to give you ‘better’, I kept reminding you of ‘before’. I spoke too often about humble beginnings. I repeated the struggle as if it was a warning, not a story. I said ‘work hard’ so much that it started to sound like ‘you don’t quite belong’.

I see now that what I thought was motivation slowly became pressure. I didn’t realise that by constantly pointing backwards, I made it hard for you to stand fully where you are. You couldn’t relax into the present, because you were taught to fear the past. And you couldn’t step boldly into the future, because you were afraid of losing yourself or betraying where you came from. That is a heavy burden for a child to carry. When you got into that excellent school—a school we worked hard for together—I should have celebrated you without reservation. I should have said, ‘You deserve this.’ Instead, I kept reminding you how hard it was to get there, as though the achievement was fragile, as though you were a guest who needed to stay quiet and grateful.

I see now how that may have chipped away at your confidence. How it may have made you second-guess yourself. How it may have made you feel like you were always proving something instead of becoming something. For that, I am truly sorry. Please understand this: my intention was never to make you feel small. But intention does not erase impact. And as your father, I must own the impact.

So this is me choosing to change. This is my promise to you going forward—I will celebrate you without adding warnings. I will let you belong, fully, wherever your feet are planted. I will trust that the values I

tried to teach you are already inside you, without constant reminders. I am learning that my role is not to anchor you to my past, but to release you into your future. I won't get it perfect overnight. But I am paying attention now. I am listening. I am unlearning. And I am committed to being a father who builds your confidence, not one who unintentionally erodes it.

You are not borrowing your place in this world. You are not an exception. You are not 'lucky to be here'. You are here because you belong. And I am proud of you; not just for what you achieve, but for who you are becoming.

With humility, love and a changed heart,
Dad

Olalekan • 35–44

My dear son,

I’m not writing this letter solely as a father who is proud of his son’s achievements. I’m writing because I believe it is time to hand you the baton. A symbol of our family’s values that has been passed down through generations.

It began with my grandmother. She used to say something very simple, yet meaningful: ‘They can take away everything from you . . . your house, your car, your money . . . but they can never take what is in your head.’ She didn’t learn this from books or lectures. She learned it the hardest way imaginable. Her entire family, including fourteen brothers and sisters and her parents, were taken to Auschwitz. Most of them died. She hardly survived, but what kept her alive was her thinking, her values and her inner freedom. When everything external was stripped away, what remained were her mind, her humanity, and her ability to choose how to think and who to be. She chose to help build a better world, a more humane place, returning home, after the Second World War.

However, after returning to Hungary she was jailed by the Soviets. Her husband was tortured. They were seen as threats to the emerging communist regime. But she did not give up. Despite hardships, she raised her three children, including my mother, with unwavering resolve and strong values. Though physically small and frail, my grandmother’s inner strength always drove her forward.

This became our inheritance. Watching you grow up in today’s rapidly changing world, so different from hers, makes me realise how relevant her words remain today. While nobody is taking away houses and cars from children, predatory algorithms are targeting adolescents’ minds. In the digital age, what is inside your head matters more than ever. Algorithms study teenagers and feed on them. They are invisible, they are everywhere, watching what you click, how you feel, and slowly shaping who you become. You are being psychologically profiled and manipulated by the most advanced artificial intelligence in human history. But trust me, you don’t need to have a six-pack by the age of 15 to be good enough. You are good enough!

During my grandmother’s time, survival depended on protecting her thoughts from physical threats. In your time, survival depends on guarding that same inner world against constant external manipulation. The battleground has shifted, but the principle remains the same. Values matter. Thoughts matter. Humanism matters. What you stand for should be owned by you, and you alone! Your generation should preserve that protected inner space my grandmother fought so hard to keep safe. I hope you always remember this: your worth is not measured by future titles, luxury estates or fancy cars, but by your ability to find practical solutions to real-world problems. Tame technology to support you. And whenever you feel overwhelmed, think of your grand-grandmother, her sacrifices to defend your freedom, and what is between your ears.

With deep love and warmth, forever,
Dad

Tamas • 45–54 • Western Pacific • Director at World Health Organization

Of course I love you. That’s the easy part. Unconditional, effortless and instinctual love. I don’t have to work at it, it’s nothing that I have to practise and fuck all will change that. Nowt. No circumstance, action or influence will stop me loving you. That love comes with a promise that has no expiry date. It’s forever.

I promise that I will do my upmost to make sure you’re safe, cared for and loved. I’ll try to bring laughter to your sadder days and show you of much of what’s beautiful in this world. I will stand by your side and will forever protect you with my life. Piece of piss.

As I’ve gotten older and the years in which parenting are catching up with the years of not, I understand that I am growing with you.

I’m learning like you. I watch you navigate the passing days and I observe beautiful transformations from dependent babies, mischievous toddlers, little boys that hang on to every word of a bedtime story to

rebellious independent teenagers.

The day has come and the day has yet to come. You no longer sneak into my bed when the darkness scares you. The trips to town are few and far between and and ‘love you’ is seldom said back. The words of encouragement and advice fall on stubborn ears. As a father I will be a spectator of failure, heartbreak and pain no matter the promises I made to you. I will tell you how I did it wrong and beg you not to follow but really what I wish for is that you become better than me.

That is the hard part.

Michael • 35–44 • Derby, UK • Actor

Reject behaviour that devalues women, even when it's disguised as humour, habit or frustration. Challenge it in yourself first, and in others when needed. How you treat women will say more about you than any success you ever achieve.

Martin • 65–74 • Hampshire, UK • Retired

Dear son,

Last night, as the credits rolled on that Formula One film we watched together, something unexpected happened. At the end of the film, when the screen flashed ‘Rosco’ in the list of Actors/Actresses, we both burst out laughing. In that split second, we weren’t just father and son; we were two fans sharing a joke about Lewis Hamilton’s beloved dog. That moment—so simple, so spontaneous—became a quiet treasure I’ll hold on to forever.

At fifteen, you’re walking your own path. You challenge ideas, question traditions and build your own compass for this world—one that sometimes feels galaxies away from mine. I admire your independence, even when it means my ‘old-school’ advice falls on deaf ears. But Formula One? That’s our bridge. For three hours yesterday, we weren’t separated by generations or opinions; we were just two hearts racing at the same turns, holding our breath at the same close calls, and clapping in unison as Brad Pitt crossed the finish line. In the darkness of the theatre, I felt closer to you than I have in months.

Lately, I’ve watched you thoughtfully explore your future—what to study, where to grow. You started planning as early as Grade 10, and that initiative fills me with pride. Do I have hopes for you? Of course. But more than anything, I want you to find purpose—your purpose. I want you to run towards your dreams with that same fire you feel when you talk about F1—with clarity, conviction and a contract with your own potential. Yes, I notice the YouTube, the games, the way books sometimes take a back seat. But I don’t see it as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Your world lives partly through screens—a portal to ideas, people and passions I never had at your age. What comforts me is the foundation beneath it all: your faith.

Growing up in a Christian home, attending a Christian international school, you’ve built your own moral compass. You know where the guardrails are, even when I’m not there to point them out. That’s not my doing—it’s yours. So here’s what I want you to carry forward: you are more than ‘my son’. You are a soul shaped by God, with gifts only you can unwrap. You are a thinker, a dreamer, a racer of your own destiny. Your identity isn’t just inherited—it’s built through every choice, every lap,

every leap of faith you take.

Someday, my son, you'll look back and realise: the greatest victories aren't just won on tracks. They're won in the quiet spaces between us—where a father and son once sat side by side, and for a moment, the world felt perfectly aligned.

With gratitude,
Dad

Jason • 45–54

A while ago I met a man not much older than me who had had a nasty fall, and once he was on our stretcher he clearly felt comfortable and vulnerable enough—as often happens—to open up about the loss of his son after a long illness. Through tears he asked me if I had any children, and I told him about you two boys.

He gripped my hand and said, 'Then you're a king, mate. You're a king. Don't ever forget it.'

With love always,
Dad x

Richard • 45–54 • New South Wales, Australia • Paramedic

Son,

You were born on a cold January morning in 2009. I can remember you being placed in my arms and I held you against my skin. Our first child and a son at that. Your delivery into the world was rough and you resembled a boxer! I looked at you and made the decision I would never let you down.

I always knew you were different but I did not choose to accept it. By the age of two you were not reaching the milestones regular kids did. You were diagnosed with severe learning difficulties. I am not sure you are even aware that you are different now. That gives me comfort because to me today you are perfect. This was not always the case. For a long time I used to think why me? Why us? Why you? It was in fact all about me. Like many parents I never signed up for a child with such complex needs. I was unable to see your beauty and that you were given to me for a reason. For many years I destroyed myself and particularly the ones I loved. I took advantage of your vulnerabilities because you did not have a voice. I carried guilt and shame and still do for the way I behaved. I have always truly loved you. The problem was never you it was me.

Eventually I made a decision to get help with my problems. I did it for me. This then allowed me to take responsibility for you. By accepting me I was then able to accept you.

Son, I truly love you and no longer want you to be anything but you. I see that you are happy and albeit slowly you are making progress. When you called me Dad at the age of twelve we hit the jackpot. When I come home from work you are at the window pleased to see me. You sit on my lap at the age of sixteen, which is different! Everything you achieve is special because it does not come easy.

We are coming to a point in your life where I want you to spread your wings. The one promise I make is that I will always be there for you no matter what. You inspire me to be the best version of me. Thanks for helping me become a man. You may never understand this letter but you know the love we have for each other.

Dad

Dan • 45–54 • Leicestershire, UK • Recovery Worker

Dear boys,

I’m blessed with the relationship I have with all of you, we have so much in common, but really, it’s sport that’s at the heart of everything for us. Nothing makes me happier than when I look out of the window and see the three of you playing football in the garden. Watching you older boys run around with your little brother on your shoulders, laughing together, gives me lucid moments of pure love and joy and there’s nothing like it. Inevitably it always turns into some sort of physical bundle or scrum, so please could you just be gentle with your little brother in those tackles (not too gentle though—and never forget the rules, like I did with you, don’t just let him win!) Rapha, you are the glue. When we had you, it all made sense, and seeing how your two older brothers have embraced you makes me well up as I write this.

There is a gentle rivalry in everything we do, who’s going to win at golf, who’s the fastest, who’s put in the most effort. This comes from something my dad instilled in me; if you’re going to do something then do it well, give it your all no matter what it is. I love that this has been passed down to you. It’s not about being the best; it’s about doing your best and I’m proud of how we channel a healthy competitiveness into all we do.

I’m so proud of the focus you give to your rugby, Charley. Seeing how resilient you are on the pitch is impressive, you’re hard as nails . . . you must get that from me!! And Beau, the way you’ve taken on football, making sacrifices, showing dedication, and handling the pressure of our family’s history in the game, says a lot about you. Sport might be the bedrock for us but the skills you’ve harnessed through it will help you navigate whatever twists and turns life takes you on.

When we brought you into the world I wanted everything to be perfect for you. But life has a way of throwing things up in the air. We are a blended family, and that’s not always easy, but when we sit together, round the table having dinner I look at each of you and feel so proud of how you’ve all accepted it and made it work. I want to say well done to you for that. Rapha, you have six amazing, hard-working siblings to look up to. Soak up everything you can from them, but still be the rascal that you are.

In my career I had setbacks and things that didn't go my way, injuries that meant I couldn't play—missing out on the World Cup was hard. But that's life. When things don't go your way, don't be afraid to be in touch with how it makes you feel and give yourself time to process it. When it passes, which it will, pick yourself back up and have another go. And keep believing in yourself because those setbacks are only part of the picture. Keep giving your all and you'll carry a pride with you knowing that you gave it your best shot. That's the real success, not the winning.

My most favourite place in the world to be is with you, talking about whatever comes out of your mouths. It can be the wildest of things, or the most mundane, a problem you have, or something you want to celebrate. Raising you is the hardest, most rewarding, and most fun thing I do. You boys are my happy place.

Love
Dad

Jamie • 45–54 • Surrey, UK • Former professional football player

My son Roux was eighteen recently. Beforehand I pondered about what advice I should give him as he became a man. I thought about what advice me dad had given me.

Just as I was about to leave the family home at age of nineteen, me dad called me into the living room. 'Sit down, son,' he said, and I thought this is it! He's gonna give me sage advice about life before I move out. He looked at me, patted me on my arm and said, 'Son,' he said, 'you're off then, right well,' before a long pregnant pause, 'Take care of yourself, son,' then slipped me a fiver he had rolled up in his hand, much like a shady drug deal, cept he didn't look left and right before slipping me the cash. He just stared at me and smiled. I waited a second thinking maybe there's more but that was it, that was my advice to go through life with. So I said 'Cheers, Dad, see ya in bit' and got up and left.

At the time I was disappointed but not too much, it was what me dad

was like. If the house phone rang and no one else picked it up he would answer with a grunt, to be clear not ‘hello’ in a gruff voice, just a grunt ‘hurh’. Don’t get me wrong, me dad is sound, I love him very much and I know he loves me, he has always supported me through all my mad hobbies and career paths. But we’ve only hugged once and only said I love you to each other once after a drunken night out. That’s just the way it was with working-class families from Stoke-on-Trent and probably all over the UK.

But by the time Roux was born, I had been to drama school and learned how to hug and say I love you to my friends and family, although, I still haven’t said I love you to me brother Keith John. Shit I really must do that. My Roux had grown up in liberal Bristol in the very multicultural area of Easton. I told him I loved him every day and we hugged almost every day. But with his eighteenth coming up, I was thinking shiiiit, have I been like me dad? When have I ever offered Roux words of wisdom?

Roux had been bullied relentlessly through secondary school because he was autistic and had ADHD and constantly misread situations. Through all of this bullying I couldn’t really offer sage advice because I’m not autistic like he is. I don’t experience the world being too loud as he does, so what could I do? I told him the bullies were idiots, that he was an amazing person and they would regret it when they got older,and I told him every day that I loved him more than the world but not actual advice with how to deal with his situation. In his GCSE year things had gotten worse, the kids at school were taunting him daily and he heard their voices all night as he tried to sleep. One night he said, ‘I don’t know if I want to live any more, Dad.’

It’s hard to put into words how much that hurts as a parent, the pain is visceral. Your job is to protect your child and you feel like you’ve failed spectacularly. How could I have not shielded him from the pain that makes him not want to be in this life, how could I not protect from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?

At the same time this was going on, Roux was preparing to audition for the prestigious Bristol School of Acting. I was supporting him but to be honest one I thought he had little chance of getting in, because he was so broken, so unconfident in himself that he was now stuttering with his words a lot. Me and his mum cried inwardly, daily for his pain. As we

know he did.

All I could say was ‘You’re the best son I could ever wish for—my best buddy’. I told him I’d never recover if I lost him, though he didn’t believe me. He thought he was a burden to me and his mum, who worked tirelessly to advocate for him. Nothing we said could erase his pain. So, we prepared him for his audition. I suggested ‘To Be or Not To Be’, I explained it was about someone unsure whether they wanted to live. As we practised, he realised he wasn’t alone—that people, even centuries ago, had felt the same pain. And when he learned the first few lines, then performed it, it was the greatest Shakespeare speech I had ever seen because it was all real for Roux. It broke me in two, with tears streaming down from my eyes as he cried doing the speech. He auditioned with a different speech but Shakespeare taught him to act from his soul.

In a movie this is where everything changes and Roux is healed but this is real life, it helped but Roux was still in pain. We got the news his audition had earned him a recall, working with others on improvised scenes. My heart fell, Roux trusted no kid, despised how petty and cruel they were, group work was going to be so hard for him. I pumped him up with every acting technique I know, his mum told him he was amazing then he went into the audition.

I went to meet him after the audition, it was snowing, there was a cute Christmas market nearby to the drama school, all I felt was horror at how my beautiful autistic son was faring in the audition. Then he came out, beaming and smiling, I hadn’t seen him this happy in years. He hadn’t been told he’d got a place, but he had made friends, felt he belonged there, had joined in happily with the devising and thought it went well. As we walked through the wooden, colourful market, high-fiving each other, it felt like a magical Christmas movie. Pure joy as the snow fell through the coloured lights with Roux eating the biggest hot dog we’d ever seen. We knew that life was going to get better, that this was a moment to be savoured, a moment we would never forget.

And a week later, as I was awaiting the price on a dreaded MOT test at the garage, my wife phoned with the news, Roux had gotten a place at BSA. I screamed to heaven, right then and there, then virtually skipped outside the garage to scream my utter joy some more. ‘FUUUUUUUUCKKKKKING YESSSSSSSSS!’

Roux's first few months at BSA were still really hard for him, he would leave class and be afraid to speak up. But as the course went on he has found his people, he has found his voice. SO much so he was offered the lead part in the second year showcase. He's found his superpower. And Me Dad? every time he sees a video of him acting, me dad calls him Richard Burton!

As I'm finishing this story, I'm still wondering whether I've offered Roux any life lessons about anything other than acting. Right on cue, Roux walks in. Me: 'Have I ever offered you some words of wisdom?' Roux: 'LOVE!' He beams, gives me a big hug, and leaves me to my writing.

Dave • 55–64 • Bristol, UK • Director

To Sam,

To be honest when we first adopted you I found things tough. Your ‘special needs’ were challenging and I didn’t know how to deal with the situation.

But over the last eighteen years you have taught me more than I could have ever dreamt of teaching you. You fill everyone around you and everyone you meet with joy. You have a huge heart and even though we don’t have the normal ‘father to son’ chats I thought I wanted, I would not change a thing.

This letter is supposed to be me telling you how to be a good man but it is in fact a thank-you letter for you teaching me who I am supposed to be. I am blessed, thank you, son. Xx

Mark • 55–64 • Sheffield • Film Producer

Dear son,

I wanted to take a moment to write you this letter because I know how important it is that we stay connected, and sometimes it's easier to gather my thoughts this way.

I know you've been sharing some things about your identity, and I want to be honest—I'm struggling to fully understand it all. It's not because I don't care or don't believe that you are trying to define where you fit in the world, but I'm trying to make sense of it in my own way. I don't want you to feel like I'm dismissing your feelings; I'm just figuring out how best to support you, even when I'm unsure or confused. I am not sure that we will ever agree but that is the joy of life right there.

What I do think is that you need to focus on getting on with what is in front of you. You have given yourself the best opportunity to focus on the three subjects for your A levels. Start leaning into the work not away—it is a much easier way to get through the day—we all get nervous and worried about things we have to do. Funnily enough, the actual doing is often far less hard than the image we create in our own head.

Also—get a job. Even a voluntary one—they are looking for people to work with the local charity shop on the high street . . . We can help you, but this is so important in starting to create independence, meet new people and have some stories to tell about stupid stuff.

Let's keep going to the cinema together. We won't be able to do it every week but at least let's try—even if we are going to watch something out of our zones—we should keep connected around crap films!

What's important for you to know is that I'm here for you, though it may feel contrarian at times. I'm open to having tough conversations, I am not going to back away from what I believe and we should be smart enough to debate this. I love you, and I'm proud of the courage it takes to explore and express who you are—this requires no labels, no definition, no alignment, no adherence. It just requires you to be you—have the courage to be this person.

I see you; I just want you to start seeing yourself.

Let's keep talking, and together, I know we'll find our way through

this.

With all my love,
Your father

Christopher • 55–64 • Surrey, UK • Human Resources Director

To my dearest two sons,

I miss you so much. I write you this letter to tell you I love you and miss you. My biggest regret is not being there for you to watch you grow up. It hurts every day not seeing you and one day I hope I get to tell you my truth.

I wasn't well. Now I'm clean and working my program and trying my best each day and praying for your happiness health and peace of mind. I put my faith in my higher power that one day we will see each other again.

If there is any thing in this world I could teach you or give you guidance in your life as you grow into men, is that drugs including alcohol will not solve any feeling you have. If there is any problem in your life please talk about it with someone, don't be afraid to tell the truth about how you feel. Asking for help has been my biggest saviour. Don't be too proud to say you don't know how to do something. There's nothing in life you ever need to go through alone. There's nothing in life that you can't get help for if you share it with someone you truly trust.

I never knew growing up how to ask for help and I made some bad decisions. My hope for you is you make better decisions. Whatever you do in life you will never fail as it's just experiences. Go out in the world and experience all it has to offer just give life your best shot and never be too hard on yourself and all will be well.

Lots of love
Dad

P.S. We will see each other again, that's a promise.

Glenn • 45–54 • Surrey, UK • Unemployed

And if Scotland can qualify for the World Cup, then there truly is no limit to what you can achieve.

Michael • 45–54 • Scotland • Deputy CEO of a charity

My boy,

I want to tell you about what it means to be a man. The thing is that for the vast majority of my life, I never felt like a man. Not really. I am tall and bearded with a deep voice and a full head of hair and I meet all the physical requirements to pass as a man 100 per cent of the time, but I never felt like one inside. I felt like I was never enough. Because I was queer. Because I was neurodiverse. Because I was nerdy. It always felt to me that being a man required being a thousand things that I just was not.

The real truth is that no man ever feels manly enough. Every man, no matter how sporty or capable or successful, looks up and sees an artificial projection of what a man is. They think ‘my muscles aren’t as big as this celebrity’ or ‘I am losing my hair’ or that ‘real men don’t feel sad’ or that ‘real men have sex with lots of women’. They compare themselves to an impossible standard and that impossible standard says that you must conform in every single way. That if you deviate even one iota from that golden ideal then you are not a man.

I now see all of this for the facade that it is. It is just lies. Of course I am a man. I think I am a man, therefore I am a man. That is it. That is the only requirement. Just because I love books and spreadsheets and sequins and earrings and wizards and lasers and ABBA and other men and not football and DIY and lager and big tits, it doesn’t make me any less of a man.

I see in you parts of myself that made me feel like I wasn’t a proper man and I don’t want you to fall for the same bullshit I did. You are the only person who determines who you are. No one else. I love you, whoever you choose to be.

Dad

Drew • 35–44 • Bath and North East Somerset, UK • Structural Engineer

Dear D and M,

There's probably never a good day to die. It's certainly not New Year's Eve, the day my dad died last year. Knowing that I'll never hear his laugh or words of wisdom troubles me, but I'm comforted knowing that I have his words on video and in journals. He conveyed everything he wanted to say to my brother, sister and myself, and I hope this letter does the same for you. I've come to understand that on the other side of illness and grief is love. Grief has a way of teaching us how to live, love and appreciate the precious moments.

When you were babies there were many precious moments, many firsts. First full night's sleep, first steps, first words, first bike, first match. The joy as a dad was immeasurable.

You are the sons of a black British dad whose parents were from Ghana and Sierra Leone and a white English mum whose family are from the Cotswolds in the UK. Figuring out 'who am I and where do I belong' begins with understanding where you come from. I'm so glad that you know and appreciate this. It's easy to mould yourself into the person you think you need to be in order to feel valued and liked. But don't shrink yourself to belong, take time to find your people where you can be authentically yourself. Good friends will provide the support when things are tough and share the joy when things are going well.

When you were young, I always wanted you to find something outside of studies and school that gave you joy. For me it was sport, for your mum it was music. I was pleased when you both played football and cricket. For me, sport is a microcosm of life. It teaches you that if you want to be good at something you have to practise for hours, over and over again. With that comes self-confidence and the knowledge that you can achieve if you put your mind to it. You've taken that passion, perseverance and determination and transferred it into all areas of your lives. As Grandpa used to say, 'There's plenty of room at the top. Aim high, you just have to reach to get there.'

Now that you are young men, I hope that you continue to playfight, trip each other up in the streets, have late-night talks, and share secrets and

jokes that pass your mum and I by. Continue to share daily life and never become strangers when life gets busy. Forgetting birthdays, Christmas and other memorable dates is the first step in losing that connection. Be there to support each other in the good times and also when things are tough. And there will be tough times.

I love that you both have the spirit to travel, to see the world with your own eyes and open yourself up to people and places. You'll make connections with people and places that ignite something deep in you and the right things will stay.

Before you were born, what I wanted was for you to be healthy and then have a happy childhood in a supportive family home and for you to become men living a life that had meaning and purpose, and provided you with happiness.

I hope that life brings you many precious moments. As you make your way, be bold, be brave, be amazing. Live your lives with passion, compassion and humour. Choose kindness and extend grace; that's your superpower. Please don't ever forget that.

I hope together we can laugh longer, walk with a dance in our steps, love and be loved.

You make your mum and I so proud.

Love always,
Dad

Emmanuel • 55–64 • Brighton, UK • Financial Technology

Dear son,

I have to apologise and on the cusp of your twenties give you the one word of advice you'll need to live through the next decade. There's no escaping this I'm afraid, it's as inevitable as the easy smile and height that you inherited from your mother.

My lasting gift to you, my son, is a guaranteed male-pattern baldness.

You're already showing signs of this and it will only increase as you go on. My advice, based on years and years of experience, is simply go with it. Enjoy what time you've got left with your hair—bleach it, grow it long, shave the sides, make it pink or green—all those youthful indiscretions that you've already got some photographical evidence for.

I know you're trying to defend it as much as you can with lotions and shampoos. But when the time comes, fully embrace your destiny.

When you've finally had enough, shave it all off. You'll still look gorgeous.

All my love,
Dad

Simon • 55–64 • London, UK • Maths teacher

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ADULT HOOD



When you were a baby, I used to sing you to sleep with a song that said you could be a doctor or an engineer, a plumber, an actor or a king (I was aware that that last one was virtually impossible), or you could be anything he wanted.

On the subject of name-calling, I armed you with this: ‘If someone calls you a pink giraffe, look in the mirror and if what you see is not a pink giraffe, then smile, as the name-caller obviously has something wrong with them. And if you look in the mirror and see a pink giraffe, well, just be proud of being the pink giraffe that you are.’

As a child I was told by my parents to treat girls in a way that we would want our sisters to be treated.

One day you and I were walking under the Hielanman’s Umbrella in Glasgow. There was a homeless person who held out a polystyrene cup and asked for some money for a cup of tea. I walked past silently, and as I did so felt a strange change in the atmosphere between you and I, son. You were about nine at the time. I asked you what was wrong. You said you’d rather not say. I pressed and you said, ‘I know we don’t have a lot of money but the least we could do is recognise that man as a human being.’ I have never walked past a homeless person again. And actually, I recently discovered that you know the names of most of the homeless people who ask for help on the streets of Glasgow’s West End.

That is the son that I strive to make proud of his father.

Kenneth • 65–74 • Glasgow, UK • Translator

Dear Jo,

I wish you could know how long the pen hesitated over this page before I could put down a single word. I thought maybe I could give you some wisdom to help you be a better man or give you some rules by which to live so that your life could be simpler. In wrestling with all my thoughts about life's joys and sorrows, my proud moments and mistakes, about me and you, I realised one thing—I don't know where sorry ends and thank you begins.

When you were diagnosed with autism you were little more than four years old. At the meeting with the psychologists, I was told it could take some time to come to a conclusion, so I should not just sit and wait. So, I went to get a sandwich. I was gone for five minutes and by the time I returned they were already back, as if they had taken one look at you and seen right away that you ticked all the boxes.

At that moment I just told myself that things would be different for you. You would not let autism be a burden, you would turn it into a superpower. I just assumed that as a family, our story of autism would be one without the hardship, without the fear, without the simple things becoming almost unbearably hard.

So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I didn't understand how life would be for you. I'm sorry that my gut reaction was to make your diagnosis all about me and how it would affect my life. I'm sorry that I was scared and selfish and short-sighted.

I'm sorry that I put the burden of all my expectations on your shoulders when they are not yours to carry. I'm sorry that my worry about how the world would treat someone different, someone gentle like you, made me push you to be more than you were ready to be. I'm sorry that instead of meeting you where you were, I rushed ahead down the road and impatiently called for you to catch up.

And thank you. Thank you for helping me realise that it is the simple things that count. The little reminders that I love you, the little words of kindness that let you know you are doing just fine, the small moments where I can show up and be there for you. Thank you for helping me walk a

better path and understand that it is consistency that counts, not grand gestures, but just being there. There is no big reveal, no grand finale in life, but one day, if you've taken enough small steps, you get to where you need to be.

I have so much to say to you. But you've helped me to realise that I don't need to say it all. I just need to walk beside you until you can run ahead of me, stand in the way of harm until you don't need me as a shield, and let you lean on me until the day comes when I need someone to lean on.

I don't have the secret of a good life to pass on to you. Keep it simple. That seems like a good place to start. Be bold enough to let yourself love but keep some of that love for yourself. Learn from your mistakes and accept that you'll always make more. Listen to your intuition enough to know that you can trust yourself. Move, breathe, feel, change your surroundings, look at the horizon sometimes, but don't rush to get there, just keep taking the next step and see what opens up for you.

But maybe the wisest thing I can say right now is that when you feel afraid—and there will always be fear because without fear we cannot be brave—make sure the fear you feel is your own, not a fear that someone else has put into you. When the fear is yours you can listen to it, learn from it, thank it for the message it is giving you, then you can set it down and move on with courage and conviction.

Always live your life not someone else's, no matter how different it looks.

I'm sorry it has taken me so long to learn what you've been teaching me. And thank you for all the lessons.

Dad

Jim • 55–64 • Brighton, UK • Writer and Researcher

Dear Jamie,

I don’t even know where to start this letter, son. I’ve never written to you in prison. It never felt right. Maybe because deep down I didn’t know how to. Maybe I never really learned how to be a father. My mum and dad were never there for me, and I guess I carried that on without meaning to.

But I need to say this straight. I’ve always been proud of you. Always. From the day you were born.

When we first had you, life was mad but there were beautiful moments too. You walking round the estate in that little denim outfit, beanie on, that bit of baby jewellery I brought back from Miami, you looked the part, proper cool. Maybe that was my ego a bit, but you really did light up the place.

When me and your mum fell out, everything changed. It was chaos and I didn’t handle it well. I thought by leaving, going to America, searching for peace, chasing art, I was doing something right. But really I was just running. I thought you’d be safe with your mum on the estate, but I didn’t see how fast things were changing.

I still remember painting that walkway by your school, the same path you used to walk down every day. When they shut that school, it broke me. That place was the heart of the estate, and when they closed it, it felt like watching the soul of the place die.

And you know what, Jamie, that’s where so much of this started, I think. The pressure. The madness. Kids from different estates suddenly turning on each other. It used to be a few scuffles, a black eye, a busted lip, and you’d move on. But it changed. Somewhere along the line it went from fights to life and death. From 0 to 100. Either him or me.

I never really saw it for what it was until you said it yourself: it was either him or me, Dad. That hit me hard. Because I realised it wasn’t just about violence or choices. It was about there being no alternative. No space. No outlet.

When I was your age, we had youth clubs, breakdancing, graffiti, music. We had places to put all that energy and pain. That’s what saved me, Jamie. Art saved me. It gave me somewhere to throw all that chaos inside me.

That’s why I’m still here.

But when they closed the schools, shut the youth clubs, and cut the funding, what did they expect was gonna happen? They ripped the heart out of those communities and then blamed the heartbeat for bleeding.

So yeah, there’s blood on our hands. But it’s not just yours, son. It’s a whole generation failed. A country that turned its back on you kids and then acted shocked when the streets turned to fire. I don’t say that to make excuses. I just want you to know I see the bigger picture now. And I see you in it, not as a monster, not as a mistake, but as part of something much bigger that went wrong.

Then came the call. The one that said my son had taken someone’s life. Jamie, that broke me in half. My heart just sank. All I could think about were those two doors, one with your mum answering, hearing you were wanted for murder, and another mother opening hers, being told her son was dead. Two mothers gone that day. That weight has never left me.

I didn’t visit for a long time because I was angry, not just at you, but at myself. Because when I looked at you, I saw that bright kid who used to paint beside me, the spark in your eyes, the laughter. There’s a photo of us, me leaning over you while you’re painting in your little pyjamas. That one still gets me.

When you came to stay with me in Hertfordshire, I tried to show you my world, the records, the dogs, the art. I thought maybe I could keep you out of trouble, get you into something new. But the streets were always calling, same as they called me when I was young. And when the police came, asking if I’d seen you, saying you were on the run, I can’t even describe the feeling. All that success, the house, the money . . . none of it mattered. I’d failed where it mattered most.

You know that old saying, you can drag a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. That’s how it felt. I tried, but maybe I didn’t try in the right ways. Maybe I just didn’t know how.

But I’ve seen you changing in there, Jamie. I’ve felt it when we talked. There’s more calm in you now, more understanding. The groups you’re doing, the reading, I can tell it’s helping. That’s why I wanna send you more books. Things that might speak to you like art spoke to me.

You said something the other day that stuck with me, about feeling anxious about getting out. I understand that now. Freedom’s a strange thing

after you've been trapped for so long. It's gonna feel weird, but you'll find your feet. One step at a time, son. You'll get there.

You've always been the stamp of me. Everyone says it. The look, the laugh, the way you move. You're my son through and through.

And I love you. I've always loved you. Even when I was silent. Even when I didn't show it.

Maybe next time I'll start my letter with that, instead of ending with it.

I love you, Jamie, from the bottom of my heart.

Goldie • 55–64 • Thailand • Artist

Dear F,

I love you with all my heart, but that is only a fraction of your mother's love. She knew that the beautiful, funny two-year-old toddler who horrified Grandma by shouting 'Fuck me that's hot' when lowered into a bath, was always there inside you, hibernating ready to emerge, when the long, stormy teenage winter passed. Nobody really knows where adolescent clouds come from and we weren't surprised that you rejected all offers of help, but lift they did and we can laugh and cry together again.

I'm not sure that every single teacher, policeman, counsellor, coach and judge will remember you, but in the years to come don't be surprised if many ask us how you are doing. Not out of pity but more because like me and your mum, we all knew that however hard you tried to rebel, your inner goodness, integrity and stubborn bloody-mindedness were still there.

Unlike your siblings, having no GCSEs let alone university degrees, hasn't mattered. You can still beat them at chess, answer just as many questions in quizzes and read more novels. Your ability to get on with everyone has opened many doors, and tales from your teenage years light up the faces of many listeners. Very few fifteen-year-olds have been befriended by international hip-hop artists, made a judge laugh in court, and invited an international rugby player to discuss a dispute 'outside' if they had a problem.

You may be a little embarrassed when your beautiful mother waxes lyrical about you to relatives and friends. Their bemused look when she insists that your apprenticeship has given her more joy than your brother's Cambridge degree. Even in your darkest days not once did she stop loving you with all her being, and now when all (well, nearly all!) sections of your brain are connected you probably know that.

Love, Dad

Liam • 65–74 • Charente, France • Retired Cardiologist

A letter to my son as he leaves,

‘You run on ahead, I’ll wait here.’

You left me at the bench in the park and I watched as you ran off to play. You looked back, for reassurance or to reassure? And I waved. And you ran, and you climbed, and you slid . . . and you fell. A heartbeat. I stood up. But you got up, brushed yourself down and continued playing. So I sat back down.

You were three then. Now you are nearly twenty-one. And, as you turn away to pick up your bags, I say those same words again. They are the hardest words to say, but I know that there can be no other way. That I have to take a step back in order to give you the space to take a step forward. This recurring moment of heartbreak which will last a lifetime for me. But brown-eyed son of mine, this is your time now. And you must go.

The day you were born I held you in my arms and I sang to you: ‘My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose’—‘And I will love you still, my dear, till all the seas gang dry.’ And your brown eyes looked up at me for the first time. I promised that day that I would always be there for you, always love you, no matter how much time passed or how far apart we found ourselves. Those words still hold true.

We have talked about how my relationship with my own father was painful and difficult. Serial adulterer, who put his career and ambition before his wife and his son, who left when I was nine and again when I was ten, and then again when I was eleven. And who died when I was thirteen. The fragile boy grew into the fatherless father.

I wanted it to be different for you. ‘Papa Poule’, your French mother called me. ‘Daddy Hen’, because I would smother you with love. Maybe too much. You would grimace as my rough, stubbled face kissed you too hard. You would squirm as I squeezed you too tight. But I didn’t want to let go of you. And you understood even back then. You never pushed away.

And then there was that time when you were nine and I was suffering with anxiety again. You stood on the kitchen bench. You took me in your arms and your brown eyes, level with mine, looked at me again. And you told me, ‘It will be alright, Dad.’

Now I stand on the first step of the stairs and I rest my head on your shoulder. And when I step down I look up at you. And I see the warm, kind brown eyes of the strong, modern man in front of me, passionate about his convictions and defender of others. My heart aches with pride and love. I tell you that I just wish you could see yourself the way that others see you. ‘Yes, Dad!’ you sigh. And I can see that you are excited about the next phase in your life and you are keen to get going.

So, you run on ahead, my brown-eyed boy. And don’t look back.

David • 55–64 • Retired Teacher

My son,

You would have turned thirty on the 27th of December. I still say that sentence slowly, because time stopped for me when you were taken at twenty-four, and yet somehow the years keep moving forward without you. I write this letter not because you need it, but because I do. Because being your father never ended.

When I was a young man, there was a moment that shaped me more than I realised at the time. I learned that strength doesn't come from proving yourself to others, but from knowing who you are when no one is watching. I wish I had understood that earlier, and I hope in some way you came to know it too—that quiet confidence matters more than noise, and character outlasts reputation.

Becoming a father taught me more about being a man than anything else in my life. I learned that real masculinity is rooted in responsibility, patience and love. It's about showing up, even when you're tired. It's about listening more than speaking, and choosing kindness when it would be easier to turn away.

Some of my happiest memories are the ones we made through music. Creating music with you was one of the greatest gifts of my life. We wrote lyrics together, played the guitar side by side, and stood onstage performing to audiences together—father and son, sharing something that came straight from the heart. Those moments weren't just performances; they were conversations between our souls. We wrote a song called 'Life Is One Big Road', and seeing it reach number one in Jamaica and appear on CVM Television was unforgettable. But more than the success, it was the fact that we created it together that mattered most. That song carries your spirit, your voice, your energy—it still travels that road, long after you've gone.

The experiences we shared—through music, through conversation, through simply being together—shaped both of us. You grew into your own man, and I grew alongside you, learning how to let go while still holding on. Watching you find your voice, your independence, your way of seeing the world—that was one of the great privileges of my life.

Fatherhood changed me completely. It softened me and strengthened me at the same time. It taught me humility. It taught me fear—the kind that comes from loving someone more than yourself—and it taught me courage, because love demands it.

I continue to learn from you, even now. I've learned how to see the world through younger eyes. I've learned that joy can be found in unexpected places. And I've learned that love doesn't end—it transforms. My biggest challenge as a father was knowing when to guide and when to step back. Wanting to protect you from pain, while understanding that growth often comes through it. You surprised me many times—by your resilience, your opinions, your ability to challenge me simply by being yourself. I wish I had known when I was younger that life moves faster than you think, and that holding grudges, chasing approval, or staying silent about what matters are all wastes of precious time.

I hope you knew, always, how deeply you were loved. In a world of likes, judgement and cancellations, I would tell you this: your worth is not negotiable. It doesn't come from applause or approval. Stay true to yourself, even when it's uncomfortable. Especially then. Friendships and relationships in this digital age can be confusing. I hope you learned to value depth over attention, honesty over image, and real connection over constant connection. The people who matter will meet you where you are. When I think of men I admire, it's not their power or success that stands out—it's their kindness, their consistency, their willingness to take responsibility for their actions and their care for others.

Music is still how I speak to you. My latest collaboration with your friends is called 'Life Is Not the Same Without You'. It reflects our deep loss, and the thoughts of you that we share every single day. Through that song, you are still with us—felt, heard and remembered. Your life, no matter how short, left an imprint that cannot be erased. You are thirty now, my son. And you are still my greatest teacher, my greatest pride, and my greatest love.

Your loving father always

Nimroy

This letter is my hand on your shoulder. Proof that even when I’m quiet, I’m here.

Alex • 35–44 • London, UK • Creative

Dear Oliver and Leo,

I remember the exact moment I met each of you. You were both premature. Both around five pounds. Tiny properly tiny in outfits that didn't fit.

Oliver, you arrived first, you caught me by surprise, what started as a birthday night out that ended with you in my world.

Leo, you followed and nearly interrupted a shopping trip in Harrods but you managed to hang on and arrived later that day.

From the beginning, you were both tiny but quickly got bigger, you both slept through the night from twelve weeks and were a dream as I learned how to become a dad.

The firsts came thick and fast.

First steps, those determined, slightly wobbly marches across the living room that we applauded like Olympic finals.

First words, you both muttered the word 'Dad', an exciting and proud moment in my life.

First day at school, oversized jumpers, brave faces, and book bags as big as you both. The nativities were great, with you proudly wearing your costumes and confidently delivering your lines.

Then football properly entered the picture, first goals, first trophies and the first time I shouted tactical advice from the touchline much to your embarrassment. Moving on to our Saturdays with our beloved AFC Bournemouth, the ups and downs, the trips away, from League One to the Premier League, a moment I never thought I'd see let alone be able to celebrate it with my two sons. Those Saturdays are never just about football. They are about spending time together win or lose it never dampens our spirits.

Family holidays followed the usual script, Dad getting stressed with the airport experience and hoping you both behaved on the flight. The challenge of applying suncream to the pool games and the diving competitions some great times together with great memories I will remember forever.

Somewhere between incubators and stadium stands, you grew into young men.

Oliver, a sensitive soul that has always had a competitive side. You've dealt with change at important times in your life and are now thriving at university. I am so proud of you and excited to see where your career takes you.

Leo, a brave lad that has dealt with a lot. I am so proud of how you handled your diabetes diagnosis at the age of thirteen and the way you haven't let it stop you. Your love for football and family is seen by all. You're tackling college and the challenges A levels throw at you determined to get the grades to progress to university. I am so proud of you and looking forward to seeing you succeed.

Those tiny five-pound boys are now two young men I respect, trust and look forward to spending time with.

From first steps to wherever your next steps take you, from nativity plays to Premier League stands, from family holidays to lives that will stretch far beyond mine you have and continue to be the greatest privilege of my life. I'm proud to call you both my sons.

And just to be clear: if Bournemouth ever win a major trophy or qualify for Europe we celebrate together wherever we are, no excuses.

I love you both with all my heart.

Dad

Mark • 45–54 • Bournemouth, UK • Managing Director

To Raith,

This is a message to you.

I want to take a moment to tell you something that I hope you never forget and will always hold close to your heart, I am so incredibly proud of watching the person you've become, fills my heart in ways I cannot put into words. Your strength, your kindness and the amazing attitude you have towards life on a day to day basis is just incredible, the way you face life on your own sense of purpose amazes me more than you know, you don't just make me proud because of what you do but of who you are . . . you bring so much happiness and joy into my life, just knowing you're in this world being you makes my days brighter and my heart fuller, you've taught me more than you will ever realise, about love, patience, joy and what being a dad is all about and what truly matters in life. No matter where life takes you and what challenges come your way please always remember that you are deeply loved and supported and you can do anything if you put your mind and the winners' mentality you've got inside you towards it. I fully believe you can do anything in life and will be very successful while growing towards your dreams. Being your dad is one of the greatest gifts of my life. No matter where life takes you always remember I'm here for you and will always have your back. I'm proud to be your dad and I'm even prouder to call you my son. Thank you for being you and bringing so much meaning and happiness into my life. I love you more than words can say, love you always Raith love DAD x

Johnathan • 35–44 • Leicester, UK • Builder

Hey guys,

Let’s start by acknowledging the awkwardness of me trying to communicate something intimate and meaningful to you in a format that’s designed to be read by tens of thousands of strangers.

I could say I love you, which I think you know, and tell you how proud I am of you, which I think you also know, and you’d rightly suspect I was aiming my words, at least in part, at all those readers eavesdropping on our little colloquy—that I was performing for them and not for you.

And now I’m thinking of you giving me a hard time for using a word like colloquy. ‘Dad and his cringe words.’

You’ve always kept me on my toes. You never put up with too much of my nonsense.

I’ve no idea if you think I’ve been a good father to you. I hope you do. I sometimes think a dad’s mission is to do the least bad job he can. ‘Fail again. Fail better,’ as Samuel Beckett wrote. (Dad’s being pretentious again.)

I know I’ve been impatient, disorganised, passive, silly . . . anger-prone at times, and also overly jokey.

Aged two or three, piqued by too many dad comedy bits, one of you said to me, with genuine annoyance: ‘Stop saying silly things all time!’ It became a kind of family catchphrase.

Sometimes my joking has been a kind of avoidance . . . a way to not get too emotional . . . Or it’s been an attempt to recognise the absurdity that runs through life. Joking and teasing is the lingua franca of the family . . . a way to cut through the preening or self-importance. Maybe sometimes it’s been a little bit barbed . . .

You are each of you distinct and very different. One of my greatest satisfactions is seeing what good friends you are to each other. (Most of the time.)

Two of you are grown now. I look back and wonder where the time went. It passed so quickly. But I also remember those endless nights . . . when you weren’t sleeping, or not napping, the trudging back and forth to twilit parks, long hours pushing you on swings, the overcrowded and fetid

soft play areas and smelly petting zoos . . . It seemed—at times—purgatorial.

I once met a woman in Fresno, for a documentary. She and her husband were hopelessly addicted to crystal meth. They'd had five boys. She'd cleaned up during the pregnancies. Then, having delivered these perfect children, she'd resumed her drug-taking. Each of the boys had been taken into care.

'I'd give anything to change a dirty diaper,' she said.

It stayed with me. Maybe as an example of the power of addiction. That, in some cases, it's stronger than the desire to be a parent. Also—as anyone who's changed a lot of nappies knows—it gets old quick. But I knew what she meant. The pain and slog of raising kids is part of what you come to miss. And then, when it's gone, maybe you romanticise it a bit.

Do I have regrets? I hope I didn't rush through it too much. If I had to do it over, I'd try to be that little bit more chill. In general, where we go wrong in life, I think, it's by punishing too much, not too little.

Mainly I remember the good times—like when Uncle Andy used to stay over and we'd play Buzz on the old PlayStation, and that Christmas we watched all the Die Hard films on successive nights . . . and family football games at Granny's . . . and the little rituals we had on holiday, the beaches and restaurants we'd go to.

Looking back, I think about how you made me a better person. Or you made me try to be one.

Here endeth the colloquy. (Cringe.)

Love Dad

Louis • 55–64 • London, UK • Journalist and Broadcaster

'It's just a cider, he'll be alright.' You were about thirteen, and having a drink with your dad at Christmas was the expected thing. I couldn't wait to fast-forward until you were eighteen (OK let's be honest, sixteen) so we could have a few pints, game of pool and watch the match in the pub. We're father and son, it's what we do.

‘I’m an alcoholic and it’s so fucking lonely.’ You were twenty-three years old when you told me. I’ve never told you this but do you want to know what my immediate reaction was? You can’t be an alcoholic at twenty-three, don’t be so ridiculous. Have a few months off and just drink a bit less, you’ll be fine. You can’t be an alcoholic at twenty-three.

I was heartbroken but not necessarily for you, heartbroken for me. I cried, I’m crying now, I’d lost my drinking buddy, it’s not the same with one of your sisters. I’m ashamed to admit to these thoughts and I can only hope that my actions since have been more supportive. What kind of a dad does that make me? I haven’t worked out the answer to that question yet but your strength, courage, grit, determination and grace over the last fifteen months of your sobriety make me wish I’d been the kind of dad to you that you will be to your future son.

You took me to an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting while we were on a short break in Barcelona where the group asked you to deliver the opening without notice or preparation. You have a superpower, use it wisely. It’s almost impossible not to dwell on your sobriety struggles but there’s no doubt it’s taught us both a lot about how to navigate through the rest of life and has undoubtedly made me a better person.

I’ve always feared death, not because I don’t want to go (you know I’ll live to one hundred anyhow), but because I won’t be around to help you with stuff and I don’t want you to have to do it alone. You’ve taken away that fear because you’ve proved to me that you can fight the biggest battles and one day you’ll win the war . . . I’m crying happy tears this time!

I don’t know how long this letter should be, I used to think I had all the answers but I’ve long since given up on that notion. There is so much I could write but I’m holding back some bits because I’m going to muster up the courage to actually talk to you about them, you taught me that much! You’ve changed me in endless ways, better ways, more compassionate ways and I’ll try to live out the next 48 years getting better still because I owe you that much.

Remember—don’t give up on you because I never will.

I love you, son.

Tony • 45–54 • Staffordshire, UK • Operations Director

There are things I wish I had known earlier in life—lessons that took me years, miles and a lot of growing up to understand. When I graduated college, I packed up, moved across the country and started fresh. At the time, it felt exciting—freedom, independence, the world ahead of me. But what I didn't realise was that distance can do funny things. It gives you space to grow, but it can also quietly build walls between you and the people who love you most. I thought I had time—time to call, time to visit, time to really understand who my parents were beyond just being 'Mom and Dad'. Parents have stories, regrets, and dreams of their own. By the time I started to understand that, a lot of time had already passed.

If there's one thing I can tell you, it's this: stay connected. No matter how far you go or how busy life gets, keep a thread tied to the people who love you. You'll never regret the time you spend with them, but you might regret the time you don't.

I also wish I had known that it's okay not to have everything figured out. In your twenties, everyone seems to be racing ahead—jobs, relationships, plans. But life isn't a straight line. It's a winding road, and the detours are often where the best parts happen. Be curious. Be kind. And don't be afraid to reach out—to ask for help, to say you miss someone, to admit when you don't know the answer.

Most of all, remember that independence doesn't mean isolation. You can build your own life while still carrying your family and your roots with you. That balance—between growth and gratitude—is something I wish I'd learned earlier.

I'm proud of the people you are both becoming, and I hope you keep learning, loving, and staying close—even when life pulls you in new directions.

With all my love,
Dad

Ben • 45–54 • California, US • Manager

Son,

When I found out I was going to be a dad it was a turning point in my life. I had drifted from one job to another with no purpose and I needed some direction. I promised your mum that I was going to do something positive with my life. I was going to be a part of something and be a success. I started a new job and I had drive and ambition for the first time. I worked hard and proved that I could achieve my goals. My biggest regret is losing my dad before he saw me realise my dreams and becoming a dad myself. Maybe it's because I never really came to terms with his death when I was still so young myself that I lost my way and turned to recreational drugs to dull the pain. But then your sister was born and although we now had two beautiful children my struggles with previous issues in my life consumed me and I still felt I was a failure and that your life would be better without me. But thankfully over time and with the love and support from my family and close friends I found the strength to overcome my demons and I started to push forward with positivity and a new outlook on life. Watching you grow up and seeing your interest in boxing was something I took great joy in as it had always been a passion of mine. I'm sure you could have took things further but I know your mum was massively relieved that you didn't. You always got on with everyone and that showed when you started to work as the customers loved you. I always tried to give you advice and support by being honest about my mistakes and thankfully you haven't gone down that path. As a family we have always spoken about how we feel. Growing up I struggled with feeling like I was a disappointment and didn't always feel that I was loved and I know that sometimes I struggle to show my feelings in that way while at other times I show too much how I feel. We didn't have the little luxuries or treats when you were growing up like most of your friends but we had some of the best times and watching old videos of our holidays away brings back some wonderful memories. Hopefully we all value the things in life that really matter. Seeing the children that you and your sister were and seeing the amazing young people you have both become me and your mum couldn't be prouder. You have made your own way in life with families of your own. Becoming

grandparents has probably been the proudest moment of our life. Seeing the different personalities, the joy of spending time together and watching them grow up is a blessing that we treasure. I might not say it often enough but as your father I want to tell you that you and your sister are loved more than you will ever know. Never change. We love you just the way you are. Love always. Your father. Xx

Gray • 55–64 • Leicestershire, UK • Retired

Tom.

I never got a hug from my dad, I'm sure he never got a hug from his. I love him dearly but he was cold and never showed emotion. It's not his fault, it's just how things were. Sadly I appear to have inherited this. I've tried over the past couple of years to hug him, he doesn't like it, nor do I, it feels all wrong so we remain settled on shaking hands.

When you left after Christmas you went to shake my hand, there was an awkward pause and then I hugged you. It was awkward but I had to. I don't recall the last time we did. I was mortified that I didn't know how to hug my own son. I'm going to hug you again, and will continue to. Hopefully one day it will feel normal, it's not your fault, its mine.

Hold the people you love close, and please show them emotion rather than protective walls built around yourself like me.

Dad

Anonymous

A good man isn't successful financially or professionally; he doesn't need to win at sports or be the cleverest in the room. A good man puts others before himself; he finds pleasure in seeing joy in those around him rather than seeking happiness for himself. A good man makes the right decision not the easy one especially if no one will ever know what you chose to do.

When I was about ten, I went on holiday to France with my parents. One evening we went out to dinner and my father said I could choose anything I liked. I had recently discovered a love for prawns and crayfish, and the restaurant had a live lobster tank, I asked for the biggest one (as ten-year-old boys do) and the waiter whispered in my dad's ear. It was obviously ridiculously expensive, and he said I couldn't have that but I could pick anything else. Completely unbothered by this I had something else and promptly forgot about it.

Spin on about fifteen years and I had become a father myself. While

staying with my parents in Cornwall we were discussing regrets one Jack Daniel's-fuelled evening, and my father said to me that he had very few himself save that lobster. I barely recalled the incidentbut he reminded me of the details and then said (with a wistful look into the middle distance) he regretted it because 'I can never go back and buy you that lobster'. I consoled him and reassured him that it was of literally no consequence to me. This conversation stuck in my head, however, as it was the first time I ever saw him look that way.

Spin on a few more years and I was at a steam rally, and I had 60 quid on me plus some loose change, and they were selling short helicopter flights for £20 per person. The two oldest of you boys were just about old enough to appreciate it, but as that was all the money I had I walked on, but then my dad's words echoed in my head 'I can never go back and buy you that lobster'. I immediately turned on my heel, we went for a flight and it was one of the best experiences as a young father, to this day it's the only time any of us have been on a helicopter and it never would have happened if my dad hadn't told me how much not taking that opportunity when he had the chance still bothered him.

It was one of the most formative experiences of my young fatherhood, probably of my life, one where I can literally pinpoint the exact moment that generational wisdom of grabbing every opportunity life gives you, passed from my father to me and then to you, my children (who have heard this story many, many, times), and it gave rise to my life motto: carpe locustus—seize the lobster, because you can never go back and have a second chance to take lost opportunities.

Mark • 45–54 • Buckinghamshire, UK • DT Technician

Travelling to foreign countries is so much more rewarding than spending time in the pub. And with the cost of a pint nowadays, probably cheaper.

Sean • 55–64 • West Sussex, UK • Senior marketing executive

Dear Dale,

Well, I couldn’t even write a letter much less have a conversation but I did a poem because, well, I can I think. Sorry that’s the easy option I know. Love you son. Dad Xxx

‘Four simple words (For Dale)’

Not unlike McCartney’s ‘Picasso’,
Everyone has a quotable quote,
But yours hit me like a sledgehammer,
And made me sit up and take note.

Meted at the end of a perfect day,
After loungers, mocktails and pool, Tenerife sunset, balcony,
Perfect timing to catch an old fool.

What brought you to this conclusion?
Bottles in the recycling bin?
Or was it something more subtle,
Feeding the dogs while I lay in?

Four simple words, in your head for months,
Before they left your mouth with such quiet, purposeful conviction
And brutal honesty:
‘You drink too much.’

Keith • 55–64 • County Antrim, UK • Civil Servant

To my remarkable son Ibelin/Mats,

You were born on a warm, sunny, summer morning. It fitted my dream perfectly. I wanted you to be a footballer—like me (not a big challenge). But you never kicked a ball.

Your mother wanted you to run in the mountains and the forests like she did. But you never ran.

I dreamt that you would be a popular boy and man, experiencing friendships, achievements, love, and that you would get married and have many children. You lived most of your life in isolation.

At the age of four I learned that we had brought you into this world with a muscle disease. A condition which gradually would take away all your abilities, all your muscles and in the end your heart, which is also a muscle.

We got to spend twenty-five years, four months and fifteen days together.

You were never bitter nor did you feel unfairly treated by nature as could be considered natural in your situation. You were always by and large happy, curious, searching, welcoming, inclusive, listening, respectful and helpful. I never understood how you could be so positive living your life with such huge limitations. It is only after your passing that I have learned that you lived a rich social life, a colourful romantic life, and most of your time you invested in helping others, building a strong purpose in your life. You had a superpower—you made the most out of the life you were given (I cannot say the same for myself)—and you had a secret—you found the joy and value in helping others (here we all have something to learn from you). You lived out these sides of your life through a screen—on video-game arenas, role-playing through your avatar Ibelin, while I thought you were wasting your limited time. These arenas I didn’t see nor understood. These arenas my generation had spent five minutes analysing and ten years condemning. I should have joined you, I should have met your friends, I should have been much more curious about this part of your life, but I wasn’t and this is sad.

If I were to condense all the things I have learned from your life into one sentence, it would be this: SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND FOR THEN

TO BE UNDERSTOOD. As for your digital arenas that became so important to you, I failed in this respect.

Although you lived a short life, it was richer than most people living to a hundred get to experience.

Your story and your life are now being shared by literally millions of people all over the world through articles, books, podcasts and movies so that other parents can learn from our experience.

You die twice—once when your body disappears and the second time when the last memory of you disappears. You will live for a long, long time, my son.

Dear Matsi, I love you, I have loved you since before you were born, I will always love you. And you made me much more proud living such a powerful life in a weak body than you would have done becoming world champion in football.

I wanted a son who was a marginally better version of myself, but you gave me so much more—for which I will be forever grateful.

Thank you, my son—you are missed but never forgotten.

Dad

Robert • 55–64 • Oslo, Norway • Politican and Author

My dearest Luca and Enzo,

There’s something I must confess to you both.

It may sound strange at first.

It may even sound wrong.

But it’s the truth.

I used you. Both of you.

And here’s what I mean.

I used you to remind myself what innocence looks like—a heart that trusts completely, that hasn’t yet learned to brace.

I used you when you looked at me like I was safe, and I realised I had spent much of my life scanning for danger, still learning how to feel safe myself.

I used you to drown out the voices in my head that told me I was behind, that I was failing, that I was becoming the very thing I feared.

I used you to hear the sound of my own laughter again—because somewhere along the way, I had forgotten it.

I used you to practise being present, so you would never have to wonder if I was really there.

I used you to become the father I was still trying to understand. And in doing that, I began to understand my own father a little more, each day.

I used you to confront the pain I carried from him—the quiet kind, the kind that teaches you to need less and say even less; his silence, his sadness, and the distance I learned to call normal.

I used you to forgive him—because loving you helped me see that he, too, was carrying something he didn't know how to put down.

I used you to grow up, in ways I thought I already had. To forgive—not just him, but myself. To try again. To have faith again. To find purpose again.

I used you to rewrite the script I was handed—where men simply 'coped' and connection was something you learned to live without.

I used you to soften my edges—the ones I once mistook for strength.

I used you to prove that silence does not have to be masculinity—that strength can sound like 'I love you' and 'I'm sorry'.

I used you to stay sober in ways that weren't just about alcohol—sober from anger, from withdrawal, from the reflex to numb what felt too heavy to hold.

I used you as medicine. Not because you were responsible for healing me—you never were—but because loving you made healing inevitable.

I used you to grow in my love for your mother—to see her not just as my partner, but as a force. To respect her strength, to admire her resolve, and to understand that building a family requires something deeper than romance.

And if one day you read this and wonder whether that sounds selfish, I hope you understand something important.

I never used you for what you could become.

I used you for who you already were.

You did not arrive unfinished. You did not arrive needing to be moulded into something worthy. You arrived whole.

And in simply watching you be yourselves, I learned how to become myself.

So I guess you could say I used you to become the kind of ‘you’ I saw in you—honest, open, unguarded, brave in your feelings.

My greatest hope is that if I used you at all, it was in a way that helped you become more of who you already are.

That’s it.

I am eternally grateful and love you more than you will ever fully understand.

Dad

Mario • 45–54 • Brooklyn, US • Builder

Dear son,

You’re twenty now, just starting your second year at university (although I swear you were only born last Tuesday...), and I’m writing this because I want you to know a few things while you’re still young enough for them to matter, but old enough to actually hear them.

I learned something once that changed how I see the world: subconscious bias lives in everyone—in me, in you, in all of us. I came to understand that how we react to triggers is about recognising the drivers behind the emotion, and that only I am responsible for how I respond. The moment I realised life wasn’t about me, but about what’s happening around me, everything shifted.

Here’s what I mean. Rivalries, stereotypes and snap judgements live in us all—they sneak in through banter, headlines or the scroll of a feed. But if you pause for half a second and really look at the person in front of you, you’ll almost always find someone just trying to get through the day like you are. It seems obvious, but it’s easy to forget. Stand up for what’s right, but never at someone else’s expense. The measure of a person isn’t where they’re from, what they believe, or who they love—it’s how they treat people and the difference they make.

There’s a lot happening in your generation that worries me—the anti-woke thing, the casual narcissism, the misogyny dressed up as ‘just being real’. The populist world of 2026 is noisy. The rhetoric can sound logical if you don’t look too closely, but it’s built on fear and hate hiding behind the language of patriotism and values. You’re a good human. I see that every day. There’s no malice or prejudice in you, and I’m proud of that. Still, watch the casual stuff—the jokes, the throwaway lines. Everyone slips. What matters is noticing it and choosing to do better next time.

Stay curious about people who aren’t like you. Challenge those knee-jerk thoughts when they come. Put kindness before comfort. It isn’t easy, and it isn’t quick. Those biases I’m talking about never really disappear; you just learn to spot them sooner. I still have to do that every day. At some point, you’ll have a moment of humility—the kind that stops you in your tracks. You’ll realise you’re both blessed and responsible: for your own path

and for the way you make others feel along it. You've got the power to make people feel wanted, safe and happy just by showing compassion.

You already have a head start. You're sharp, quick, gifted at sport, and you can hold a room. But real leadership isn't about skill—it's about your story. Be open. Be honest. When you share who you are, people will follow because they'll trust the truth in you.

You've got more ambition and direction than I ever did at your age, and that's brilliant—just remember, happiness sits somewhere between ambition and peace. Keep both close, and you'll be alright. So when you're thiry, forty, fifty—facing choices that matter—carry this with you: the response you get is the message you send. Be curious, not judgemental.

And most of all—don't be a dick. I wish I'd understood sooner that doing good quietly is better than being right loudly. What really matters is how we behave when nobody's watching, not when we've got an audience. It's that simple, and that complicated.

By the way, I still struggle to remember this stuff every day—but I'm keen and trying (like my golf game...).

Love,
Dad

Anonymous

Count your blessings and phone your mum more.

Drew • 65–74 • Merseyside, UK • Actor

Hello, Nik. Now that you are twenty-one, I feel as if I can speak to you as one adult to another. I have dozens of reasons to write this letter, but one outweighs them all: the constant sirens and explosions that can be heard in the city every week. Even back when I was working as a journalist at the front, recording interviews right in the trenches, I had already accepted the possibility that I might die. But what frightened me most was something else—that I might not have time to talk to you again, to tell you what truly matters.

I no longer live on the front line, but hundreds of kilometres away from it. Yet rockets and 'shahed' drones reach this far every week. I'm afraid I won't be able to do everything I've planned in life. And I'm afraid I won't be able to tell you what truly matters to me. That's why I'm writing.

First and foremost, you might be wondering why I remain in Ukraine, knowing that my life is at risk. Indeed, I had the chance to leave. But I would have lost all respect for myself if I had. It's as simple as that. An enemy has attacked our country. And it wants either to destroy us or to turn us into slaves. It's just like in The Lord of the Rings—the orcs have come for the people. I have taken up the fight. My weapon is not a gun, but words. I want to tell people the truth about this war. I truly believe that it is the truth that will help bring it to an end.

That is why I stayed. That is why, for two and a half years, I risked my life, travelling along the front line, helping foreign journalists cover the war, and writing reports and even a book on what I saw. That is why I joined the army, to serve my country. Once again: I could have left. Men of conscription age are not allowed to leave the country, but I have an exemption because I am a father of three children. One thought always stopped me: what kind of life would await me in Europe? The life of a refugee, odd jobs in a restaurant, canteen or care home—just to keep a roof over my head and food on the table? I wouldn't even be able to support our army. Right now in Ukraine, everything comes down to one simple truth: you are either in the army, for the army, or against the army. That's the reality of war. It's as simple as that—there are no grey areas; there isn't room for doubt or debate.

So, there you have it—that's what I believe. You may have known it without me saying it, but I wanted it to be written down. This doesn't mean I think our country is perfect or wonderful. There is much I dislike—the

way things are run, the behaviour of some politicians and commanders. But I remember John F. Kennedy's words: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. I stayed to fight for my country's freedom. So that one day, when the war is over, you can come back home and live in a peaceful and free country. In the country for whose freedom your father fought. It may sound a little grand. But you cannot speak about values and faith without a certain grandeur.

I won't say that every man must defend his country. It's not about the country, nor about the man or gender roles. We have many women in the army, and they are no less strong or capable. It's not about whether you're a man or a woman—every person has a duty to fight evil, and evil has attacked our country. And so this fight against evil takes the form of participating in the war by serving in the army or supporting the army. Of course, this is not the only way to fight evil in the world. You, for example, have chosen to become a teacher, and that, too, is a form of service.

Sometimes I look at our old photographs and recall the past. Sometimes I remember the first days after you were born. Your mum and I invited many friends over. We were the first in our circle to have a child, and it felt like everyone wanted to congratulate us. One of my friends asked me, 'Do you feel like a father yet?' I didn't know what to say. I was overwhelmed. There was suddenly a new person in my life, a person born out of your mum's love and mine. My first feelings as a father were wonder, awe and anxiety. I was afraid to hold you in my arms, afraid to bathe you. You were a tiny baby, completely dependent on us. You cried—and your mum nursed you. You fell asleep—and she could finally rest. For a time, her entire world revolved around caring for you. I will never cease to admire this almost-sacred power in women—the ability to create life, nurture it and sustain it.

It makes me sad that I have to write this letter at all. It is yet another visible and obvious confirmation that I am not with you. After all, if you were living with me, I wouldn't have to write any letters. I would simply talk to you every day; you would see how I live, how I interact with people, what I do and why—and that would be enough. Children don't remember our words, but our actions, and they adopt our way of life. Or they leave it behind, if we behave unworthily. The hardest thing about these years of separation isn't the shelling, rockets or power cuts. The hardest thing is opening the front door after work and not hearing 'Daddy's home!'

I wanted to write to you about raising children—but you know more about that than I do now. You're training to be a nursery teacher; you're with children every day. All I ask is that you don't repeat my mistakes with your own children. Spend time playing with them while they're still small. Be there.

There are now over 2,000 kilometres between us. It's not just hard to be away, it's hard to think that it's for your good. To care for you and your future, I have to be far away from you. To fight the enemies who have attacked our country and want to take away our futures, I have to give up the time I would otherwise spend by your side. I hope one day you'll understand.

We parents like to think we know which moments shaped our children. We're usually wrong. It turns out the things that stay with you are the ones where you were watching, and we didn't even know it. Let's talk about this soon. I have a fortnight's leave coming, and I'll be there to see you. I don't know what you think you've learned from me, but I know what I've managed to give you: how to read, think and explore the world. And smaller things, like how to ride a bike. We went swimming together, and I decided to find you a coach. Now your breaststroke is faster than mine. You've learned languages and left me behind in them. You know, that's the greatest joy for me as a father, when my children become better and stronger than me.

Your ever-loving father,
Vlad

Vladyslav • 45–54 • Kyiv region, Ukraine • Journalist

(Translated from Ukrainian by Marta Gosovska)

Dear boys,

Being your dad has been one of the greatest adventures of my life. It has taken me to places I never imagined existed and—even now—I am not sure I can fully explain. The love you feel in the first moments of being handed your baby son is overwhelming, and to see that precious baby grow to become a man is a journey you may find yourself on one day and so these are the top five lessons I would share with you.

1. It goes faster than you imagine. I blinked and that baby became an adult and somewhere along the way we managed to get through the scrapes that come with childhood and the period when all teenagers are dickheads, to moments when my child is the wisest person in the room and they allow me to lean on them. We tried to fill your childhood with fun things, but if I was to tell you to do something with your kids it would be schedule time in to do nothing. Just being with you doing nothing is the thing I would have liked more of because it is amazing how just being together is enough. Do nothing together and you have done everything.

2. The saddest day being a father of boys is a day you don't even notice, it is the day you son lets go of your hand and he will never hold it again. When I think of that, it can crack my heart but it is also inevitable, and let's be honest if I was walking around holding hands with you now I would look like some kind of sugar daddy. Boys step away from their fathers but I now know they find a way to come back. We spend more time talking now than ever so when your son lets go of your hand don't fret, just do your best to keep the light on so they can find their way home.

3. Like me you will probably have to parent in a world you haven't lived in. Technology changed everything and looks

like it will continue to do so. Embrace what is good. I wish I had played more computer games with you. I would have been good at Grand Theft Auto for reasons I don't need to explain here, but always remember nothing beats the simple things like sitting in the garden eating pizza like we did a few weeks ago.

4. Hindsight comes too late to make a difference. There will always be things you wished you got better. I know if I was doing it all again I would be better now because I am older and I know things that it would have been impossible to have known when I could fit all three of you on my back. If I tried to retrace my steps it would be futile, things have moved on and if I tried to put all three of you on my back now, I would end up in A&E. Do the best you can at the time and move on, that's all anyone can do.

5. Don't be scared of words. You are all more able to finish a phone call saying 'Love you Dad' in a way I have not managed to do with my own Dad. It means everything to me that you can do that. Never lose it, not with your own kids but also with whomever you share this life with. I am in my fourth decade with your mum and we understand each other more now than ever because we have learnt not to be scared of words, they are stepping stones to your heart.

You are good men. You will be ok and you will be good fathers if that happens for you, I know you will.

Love you boys from your first breath to my last.

Dad x

John • 55–64 • Sussex, UK • Comedian and Actor

Hi son,

I’ve been given this opportunity to put into words something I’ve failed to ever say to you. I hope you understand my fumbling words and can appreciate what I’m trying to say. I was brought up in a world of ‘children should be seen and not heard’ and ‘silence is golden’. While this has now changed, and spun on its head even, it’s always been a part of me to seek the unspoken places.

I wanted to explain about the times where we never spoke. Those quiet spaces between conversations. I know there was always the mini-interrogations on the way back from school, the deep analysis to and from matches and even during the longer journeys in the car during holidays, but these were also filled with a deep silence. These long spaces are part of my tacit nature but I’ve realised that perhaps they might be misunderstood.

For me, you see, during the quiet there are feelings that I desperately project towards you, like iron filings to a strong magnet, pulled and dragged, from me to you, misshapen and malformed but nevertheless pouring out with hope and love. I’m comfortable in the stillness but hope you understand that, though I am afflicted by a hereditary masculine muteness, the silence we carry together is really just radiating the words I fail to say that I know I should speak out loud: ‘I love you my son, now and forever.’

Dad

Terry • 55–64 • Surrey, UK • Retired

Hello my mate,

Wow, where do I start? From the moment you were born, I held you tightly in my arms and you looked at me with your big brown eyes. I knew from that moment on, my life had changed in ways I never expected. The overwhelming feeling I felt of love, happiness, excitement and most importantly responsibility instantly kicked in. It felt like my life had just begun. It was time for me to step up and be a man and be there for you in every way possible.

Now you have made me incredibly proud of how you have grown into a young man with values, love, respect, honesty, care and compassion. Now, I am going through the times where I know nothing and you know everything. I remember it well with my own father, so I am looking forward to the days when you have a child yourself and you realise every decision I make is with good intentions, helping you become the best version of yourself.

My advice to give to you would be to love unconditionally, listen, be patient, be kind, be polite, appreciate life—despite the challenges you might face. Share your thoughts and feelings, realising that this makes you more of a man, not less so. Work hard but also play hard.

Try to be the best version of yourself in everything you do.

I have loved you since the day you were born and I will love you until the day I die.

Lee • 55–64 • Merseyside, UK • Education Officer

For all the embarrassing Dad moments, I apologise.

Grant • 65–74 • Scotland • Retired

Hi son,

I hope you are well and happy. It has now been over a year since we last spoke. I fully respect that it's your right to choose whether you want to speak with me or if you want me in your life. I had a terrible relationship with my father and it's a regret that I have had all my life. However, I have always believed that history does not have to repeat. So, since before you were born, all I wanted was to offer you love, protection, support and guidance.

I have always been so proud of you, and I have felt blessed that you are my son. The fact that I have let you down so much when the business collapsed that you feel no communication with me is the only way forward is heartbreaking and I am sorry for putting you in that position.

Life is a winding road and it's how we deal with the failures that make us more resilient. Forgiveness is a gift that rewards both parties. I will always be there for you, and I hope time is not a barrier to getting in touch. I promise there will be no inquiry, no raking over the past. Unless you would like to talk, and I promise I will listen.

I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive and get in touch, just a text letting me know how you are is fine.

Take care, son.

All my love,
Dad

Nigel • 55–64 • Greater Manchester, UK • Retired

My lads,

I've been thinking about how lucky I am to have you both, not just as my sons, but as my teammates in life.

We have won a fair few trophies together over the years, and I'm not saying it was all down to me and my coaching skills, I'm not saying that. The graft, the muddy boots, the laughs, the celebrations, that's what really matters. We did it side by side.

Our dad and lads adventures and holidays are some of the best memories of my life, the three of us off and let loose.

Some memories still make me laugh and bring a tear to my eyes, or is that the tequila and lager, like the time you said, 'Dad, I am getting married.' 'Dad, we are buying a house.' I was so happy to see you both taking these steps, then reality set in and I thought how much is this going to cost me?! Or Father's Day and you always want to take me out but I always end up paying the bill.

But do you know what makes me the proudest? Watching you both with my grandkids. Seeing you teach them the same values, respect, kindness and fun. It tells me everything I need to know. It makes me realise I must have done something right with you two after all.

Seeing the men and fathers you've become honestly means more to me than any trophy ever could. Being your dad is my greatest win.

Big Ted

Terry • 55–64 • Liverpool, UK • Bistro owner

I am sitting at your desk on your PC writing this alone. I have never really written you a letter before, son, normally we would talk about our day or what we thought and sometimes how we felt. I always remember when you were young, a blond, smiling boy on rocket power, whizzing about the

place. Fiercely determined to do things and bloody fearless. Seeing you leap down a flight of stairs made me moan at you, and various trips to casualty made me whinge.

What always comes up when we talk to our friends is your wit and sense of humour, one-line spot-on quips and a quick exit. You tied me in knots laughing sometimes. Your jokes were sharp but not hurtful and we all got caught on occasion. I am grinning now thinking about us all playing word games and how sharp you and your sister were. King of the one-liners.

As you grew up I remember repeatedly saying you would be a unit like me, and if you are not careful, other people would be intimidated or treat you like a hooligan, because of their preconceptions about big men, especially young ones. I tried to show you how to be courteous and give people space. You made a much better job than me showing courtesy to people usually with a smile. How you dealt with my school friend's aged mother was a lesson to me in kindness and patience. People remarked to Mum and I how you behaved. A mother spoke to me how you had befriended her son and became his school buddy, without any prompting. You saw he needed the company to get his confidence in his new environment. I saw how you looked after your friends and schoolmates when they needed it and made peace when others wanted to fight. I am sure I said it then but it makes me so proud to remember that. It takes a lot more to stop fights then to start them.

When you got the photography and filmmaking bug and we could share some of it was such a great feeling for me, you're the fourth generation to embrace photography, and the first to actually make a go of filmmaking, YouTube channels and more. I started learning from you and was often in awe at how much you had absorbed and could do so ably. You taught me light box from scratch, thank you. We went to various universities to look at courses and you found the one for you on our doorstep.

We both started studying in the same term, then within months life shot it all down. You were ill, not a worry until I had to take you to hospital and was stood next to you when they told you you had cancer at four o'clock in the morning. The next few months were soul-destroying. We watched you fighting the disease and getting the treatment you needed, but so ill.

I remember you discussing your scans with the radiographers and they asked was it your job. No, you used to calibrate the machines and the trace

elements they use as part of your apprenticeship so you knew everything that was going on. We got to know all the staff and a lot more about how hospitals work than I ever wanted to. You impressed everybody that came into contact with you because you didn't moan and you tried so hard to do as asked. You showed the sort of man you are, your character and strength, in gently getting on with it all. Quiet strength is awesome to witness.

You asked us not to get upset around you. I couldn't make things worse for you by breaking down or weeping, and you were solid. You never talked to us about death, it would have been too much for us all I fear, but you made peace with each of us and told us to look after the others. I think you realised it was happening but would not surrender the fight.

You died aged just twenty-two years and have left a hole in all our lives.

One of the most moving things was I had to tell your clan on RuneScape what had happened, and they did not know anything about your illness. We had both played the game with your sister so it was the right thing to do. They were so kind, even in 'cyberspace' your character had shown out.

I miss being able to hug your shoulders or seeing you make a really quick joke and smile. Life is not the same without you, but we are doing what you asked. We moved somewhere different in the shires, we take life more gently and we think of you. Your sister and her husband live close to us, so we are looking after each other. We have two new cats that you would love.

I have seen bravery and courage in extreme conditions, but nothing like the manhood you displayed in the last few months of your life. I am stuck for words and tears are screwing up my vision. I love you and all the warmth you brought us and still do when we talk about family life and the things we did.

Goodnight, son, rest easy.

Dad

Chris • 65–74 • Sussex, UK • Drug and Alcohol Recovery Motivator

My boy. My firstborn.

I’m writing this because some words can’t be said out loud without cracking. The fact that I have to write them at all probably says more about us than anything written here ever could. But I need to try.

When you came into this world, I was still searching for a reason to belong. I’d spent most of my life walking through rooms like a stranger, even in my own skin. Then you arrived—this tiny, perfect proof that I could matter to someone. You made me feel seen for the first time. Needed. Wanted. Loved with no conditions, no expectations. You gave me a sense of place I didn’t even know I was missing. You gave me more than I have ever managed to give back.

It all started so well. The late-night feeds, the laughter that cracked through my chest like sunlight, the way your small hand used to hold my thumb like it was a whole world. But life doesn’t let you hold on to beginnings. The truth—the real, raw, uncut truth—is that love alone doesn’t save us from ourselves. I was drowning quietly, and I tried to convince myself that the bottle was a raft. It wasn’t. It was an anchor.

And so we drifted.

The warmth turned to words we both wish we could take back.

Hugs became distance.

Our silence grew thick enough to walk on.

Somewhere along the way, I became the man I never wanted you to meet. And you became the man I never had the courage to be.

But here we are—on the edge of something new. Maybe this letter is my way of swimming back towards you. Maybe it’s a flare sent up from somewhere I used to live. Maybe, in some strange way, I was meant to be your warning—a reminder that the past can shape us, but it doesn’t have to chain us.

My advice? Don’t spend your life trying to outrun me. Just be you. Because you are already everything I wished I could have been. You’ve broken cycles I couldn’t even name. You’ve faced things I ran from.

I know I can’t rewrite the years or fill the spaces where I should have stood. But I can tell you this with every breath left in me—I never stopped

believing in you. Not once. Not even on the worst days when I couldn't believe in myself.

You are my son. My mirror. My second chance walking around in a world that's finally big enough for both of us.

And I am proud—quietly, endlessly proud—of the man you are.

Ashley • 35–44 • Kent, UK • Actor and Musician

I make no bones about it, but I really wanted a son, I thank my lucky stars you arrived four days after my thirtieth birthday and it was without doubt the best and most amazing thing that has ever happened to me. My one and only son.

I can still remember the moment like it was yesterday, your 6lb little body being pulled out of your mum's tummy and me praying you were gonna be a boy. To my surprise I saw this little pair of purple balls and you weeing everywhere, which made me burst into tears . . . all my wishes and dreams had come true.

Until you came along life had been wonderful but also very cruel. I lost my mum, your nan, to cancer three years before you were born, this was by far the most painful thing that I have ever had to go through. One of the first things she said on the day she was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour was 'I'm never going to meet my grandchildren'. That, as you can imagine, broke my heart. I know she would have loved you to pieces as you were the son of her soldier as she used to call me. I'm so gutted that you never got to meet.

So, soldier on we did. You were just what I needed: someone that I could love unconditionally. You were a textbook child, never had a tantrum, always done as you were told, shared with other kids, just a dream... you still are today.

I always wanted to be a dad from my late teens and early twenties. My own dad wasn't really around when I was young and left your nan when I was fourteen years old, so I had to step up and grow up quicker than others, but you know what, this shaped me into being your dad that stands before

you today.

The next challenge was when me and your mum broke up just before your fourth birthday, but by now we had the most amazing, strong, loving bond that any father and son could possibly have, I said to myself and you this was NEVER going to change as long as I have a breath in my body. We spent every weekend together from four till seven years old, riding bikes, going on holiday, Thorpe Park, painting, baking cakes, the list goes on and on, but we were so happy in each other's company and the start of our beautiful friendship.

You have turned into one of the loveliest human beings that I know. I will take some credit for the man you are today, but you have beautiful qualities that have just come naturally to you. I'm sorry I've passed on the Manchester United gene.

I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the joy you've brought me for the last twenty-three years, I don't think you will ever know what you have done for me. You have made my life complete.

Now go on and enjoy life, be happy, work hard and be the best person you can be.

I love you, mate,
Dad x

Leon • 45–54 • London, UK • Chauffeur

Being a man isn't easy but I still think on balance it's easier than being a woman (see 'childbirth').

Andrew • 45–54 • Engineer

Dear chip off the old block,

What would I be if I still had all the money I spent on you? Poorer.

What would I be without the sad journey through your desperate times? Less wise.

What would I be if I didn’t see your travails each and every day? Uninspired.

What would I be if you hadn’t included me in your son’s life? Incomplete.

Thank you for being there for me.

Thank you for waiting until I need you most . . .

Thanks for letting me pay it forward.

And most of all, thanks for all the socks.

Love, Dad

Doug • 65–74 • Durham, UK

Dear sons,

I nearly missed you growing up. Between 1998, when I was made deputy head teacher, and a February day in 2011 when I was teaching Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, you two had morphed from toddlers into young men. Metaphorically, I had slept through the whole process.

When you were born, Mum and I wanted our house to be an open house. We planned for it to ring with youthful laughter. We hoped it would be a second home to all your friends. We imagined it alive with bright, young faces. But I put my work first and our dream died. I didn't mean to be a misery, but I know I was. I would take you both to football on a Sunday morning when I had school work to do. I would be moody when the kick-off was delayed. I would be mad with you if you didn't try. I felt like I was wasting my time, time when I could have been working. When your mates turned up, I would snap at them when they were rowdy, growl at them when they had a popcorn fight in the front room, bark at them to be quiet during sleepovers because I had to get up early to work. You and your mates soon grew afraid and you went to their houses to watch the footy, to hang out, to lark around because their folks were much more fun.

Despite the obvious signs of failure to connect with you both—and with you, J, especially—I ploughed on with my career and became a head teacher. And my head-teacher designation became a vehicle for abuse. 'Stop being a head teacher,' you would mutter, J, with no attempt to conceal your contempt for me. I justified my work obsession through the middle-class lifestyle it afforded us as a family, even though I knew that was nonsense. I ended up working even longer hours. Coming home late meant I didn't get to eat tea with you two and Mum. In so many ways I was an absent dad, though present every day. And the gulf between us grew wider.

But on that day in February 2011, teaching A-level English, Miller's insight changed my life. Near the end of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman clashes with his son Biff. As they fight Biff suddenly kisses him. Willy is astounded. We were watching a film version of the play before we got to read the text. Biff's kiss and Willy's response destroyed me. I had to leave the room, weeping uncontrollably. The students were bemused as I fled to

an office across the corridor.

A number of different issues surfaced in that classroom: my own dad's (your grandad's) sense of futility having spent forty-two years delivering letters as a postman, only to die three years before he could retire to tend his roses; my sense of failure at being unable to forge a healthy relationship with you; the hope that you both still loved me.

The next lesson I took my dad's alarm clock into class—the same despised alarm clock that had rung him out of bed at 4 a.m. every working day—and talked about it as a symbol of my relationships with both my dad and you; the whole sense that we can waste time without choosing and once it has passed, it's passed; how I wanted something wonderful for you two and I felt I'd mucked the whole thing up. I decided that day that if either of you ever asked me to do something I would do it, no matter how much work I had.

I've stuck to that principle fiercely for the past fifteen years. It has meant me going to bed later, getting up earlier and doing some work stuff just well enough, but that's OK. When it comes to work, just well enough is good enough, always. I hope you know I would do anything for you both. It's easy for a dad to say 'I put my family first' but not quite mean it. You're both grown men now, forging your own lives in your own way. If, one day, you have children yourselves, when they ask you to do something, if you possibly can, then do it. I know for sure you won't regret it.

With more love than you might ever imagine,
Dad xx

John • 55–64 • Yorkshire, UK • Head Teacher

When I first met you both, you were three. Beautiful, identical explosions of blond curls and laughter tumbling down a playground rocket ship and straight into my life. It was love at first sight.

Play-wrestling, cuddling, laughing, kicking a footy—that became our language. Our glue.

We got stuck then. And we'll be stuck forever.

Bringing you up was a privilege. It gave me a lifetime of joy.

You were taught to stand up for what's right. To stand up to bullies and injustice. To respect women completely. To challenge racism and bigotry wherever you find it.

You've travelled. Built careers. Cared for people. Begun discovering who you are as men.

We don't see as much of each other, but I need you to know how proud I am of you.

You've carried and faced things many your age haven't. You've met trauma head-on and come through it with tears, hugs and—maybe most importantly—the ability to say how you feel.

From waking me up as young boys to tell me you had 'adverts in your eyes' (your brilliant way to describe anxious thoughts that wouldn't let you sleep), to doing so in the middle of the night as young men because you'd taken something at a club and were freaking out—there has always been a safe, non-judgmental place here. A hug. A reset. A chance to learn and steady yourselves.

Whatever you go through, never let that change.

So here's my advice now:

- Don't let manhood silence your inner child. He never goes away—and he needs to be heard.
- Be brave. Look after people. Look after your big, beautiful family. One day, maybe, your own children. But always give voice to the part of you that is vulnerable. The part that sometimes feels afraid. The part that still needs a big hug to ease whatever's weighing heavy.
- Too many men get lost trying to be what they think a man should look like. And somewhere along the way, life becomes a performance.
- Give yourselves permission to be honest about everything you're carrying. Trust me—there's always something to carry.
- To thine own self be true.

You know better than most how hard it is when families break apart. But you also know this: children can never have too many people who love them. And we do come through it. A little bruised, maybe. A little wiser.

More prepared for whatever life throws at us.

In the end, the only thing that really matters is love. Carry on loving the people you love. Keep finding new people who love you back.

Complex families can be tricky to navigate—but they can also be a gift, if we choose to nurture them. I hope seeing your biological dad—kind, strong, loving—and me sharing a pint and a laugh brought you a sense of peace and security.

When he said to me at your 18th birthday, ‘I love you, mate. I couldn’t have wished for a better stepdad for my boys,’ and pulled me into a hug—I can’t tell you what that meant. It was a brave, generous and kind—like you two. And it was a moment that said we’d done this right.

As you get older, our glue stretches. It gets tested. Sometimes we lose sight of the roles we play in each other’s lives.

But remember this: I will always be your other dad.

And I will always love you.

Nick • 45–54 • Liverpool, UK • Actor/Writer/Director

My dear son,

Let me start with the thing I never told you—the thing that shaped everything that came after. You've always known I don't believe in God, but you never knew the reason. When I was a boy, I lived in a house where the loudest language was violence. Not laughter, not joy—just fists hitting flesh, my father raging at the world through my mother's body. I used to hide in the next room, frozen, listening to her cries. And when it was my turn, I prayed—begged—for something divine to stop him. But nothing ever came. I remember the taste of blood in the back of my throat, the sting of a broken nose, and I remember thinking: If there is a God, he would not allow this. That's the night I let go of heaven.

By twelve, I'd learned crying only made things worse. So I switched it off like a tap. From that moment, tears belonged to another world—a world I wasn't allowed to live in. And even now, decades later, that boy still sits somewhere inside me, stiff-backed, jaw clenched, refusing to break. I spent years trying to understand my father. Sometimes I think he was trying to beat his own disappointments out of me, as if every strike was aimed at the failures he saw in the mirror, not the child in front of him. I used to imagine saying to him, 'I love you, and you tried,' even though he hadn't. Even though he never knew how. That longing stayed with me—that ache to say something kind to a man who gave me so little kindness in return. But longing is not love, and hurting someone is not raising them.

So when I became a father, I promised myself I would not continue that pattern. I would not hand you the pain that was handed to me. I wanted to break the chain, not become another link in it. You and your sister were my proof that I could be different. I hugged you, I listened to you, I tried to show you a gentleness I was never shown. Your mother helped me with that—she has always been the balance I never had. Whatever softness you saw in me often came from her hand on my shoulder.

Being a journalist gave me purpose, but it also scarred me in ways I didn't fully understand. Reporting on wars and protests and suffering became my armour—but armour is heavy. The nightmares, the insomnia, the images I carried home . . . I didn't have the courage to seek help. Pride

is a strange companion—it convinces you that silence is strength. It isn't. I wish I'd shared more joy with you, not just the sadness of the world I worked in. But whenever I saw a child crying in rubble, I couldn't help imagining you in their place. My work made me grateful for your safety, but it also made it hard for me to switch off the fear.

I know I left home abruptly. I know the timing was bad, the pain unnecessary. You were already beginning to see the cracks—the unhappiness, the distance, the mistakes. I don't offer excuses. One day, I hope we can talk about it honestly, as men, without judgement. Not to rewrite the past, but to clear the fog around it.

You're holding your own now, making me proud every single day. You've become everything I wanted you to be: bright, kind, funny, respectful. You speak languages I can't, move in circles I never could. You are, truly, a better version of me. And that's what matters most. Because the way a man raises his son shapes how that son will one day raise his own. I have spent my life trying to stop the violence and fear I grew up with from reaching you. I hope—sincerely—that I've broken that cycle. That the story ended with me, not you.

I don't expect perfection from you. I don't even expect understanding. I just want the one thing I always wanted from my own father but never received: your presence. Your willingness to walk through life knowing I'm your dad, flawed as I am, trying as I did, loving you fiercely even when I didn't know how to show it. Whatever happens, wherever you go, I will always be grateful that I got to be your father. That alone has been the greatest gift of my life.

Anonymous

Dear sons,

I came into your lives at the age of twenty-five and then your youngest brother was born a couple of years later, and if I am honest with you, I struggled a lot in the first few years of being a stepdad and then being a dad. It is difficult when you are ‘free’ to live your life, do what you want and then three children depend on you. However, it has been the privilege of my life, watching you go from little children to young men, and how the world shapes you every day is scary and exciting.

My father was a conservative, religious man and I saw the damage his childhood had imposed on him, how him and his father were awkward and had a relationship based on duty, rather than acceptance and love. And yet my father raised me the same, a man stuck in the only role he had learned and been raised with. I saw flickers of happiness and humour in my dad but overall he was not a very happy man, stuck in cycles of duty and lack of self-worth. I always said to myself that if I had children then I would break this cycle and enjoy fatherhood fully.

And so I have tried to do that, I have not always got it right but I have tried to show you that life is not about dogmatism and materialism, it is about finding the beauty in nature, in animals, in your family. Your mother and I separated a few years ago and she went on to have a daughter who tragically passed away as a baby of a few months, and I know that grief was a lot to put on three young boys, and yet you have inspired me and made me proud at how you have managed this while keeping your sister’s memory alive, being the best big brothers she could have asked for in her short time in this world.

So my final message and lessons to you, my sons, from a dad who is still learning, I want you to live life for all it’s worth, because it goes so quickly and you might be writing this letter to your sons before you know it. I want you to work hard and be determined and resilient, you have acquired a world where patience is not valued, but also take time out to enjoy the little things in life. I want you to try and laugh every day. I want you to be kind to yourself and to others, it is a wonderful quality to have, but I also want you to have boundaries as your kindness should never be

taken advantage of.

I love you now and always.

Your dad

Zubair • 35–44 • Hampshire, UK• Mental Health Nurse

Having a poor happy dad is better than a rich cross dad.

Dave • 55–64 • Bath, UK • Councillor

To the greatest achievements of my life: my sons/boys/pals/buddies

Yes, my life so far has often been difficult to get my head round—come on, it's me, Kammy, a lot of stuff which comes my way I find difficult, it's par for the course—but I believe I have packed a lot into it (so much of which I have forgotten!), but you two are up there, right at the top of the pile. You'll have to make room up there for Mum, though, after all, without her . . . She is the rock of the family, the glue, as they say, so she deserves to get stuck on the summit with you. Actually, budge up further, there's a few more precious souls who need to be there—and that is all down to you two!

Who'd have thought when I was growing up that my life would have turned out the way it has? Yet, for all the celebrity lifestyle we, as a family, could have lived, our feet have remained firmly on the ground and I am so, so proud of that. Your mum and I can honestly say that neither of you ever 'brought trouble to our door'—and if it was there but you managed to keep it away, good on you . . . that's my boys!

Uni was good for you both, while Mum and me were left wondering if you would ever come home again. Big 'Un, when you told us you wanted to go to Durham Uni to study 'AI' we stood there incredulous (look it up, it means 'beyond understanding')—and that was us, because we had no idea what you were talking about! But, it was written in the stars that a successful career in IT was to follow for you—and Mum and I were happy to have secured our very own permanent computer geek to navigate us through everything we still can't fathom. We can only imagine how many times your eyes have rolled and you've muttered under your breath when you've heard those fateful words from us . . .'Ben, can you show us how/can you just do this/I'm going to throw this computer out of the window if you don't come and help us . . .'

Rooney, Birmingham was your uni choice, to learn all you needed to become the successful cameraman you are today. You cannot imagine how chuffed I am when I see you around any one of my old stomping grounds, filming various sports for TV. And believe me, I was fit to burst with pride when you became floor manager for televised rugby league, relaying information to the teams and officials and to the director from the touchline. You have worked hard to make your own way in your chosen field. I like to

think a bit of me rubbed off as far as the work ethics go, but ask me where the brains to do this job, or your brother's for that matter, came from and I cannot deny it must be from your mum—I can't get away with claiming any part of that whatsoever!

Your own greatest achievements are undoubtedly what bring me and your mum so much love and joy—our four grandkids, what a gift! Spending time with them, along with you and their mums, of course, and being Grandad is just the best! You have each exceeded our expectations as fathers, in fact, almost daily, I am under the cosh from your mum with her comparison comments. I cannot win, no change there, but neither would I expect or want to—you two are top of the tree.

Can I offer you any advice? Not sure I am qualified to. After all, which one of you is the bright spark who once said 'Dad is the only person we know who is revered for doing his job wrong'? My own dad's advice to me comes to mind but I think you'd be headed downwards on a slippery slope if you emulated me—in both 'do as I do' and 'say as I say'! No, you are both doing fantastically well without anything from me, just keep being amazing.

And thank you for being you, my unbelievable boys! X

Chris • 65–74 • Wakefield, UK • Former football player / manager and TV presenter

Dear son,

I’m not sure why I can’t say the things I feel about you, that is probably for someone much smarter than me to analyse. But I will try to put down here in written words how I feel.

You didn’t just become a good man over the years, you have been a wonderful, kind, generous and joyful human your entire life. That has given me so many heart-warming days and nights, and I can’t express my gratitude for you being a part of my life. As I look at the world today and I see how hateful and greedy our species has become, I marvel at how you have navigated your life, and stayed true to your truly beautiful soul.

You don’t know how sorry I am that you didn’t feel comfortable with me, until you were in your 30s, to let me know that you were gay. I’m not sure what I did or how I acted that kept that in you. I can only hope that you can forgive whatever actions I did to cause you to wait. I want you to know that I have always loved you, and I always will. I hope there wasn’t too much angst in those days, not being able to share yourself.

I do have to say you have given me some late-night scares, but probably not more than I probably gave your grandparents. Part of growing up is testing the waters. But you never gave me pause, as to the truly wonderful person you were and remain to this day. You are so patient and caring with your special needs students. It is a profession that is so hard, and given so little appreciation. Stay being you, I’m so proud to be your dad.

Love you!
Dad

Anonymous

Get enough sleep—it helps you be rational and less of a dick. I have failed on this one often (I’m sorry).

Andrew • 45–54 • Engineer

There is no guidebook on how to be a perfect parent—simply because the perfect parent doesn't exist. I felt then and still do now that my role is to guide, to listen, to be open, and for you to explore and discover this amazing world in your own unique way—and that is all that myself and Mum both wanted for you.

Becoming a dad fulfilled in my heart, mind and soul a sense of worthiness—a sense of being validated, something which had been missing in my own childhood. And now we are at a crossroads—one where I often seek advice, support and guidance from you, my adult child. My experience has now changed from being the guide to being guided myself by you. Hearing you no longer identify as a 'he' (perhaps you never really did) and asking me to call you 'she' or 'they' made me realise that our relationship is strong, that you can be open with me, that you trust me.

I now find myself seeking out answers to questions—I'm the one reaching out for guidance, finding information and networks so I can understand better and know what I can do to support you. I know that the most important thing I can do is to carry on offering my love and providing safety within our family, a refuge perhaps at times when the world can feel uncertain, judgemental and often against you and the trans community to which you belong.

In terms of advice? it is simply to be you and to continue to listen without judgement, to offer support without conditions, to love a person for who they are and to accept that each of us is a truly unique person. For you to continue to be that person and to continue to be true to yourself and I promise I will always do the same.

And one last thing? I will always give you my 'limitless undying love'.

Anonymous

Dear Jordan, my son,

This December, it will be six years since we lost you. Following those early days, weeks and months when the tic I developed made my head twitch violently or those moments when, out of nowhere, I would be knocked backwards by some kind of invisible force, almost like I'd been punched in the stomach, the trauma did eventually ease. The head twitching is less frequent nowadays but when it happens, it serves as a reminder that I will never truly get over the devastating and traumatic impact of your suicide.

In the early days, I drank more than I should have and took an anti-anxiety and sleeping tablet (probably not a great combination) to help me get through the nights. I stopped riding my bike and forgot about playing my drums too—most times I was quiet and tried to avoid bumping into people I knew when I was in town. I remember visiting your grave one Sunday. We left you flowers and stood quietly in the driving rain before I got back in the car, shook my head and burst into tears. I'd much rather have been able to have brought flowers round to your house for that dinner you promised us that now we'll never have.

As the months went by and they became years, I know I changed as a man and as a father—your sister will have recognised these changes and I hope you, wherever you are, have noticed the difference too. I know that in your note you said we were great parents and many of your friends have told me how you'd often mention me to them and how proud you were of me. It's strange how you and I never discussed such things though. Was I a great dad?—I'm not so sure. Yes, I provided for you and your sister and I was there for those special moments in your life, the birthdays, the sports tournaments you participated in and those we went to watch together like those Saturdays when, as a family, we all drove to Manchester to watch the Manchester Giants play basketball. I know I was there, during that final year also, if not physically, I would at least message you and of course we had those special times together, such as when we went to watch our favourite band (Hootie and the Blowfish) together.

But . . . we never really talked about the struggles you were facing. I know you were a very private lad in many respects and I know the male

stereoptype suggests that, as men, we don't talk about our emotions but I think we could have, should have, more than we did. I now know, through your journals, that you felt you didn't live up to so many expectations you had of yourself and yet everyone around you thought the world of you.

It's tough being a man at times in this world. It can be confusing too. I now know that you struggled on so many fronts. How I wished we'd talked about these things. Instead, when we did go for a beer or a meal or to a gig, I wanted to just be Dad and not your counsellor. Now I realise that what a dad should be is a friend and a guide—a counsellor of sorts I guess. What does it mean to be a dad? I suppose I've learned that it's about being there and creating a safe space so that your children don't just see you as a grown-up who loves them but as someone they can turn to whenever life throws curveballs your way. A dad who doesn't judge but listens and asks, 'How can I help?'

I think I could have been better at that part of being a dad. Knowing that you were proud of me as your dad, though, is the most important glimmer of hope I take from the fact you're no longer here.

Love always, son,
Dad xxx

Steve • 65–74 • North Yorkshire, UK • Non-profit Director

My dearest sons,

Here are a few things I have learned over my sixty-plus years. They are in no particular order of hierarchy. Some I discovered early, some late. But mostly by experiences both good and bad. Be kind. Try and forgive people who have been unkind to you. Let them accept your forgiveness or not. If you love someone tell them. If you don't then don't tell them. Really don't sweat the small stuff. If you can't say something nice or constructive try and say nothing. Try not to have regrets, but it's never too late to say you're sorry. It's not true that time heals everything. Some things hurt forever. My love, unlike my bank balance, is unconditional. No one ever goes out for one drink. Drugs will fuck you up. Money is not that important, but unserviceable debt is. Don't mess with the taxman. In business, even if it's a friend, get a contract. When you meet new people presume they are decent and they may not be as smart as they think they are. But be open to changing these opinions. Learn to cook at least three things well. Be polite. Be clean. Don't judge someone until you know their backstory. And finally don't wear hats indoors!

Jonathan • 65–74 • North Yorkshire, UK • Dentist

Son, I remember the day you entered this world a new emotion was unlocked.

I remember feeling a new feeling that I hadn't ever felt before, a bunch of feelings and emotions tied into one. Feelings of fear, love, purpose, and a whole other bunch of emotions that I couldn't explain.

As soon as you were born you poo'ed inside your mum so you came out choking on your own poo, and the doctors had to handle that situation which immediately made me feel so much fear for this brand-new person I had just met today but had so much love for.

That was a life-changing moment in itself separate from your arrival that made me know for sure, I have to do everything in my power, if it's even

down to my last breath, to make sure this guy is OK at all times.

You are twenty-four turning twenty-five now, and every single year has been an absolute pleasure, and still is and will continue to be until I leave. I am your biggest fan, every single time you walk into a room I am celebrating in my mind ‘there he is, look how fuckin’ cool my fuckin’ son is, man’.

You are one of the wisest men I have ever met, literally every time you speak it’s an absolute pleasure and a lesson, I am so incredibly grateful.

I thank God for blessing me with the opportunity to be your father, your guardian, your role model, you make me wanna be better so you can look up to something inspirational.

I love you more than words could explain. My fuckin guy.

Giggs • 35–44 • London, UK • Rapper

Own your failures. Own your mistakes. They are not flaws in your story, they are the foundation of it.

James • 35–44 • Carmarthenshire, UK • Gym Owner/Coach

When I look back, when I was a kid
On all the stupid stuff I did
Smoking weed, drinking beer
Eventually it led to the gear

After that I was smoking crack
I should have given myself a slap
Then I met the perfect girl
I thought that she would rock my world

But she also liked to smoke the drugs
She said it felt like great big hugs
Then one day a baby came
I knew my life would never be the same

Then another son was born
Then a daughter
Then one more boy
It was starting to become expensive on toys

So, the brown and crack I started to sell
If I didn't make money, then life would be hell
The social services came one day
They came to take our children away

I tried to keep them, to give them hope
I tried my best, but I couldn't cope
They went to go and live with family
And onto the streets went their mam and me

In and out of prison I went
Most of my time, that's where I spent
Then one freezing February morn
The Holy Spirit came, and I was reborn

He told me that I had a purpose
To put my trust in those who serve us
That my life was worth being saved
That it wasn’t my time to go to the grave

So if I had to tell my son
Of all the stupid stuff I have done
I would tell him to stay well away
To go about life in a positive way

To follow his hopes, ambitions and dreams
And look at this beautiful world to truly see
That there are millions of better things in life on offer
And to stay away from trouble, just don’t even bother

Daryll • Cardiff, UK

Dear Freddy the father-to-be!

There have been so many times over the last twenty-two years where the challenges and weight of responsibility have overwhelmed me, but inspiration has never been far behind and those knocks have taught me that the challenges are not only necessary in order to help you to grow in resilience and emotional intelligence, but also deliver invaluable lessons.

The lessons are still coming thick and fast, and probably never end, but if it wasn't for the hardship would I have known true patience? If it wasn't for the helplessness would I have met an acceptance for the things that I do not control? I welcome the discomfort of growth and am truly grateful to you for helping shape me into the father I am, forever by your side.

But now it's your turn, Fred! What an adventure this will be! I remember being told the news I was going to be a Dad. The next nine months raced by and even though you know what's coming, nothing can prepare you for the miracle of the birth and how it will feel for you to hold your daughter in your arms. I can't wait to support you however you see fit and I want to pass on some of my own parenting reflections in the hope that they give you reassurance in times when you feel you're failing and conviction in times where you wonder if you're enough.

1. Being 'present' is enough.

The pressure I put on myself to be your all and everything was unhelpful. I wanted to take away your grief, help you avoid any discomfort and stress you were feeling, you'd been through enough, I wanted to make it easier for you but in carrying you through discomfort, I showed leadership but also denied you the opportunity to gain confidence in your own ability to problem-solve.

Obviously the energy you bring while you're being present is important but contrary to popular and certainly my own beliefs, you don't need to always be the solution, sometimes there isn't one! But what we can always guarantee is that when our children recount memories of their childhood if they can tell people that 'Dad was always there by my side' for me you'll have achieved one of the most underrated aspects of parenting,

consistency.

2. Own your shit

There came a point amid all of the pressure and responsibility of parenting when I realised I couldn't go much further without the need to be far more honest with myself and allow myself a support. The realisation led me to seeking a prolonged stint of professional support that still prevails today. How much things improved for us is hard to quantify but taking ownership of my challenges, my triggers or coping mechanisms and all that an eventful childhood bestowed on me gave me a grounding and a toolkit that enabled me to soften, slow down, to accept what I couldn't be and share my vulnerable moments in a way I just wasn't programmed to before that intervention.

3. Be a safe space

When you delve into the art of owning your shit, you become a better version of yourself and your ability to cope with stress, disappointment, responsibility and conflict improves drastically. One of the most important differences though is how we become a much safer 'holding' space as a man. I wouldn't have understood this term before or what it actually is to be a safe masculine energy but I'd love it to be in your awareness, Fred, as it's a beautiful place for all of your words, actions and intentions to flow from.

We think of our job as Dad to be the 'strong protector' and a 'provider of things' but we know so much more now about this whole other side of us that can provide so much more security to others than the stereotypical.

There is strength in vulnerability, admitting we don't have all the answers and are willing to ask for help. We all try to shield our loved ones from the realities of life but letting people know when we're sad or hurt allows them to attach a label to the emotion and also enables them to support us which will be a useful skill to develop some emotional intelligence for future use!

4. Create invaluable memories

I recently experienced what it is to have an 'empty nest', from having you both as a constant to seeing you less often, the loss of purpose and identity

was uncomfortable and confronting to say the least. There was a big space around me that you used to occupy but eventually and even though reluctantly at first, I gave myself permission to step into it and focus more on the things I had never really prioritised.

My point is, it goes quickly. Memories are so invaluable and you would swap everything you own to be able to go back and experience the cute moments again. Your squeaky little voice, Bobby softly speaking for you because only he could interpret what you were saying, the books we read together in bed and that cheeky little face of yours.

These are the best memories I have. With your empathy and consideration and a heart the size of a house, I can't wait to see how you navigate the challenges in your own special way. Watching you as a father might just be one of the most gratifying things I'll ever get to enjoy.

Thank you x

Jeff • 45–54 • Essex, UK • Television Presenter

Never take advice from books like these.

John • 45–54 • Winchester, UK • Entrepreneur

1. Always read the question.
2. Measure twice; cut once.
3. Think carefully before replying—doubly carefully before posting.
4. Do a smaller number of things brilliantly, rather than more things well.

I love you so much.

John • 45–54 • Scientist

A sense of belonging is like a love song or a cuddle on a cold winter night, belonging is better my kids. They keep me sense[sane?] and sometimes they are a pain, if it wasn't for them I'd be doing life or death, Ive never been on meth my son is me but worse am scared he go down the same path I did and I don't want that, I want everything I couldn't get for him and nowaday theres more help for him. When I was a kid I was classes as a bad kid but I was misunderstood. I needed help. Special needs class for all the asses everytime I read I think I need glasses. I belong on this earth because he made a deal with the devil I am on a level, I have a angel on my shoulder watch me move that boulder, belonging is somewhere you can call home with no moans a safe place is somewhere you can rest your face and go at your own pace. Belonging is like having a wife and a home with no loan, a free and easy life, belonging is having the right to be there with no fear because fear can lead to beer and there's no light at the end of that pint, belonging is being able to do what you want within reason in all the seasons, belonging is wanting the best my kids while I sit in jail, where's the mirror as I feel pale, belonging is freedom of speech even if you upset a few people, belonging is a sense of pride. I don't pussy foot around, I say it how it is I don't care if I take the piss like a to-do list, belonging is knowing you done wrong, so you take in on the chin after doing a bong. Belonging is like sitting in a crowded room not knowing anyone, knowing

your right where you need to be, belonging is sitting in jail but your at peace because you know you did wrong that why am in here am a slow learner I want to teach my kids this is no life. Being able to walk in a curry house and getting a hot meal because your polite and they can tell your from a good family, belonging is being in your hometown where your on shop-watch and pub-watch but still get into pub for a quick pint, belonging is having all you want but your the kind of person that wants to see everyone win not just you. Belonging is watching your folk grow old together, enjoy retirement and enjoy it they golden years with no stress from siblings, belonging is knowing you've done wrong and owned up to it and faced the music.

Mohammed • Prison letter

My dearest sons,

You are a constant reminder of the love I hold for the most important woman in my life—of who we were, the path we walked together, who we became, and where we now stand. She will forever hold a special place in my heart, because I believe that our story, though unorthodox to some, was magical at its best.

Even through the hard times, she was the love of my life. The memories we created, the life we built, and the chapters we shared still echo within me. Our story continues to shape my thoughts, my emotions, and the distractions that come with remembering a love that mattered so deeply. It goes without saying that biologically you would not be here without her. But beyond that, it is unlikely you would know the true meaning of unconditional love were it not for the love she held so dearly for each of you.

Apart from bringing you into the world, her greatest gift to me was helping me break the generational trauma tied to being a fatherless Black boy and the impact that absence had on my early life.

Fatherhood—parenthood—is not simple. You know this yourselves now through raising your own children. Until recent times, there were no instruction manuals, no websites, no ‘Dummy’s Guide to Fatherhood’. Fatherhood was learned—rightly or wrongly—by being fathered, or by having positive role models to follow.

I had neither. And this isn’t meant to be a sob story—it’s simply an introduction. Perhaps the beginning of a deeper understanding of my story, which in turn forms part of yours. After all, isn’t it true that our children are an extension of who we are?

Despite my mother’s best efforts, growing up in the 60s, 70s and early 80s was not easy for Black children, and often harder for mixed-race children who didn’t seem to fit fully into either world. I understand now how difficult it must have been for her as a white woman raising a Black son. How could she know how to nurture a positive identity in me? How could she model what she had never lived? Her stern exterior kept me in line—kept me fearful not only of bringing the police to her door but of

bringing girl troubles as well.

Without realising it, she planted the seeds of my early negativity towards absent Black fathers, and towards what a healthy, loving relationship could look like.

It's remarkable how the way you are raised shapes the person you become—how conditioning carves out your expectations of life. So it's no surprise that I spent a lot of time wondering what it really meant to be a father—a present father—someone who understands that what begins as a brief encounter can become a lifelong responsibility. Growing up, I had ample time to consider this while confronting the old saying: 'It's a wise child who knows his father.' Back then, if you didn't know him, you were labelled a 'black bastard'. That was the reality.

When I needed guidance about identity, race and belonging, initially there was no one. Looking back now, I think I was constantly searching for role models in the fathers of my friends, hoping that while they guided their own sons, they might spare a little for a 'stray' like me. But being fatherless, and being a minority, meant that kind of guidance was rare.

Thank God for roots and for libraries. What I couldn't find in a father or mentor, I found in books. But that knowledge hardened me too. I became a deep, inward teenager, and for a long time I decided I would never have children. I had no concept of how to maintain a relationship, how to be a consistent presence, or how to build a family. Even the idea of marriage carried fear.

I say initially because, strangely, the very experiences that unsettled my early years led me to a young woman who would become my wife—your mother. Her own story drew me into her orbit through her son. In hindsight, perhaps two souls with different but parallel wounds recognised something familiar in each other.

Whatever it was, it became the reason I pursued her for five years—a need to finish what had begun, a need to shed the heavy luggage I had carried from childhood, much of which I blamed on the absence of a father.

The universe—however we choose to understand it—brought us together and gave me a test: a chance to become a father, and to realise that my upbringing did not define my ability to be one. It was the woman I chose to share my life with who made that possible. She saw a role for me.

She trusted me.

I'm not saying I got everything right. But she was there to guide me. And there is an important truth for all men: our children are rarely ours first. We may feel they are, but if we are honest, they belong to their mothers first—and in most cases, rightly so. We owe women a great deal of appreciation and gratitude. They carry our children, live with the changes, the pressures, the fears. And in your mum's case, all three pregnancies—and your eventual births—were filled with stress.

I believe I was chosen by your mother; your nana had a part to play in that. I was chosen to join her on a journey and be the man who would become the best father I could hope to be.

I want you to know that being your father is one of the greatest privileges of my life. I hope in my efforts you do not think I have attempted to control who you should be and know I love you dearly exactly as you are.

Though I often question my impact and my influence, I hope that what I have learned helping your mother bring you up has gone some way to show and teach you what it is like to have a father who is present. I do realise that in watching you with your own children, my gorgeous grandchildren, and the beautiful women in your lives, who hold a stronger place in my heart than being mere daughters-in-law, I can surely take some credit for doing something right.

Though you are grown men and fathers now and some people may believe my role has significantly changed, I cannot promise to step back, not just because I love you dearly but because I want to have a continued impact on my grandchildren. Hopefully showing them that which was not experienced by either your mother or myself and nurturing them in ways that will help further bury the chains of generational trauma.

There is a constant need I carry, that is for you to know I could not be any prouder of the men you have become and the fact you are my sons, and I will say it again, I so deeply love the three of you with all my heart.

Your loving dad

Pops • 55–64 • Liverpool, UK • Clinical Compliance Officer

Dear sons,

I am blessed to have two sons.

I was also someone's son, and my father, your grandfather, was a complicated man. He was born during World War II. In the strong Irish Catholic community of Scotland Road, Liverpool. The area close to the docks was heavily bombed. Him and his sister were bastards, they did not know who their father was. His mother married a tyrant and had five more children. Life for my father was one of extreme poverty and having to look after his sister, both living on the fringe of a new family where they were treated very different from the other children. Although he chose not to speak much about it, he recalled regularly sitting on the front step of the house hungry, while the family ate dinner inside. Your grandfather attended school without any shoes on his feet.

Environments shape people, and in his teenage years now with the nickname 'Butch', your grandfather began to make a life. He found boxing and became an ABA Champion. Butch also at the age of fourteen gave his stepfather a lesson in humility. He watched his mother take countless beatings from this man until he was strong enough to stop it. Which he did one day in the kitchen of the house, the bully now hiding under the table begging for mercy. The bully never struck Butch's mother ever again . . .

I tell you these things to provide context on my experience as a son. I loved my father with all my heart although this letter may seem to be at times criticising of him. I believe that it was his story that made me the father I am to you today.

Butch was a forklift truck driver who was partially illiterate. Me and your two aunties were kids and we lived in postwar concrete tenement flats, built on the previous slums bombed during the war on the edge of the Tate and Lyle factory. This took over his life and as children we lost our father to it.

We come from one of the poorest areas in Europe, to this day the area is still categorised as this. My father ensured we holidayed in Spain every year, and when I was seventeen my father bought me a car. In those days a car was a rare thing in that area. My father provided for his family very

well. His time was always given to his regeneration work, he had time for every person with a problem, and he helped thousands of people. He had no time for his children though. Strangely whenever I clean my ears, and this is daily after a shower for example, I recall his lesson. ‘Always clean and dry your ears it’s very important.’ I think he suffered with ear infections as a child. This was the only thing he ever taught me. He never took me to a game, or a park. He never sat and discussed the world or history with me. Our time was always fleeting as he was busy. He would always ensure I had money and was OK, and once that box was ticked, he went back into his own world.

Tony was awarded first an MBE, and then an OBE. He was made a Freeman of Liverpool and when he died a couple of years ago the city held its flags at half-mast for him. He was a great man and, in many ways, a great father. But I am left with only memories of the public man and none of the private man. Ironically, I went on and dominated the fight game and today still hold the highest Boxing Board of Control Licence. My father was a champion boxer as a young man, the skills he learned ended the abuse he was subject to as a child. He never taught me to throw a punch.

At eighteen I was in pen 3 behind the goal in the Lapping’s Lane end of the Hillsborough football stadium. I woke up in a pile of dead bodies, in my mind’s eye hundreds of them after the crush happened. I was one of the lucky ones to survive that day. Before I lost consciousness my final thoughts as I believed I was dying were of my mother and father. How my death would hurt them, I found a place of serenity and peace in those last moments. It taught me a great lesson I will reflect upon later. I have never spoken about football since that day or attended any game. My father showed great concern and love when I returned home, and in the following months, years while I struggled with what that day did to me. My father engrossed in his own world only spoke to the amazing fact I survived, never about its effect on me. He seemed oblivious to it, ignorant would not be the correct term.

In 2004 I opened my gym. In a new sport nobody had heard of called mixed martial arts. For many years before, I had learned how to box and other sports and was a fan of a show called the UFC. My father never applauded me, never celebrated my career and would only ever speak about himself. The duplicity being I know he loved me, but the ego he had

developed had taken over his personality. Fortunately, I did not miss what I had never had. I made my way to the top of the fight industry with my own talent and was proud of myself.

I have tried to be a better father to you than he was to me. I have taught you everything I know. I have engaged you on philosophy, history, how lessons from my experiences in life can be used by yourself. From boxing, to BJJ, fishing, riding motorcycles and driving cars. Most of all I have given my time. A father's role is to make his son more than him, to teach the mistakes he made and to avoid them. To know his son's limits and encourage him to push through them. To teach him to be a man. An important lesson for me was the damage that can be done with a run-away ego. I have lived many lives and accomplished more than most. Nothing I have ever done outshines the successes of my sons. My joy comes from you.

So let me leave you with these principles, they will serve you well.

1. Respect is earned not given. If your actions and character demand respect, then respect will be yours.

2. Always look through the other man's eyes. Before you take a course of action look at yourself in the mirror and ask the question, are you in the right?

3. Dangerous men who have complete self-control create stability. Be strong and fair in all that you do. Protect and care for the weak. Let the bullies of this world understand your calmness should never be misunderstood.

4. Never fear death. The ticking clock of mortality hangs over all of us. I have been there and miraculously came back. I have never feared death since nor should you.

5. Take risks and enjoy the ride we call the gift of life. Make memories, tell stories and remember the very true words, fortune favours the bold.

6. Rites of passage are important. Making those firsts steps on

your own. I have always set the stage for breakthroughs and you have always grown on the other side win or lose.

I love you, my sons,
Your father

Anthony • 55–64 • Liverpool, UK • Sports Agent

Alright, lads.

Just a short half-time team talk to let you know you're on the right track.

I'm really enjoying watching you grow into the best version of yourselves whether it be work or sport. You both have a great work ethic and respect the fact nothing comes easy and you only get back how much you put in. Keep doing what you're doing, giving a bit back whether it's volunteering or running marathons that shows how much you care about everybody around you.

I'm really proud that you're great fathers and the kids look up to you even at this early age. Stay humble and respect yourself and treat everyone with the same courtesy as you expect.

Anyway signing off now, just a reminder there's always room for gentlemen like you in life, keep holding open the doors.

Love, a proud dad

Alan • 55–64 • Liverpool, UK • Engineer

Remember that love is not possession. Your partner isn’t something you own, but someone who chooses to walk beside you. Honour that choice every day.

Martin • 65–74 • Hampshire, UK • Retired

Dear son,

You are now living isolated from me, successful in your career and autonomous in your daily life. This is the third letter I write to you . . . despite you not answering my previous ones, I am persevering. I didn't listen to you as a child and I feel like I owe you. Like the time we were waiting for the match to start at the football stadium. I had commented on something you were doing and you told me I should have taken care of you earlier regarding this problem. You told me you should've had the support of a psychologist to work through your issues, as various of your schoolmates had.

On the one hand I grasped your suffering and loneliness in dealing with your difficulties . . . which were just the tip of the iceberg. I understood the deep suffering created by my inability to communicate with you. I couldn't handle your problems, let alone open up and talk to you about mine. On the other hand, I felt your recriminating comment as a deep knife in my heart. I never offered you any time to listen to you or share my emotions.

But the pain only lasted a few seconds, I immediately buried it in the abyss of my hyperactive days and forgot about it. Since your childhood years, not much has changed. And I am now worried that this imprinting may damage your present and future as a man. For me a good father is affectionate, always present and supportive, but not overpowering. It's important also to transmit values like freedom and independence, but I have not fulfilled my role. I have focused mainly on providing you with practical and economic support.

My own father was cold and non-communicative. He never talked about feelings, but he was successful in his work. He only had a very basic education, but managed to build up a well-respected business. Everybody was scared of him at home, while outside he was considered great fun. His silence with us was a violent weapon, which terrified all his children. He gave me my ideas of what a man should be, and he also taught me how not to communicate. My masculinity was built on professional success, moving as an immigrant with no money at all. This took on the form of creating a prestigious identity in my career.

You cannot understand the enormous battles I fought for social survival and economic enhancement in Italy. This, along with what I had learned from my father as a child, created the basis for my behaviour towards you and the whole family. And this is exactly the opposite of what I consider a good father. I am very sorry for what happened in the past, but I would like to make up for my mistakes in the future. I am concerned that the suffering you experienced as a child due to my negligence may influence your well-being as a man. You might think you have a lot of time ahead, but I know I do not.

I would like to ask you for a small baby-step to improve our relationship. Choose a football match that you would like to see and buy tickets for both of us. I promise to travel to you so we can watch it together. I have a great nostalgia when I think about the time we lost and feel that there is little time to make up for the emotional moments that we could not enjoy in the past. But I have faith that we will still be able to live some precious moments and emotions... and if you wish it, I am ready to have the courage to show you my vulnerabilities and communicate intimately with you.

All my love,
Your pa

Anonymous • Italy

Hi son,

I want to start this letter by telling you how much I love you and how proud I am of the man you're becoming. Despite the life challenges you've faced, I see you constantly pushing through. To be honest, I feel the odds were stacked against you from the start, with me and your mum separating before you were born and my being absent for the first seven years of your life due to my own irresponsibility and struggles with addiction.

As you were growing up, struggling at school, and getting caught up in that street life and seeing you have to deal with the consequences, the powerlessness I felt was on another level. I wanted to rescue you but I knew deep down that I had to let you go through your process. It also gave me a glimpse into how your grandma and grandad must have felt with me.

But look at you now age twenty-one, you're showing your old man how it's done. You're being responsible, getting yourself off the estate, moving to another country, providing for your family, and now having a son of your own, a beautiful partner, and a daughter on the way. The first time we flew out to visit you all and saw how you're living filled me with joy. When I saw you leaving for work in the mornings, a voice in my head said, 'That's my boy.' I know life on life's terms can still be a struggle at times, I feel privileged to be in a position where you trust me and can come to me when you need to talk. As you know, I don't always have the answers, but we've learned together that often a problem shared is a problem halved, and together we stand a better chance of finding solutions.

I also want you to know that I don't always like it, but I value and appreciate it when you challenge me and my wonky thinking. I don't know if you're aware that the moves you're making are breaking the cycle of generations, and that's definitely something to be proud of.

Keep on keeping on, son. I'm so proud of you. We're looking forward to flying out to meet your little princess when she's ready to greet us with her presence. I want to thank you and your sisters for the unconditional love you've always shown your old man. You've all given me strength in my darkest times, and for that, I'm forever grateful.

Love you, son. Thanks for being you. See you soon.

Jerome • 45–54 • Loughborough, UK • Drug and Alcohol Recovery Navigator

You were born into a world that looks nothing like the one I grew up in—and that's exactly the point. When I was fourteen, I was homeless. I drifted between benches, temporary beds, and the foster system, surrounded by violence, drugs, and indifference. It was a childhood filled with fear and rejection, where love was conditional or absent entirely. For a long time, that could have been my excuse to give up. It would have been easy to say, 'Look what the world did to me,' and let that become the reason my life never moved forward.

But I made a different choice. I decided that everything that broke me would become my fuel. I turned the pain into purpose. Every time life told me I wasn't enough, I used it as proof that I could be more. I didn't know it then, but I was already preparing for you. Even before you existed, I was fighting to become the kind of man who could build a home where safety and laughter came first. A man who deserved to be your father.

You are the reason all of it mattered. You are the continuation of every choice I made to be better, to break the cycle, to give love instead of chasing it. Our life now is unrecognisable from where I began. There is warmth where there was cold, peace where there was chaos, and opportunity where there were closed doors.

I am proud of the man I became, but I'm even prouder of the man you will become. You are my legacy, my proof that love can rewrite any story. Every time I see you laugh, I'm reminded that we changed the ending. And one day, when you face your own storms, I hope you feel my voice inside you whispering, You've got this. You were born for this. You come from love.

Phil • 35–44 • Sandton, South Africa • CEO and Founder

’ello champ,

What can I say? From the moment you and your sister were born my heart has been full of a love I never thought was humanly possible. As a baby you were filled with wonder and so much energy. You had a beautiful, mischievous and inquisitive nature which has always made me smile. You were climbing, running and jumping everywhere. You’d walk into a room wearing shoes which were four times, five times, ten times too big for you . . . sometimes they were ye mother’s.

The sound of your laughter is one of the most beautiful compositions made by nature. I am so blessed to be a part of your life, and our friendship is something I hold dear to my heart. That beautiful bouncing boy has grown into a man who brightens up a room whenever he walks into it.

I have had the pleasure of watching you grow, of watching you learn the lessons of life, like how you conducted yourself when your heart was broken for the first time. To watch you navigate that pain with compassion and come out the other side appreciating your worth without holding on to any resentments, showing your vulnerability to me and your mother and allowing us to guide you through, that was truly admirable.

You’re the glue that holds friendships together, you give 110 per cent to all of your relationships. You are a fantastic listener, never judgemental, you have the humility to sit with a prince or a pauper and treat them both equally with dignity and respect. I think one thing I’ve passed on to you is the quality of a proper hug, and anyone who knows you would completely agree.

You’ve got funny bones. The little voices you do, your silly impressions, and I love watching the double act you and your mum have created, especially when yous take the piss out of me (*I am* five foot six). One of my fondest memories is when you and me went out to play football. We climbed over the school gate, wheeled out the goals and had the best game of shootie the world has ever seen (I think I won 10–9). When we got home and knocked on the front door we were covered from head to toe in mud. I’ll never forget your mum’s reaction, ‘What the hell have you two been up to?!’ You and me looked at each other and burst out laughing.

My hopes, dreams and aspirations for you are already being fulfilled. Keep being you because you are brilliant. You constantly embody what your nana used to say: ‘No one is ever above you and no one is ever beneath you.’ Always be true to yourself and to who you are. The only advice I could ever give you is to keep doing what you’re doing, always be willing to learn, always be open-minded and always be honest.

I love you so much, you’re one of my best mates. I love you to the moon and back forever.

All my love,
Dad

Stephen • Actor

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Afterword

When our son became a teenager, it felt like a big deal for me and my partner. What we would never have imagined is what a big deal it would become for so many others. We had decided to ask some men who we love and admire to write a letter to our son, saying what they believe makes a good man. We wanted him to see a range of perspectives, and so asked men we knew of all different ages, backgrounds and circumstances. The letters he received were filled with wisdom, humour and big-heartedness. So much so, that I started telling people about them, and a casual comment from an ex-colleague led to me building the idea into a book proposal.

A few months later, my close friend Katherine was over from Australia and organised an afternoon out at a cabaret party hosted by Brighton legend Boogaloo Stu. I got chatting to her sister Jude and asked her what she did for a living. Her answer changed everything. It turned out Jude works at a literary agency—she loved the idea and got in touch with her friend Stephen Graham, who was, of course, the perfect person to get on board! Stephen sprinkled his magic onto the proposal, understanding that its real value would be in making it a collection of letters written by fathers to their sons. Thanks to Jude and Stephen, and their incredible insights and energy, the book was now turbo-charged. Within a few weeks we had signed to Bloomsbury, the perfect home for this book, with the best editor I could possibly dream of. And a month later, with cheeks as shiny as my shoes, I recorded a video with Stephen, asking dads to submit their letters.

And so here we are. An amazing book, pulled together from over 1,600 letters written by dads all around the world. Their letters moved us, surprised us, made us laugh and taught us so much. We heard from dads with grown-up sons, dads with newborns, stepdads, adoptive dads, single dads, divorced dads, gay dads, estranged dads, expectant dads, dads with illnesses and disabilities, dads with mental health issues and addictions, dads who are dying, dads whose wives have died and dads whose sons have

died. Dads who had very little in common, except they were dads. And what shone through from all of them was their phenomenal wisdom, courage, empathy, insight and love.

That's not to say that it was all sweetness and light. Some dads described challenging relationships with their sons that they felt wretched about. Some described difficult relationships with their own dads, which had shaped their experiences when they became dads themselves—for better and worse. Many described wonky paths filled with difficult circumstances, childhood traumas, big mistakes and deep regrets. Many of the dads were desperate to break the cycles of abuse and mental prisons they had been locked in, determined not to repeat the same negative patterns with their own sons. Their efforts moved us to tears. As the saying goes—not all superheroes wear capes.

This whole project began with me and my partner discussing the question of what it means to be a man and what we thought makes a good man. These letters offer answers, both in the advice they offer and the behaviour they model. They highlight the many different ways to be a man. They demonstrate the generosity and open-mindedness of fathers all around the world who share a universal wish for their sons to be decent human beings, happy, fulfilled, loving and loved. Fathers who look past the stifling, one-dimensional stereotypes of what a man is or should be, and instead encourage their sons to find their own, unique paths and stay true to themselves—the whole of themselves—whatever and however that may be.

These letters demonstrated so clearly that we are all the same and we are all unique. We each have our own histories and experiences, successes and failures, values and beliefs, and we bring all of these into our parenting. Being a dad is not one thing and it's not the only thing, but it's a precious and valuable thing, that all of us benefit from. That is not to say that boys growing up without dads are at a disadvantage. We know that boys gain a lot from a positive, caring male role model, and that love is love, whoever it comes from. Father figures come in all shapes and sizes, and some of the best dads aren't technically or biologically dads at all. The letters illustrated how being a good father figure is not about physiology, but about committing to a special role which offers playfulness, safety, support and guidance. And don't we all need some of that?

The story began with letters to my son, and grew into letters to all our

sons. And we truly meant all our sons. Because all sons are all our sons—communally, universally, eternally. We hope that this book helps to start some important conversations with boys and young men, where we all listen and learn. We also hope that thanks to the extraordinary soul-baring and wisdom-sharing displayed by the writers, everyone will find something in these letters that helps them realise what they need to say and do.

The people who wrote letters reported finding the experience itself to be powerful—sometimes difficult and painful, sometimes cathartic and emotional, but always rewarding and worthwhile. So if you haven't already done so, give it a go! It might be a precious one-off gift, or an annual letter stuffed in a birthday card. You could send it to your son to read by themselves, or you could read it through together. You could write a letter to give to them now, or store it for later when they reach a certain milestone. It's entirely up to you, but it'll be worth it.

Stephen said that one of his favourite bits of advice from the book was 'Get a dog'! So I'm going to stick with the animal theme and say that one of mine was 'Seize the lobster' (p. 249)! Write your letter, have that conversation, build that connection. You won't regret it, and you'll truly be benefitting us all.

So, to the incredible dads who were courageous and big-hearted enough to submit your extraordinary letters—a huge thank you from the bottom of my heart. And thank you all for reading this book.

Orly x

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Stephen

Firstly, I want to say a huge thank you to Ali, my best friend for the last fifty years, who unwittingly planted the seed which grew far bigger than we could ever have imagined. You've been the best friend I could ever wish for and I love you to bits.

Secondly I would like to say a MASSIVE thank you to all the guys who were kind enough to write the original letters to my son—Aidan, Alan, Apurv, Dan C, Dan F, James G, James R, Jonathan, Leigh, Mark, Mick, Miles, Nadav, Neil, Omari, Paul, Rob R, Rowan and Shadreck. Your letters were so good that I started telling people about them, and that led down the extraordinary path that resulted in this book.

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Thank you to my Katie for being such a wonderful friend and making

me forever grateful for getting gestational diabetes. Thank you to Katherine Johnson, my Fairy Godmother. I owe you so much and I miss you like crazy.

And finally, a huge thank you to Dad Supremo, my partner Rob, for always believing in me and for going along with my random suggestions, including: ‘Let’s ask a load of blokes to write letters to our son on what it means to be a man!’ I don’t think many people would have been secure enough and big-hearted enough to go along with that, and I honestly feel like the luckiest woman in the world to have you.

Orly

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A Note on the Authors

Stephen Graham, OBE, is a multi-award-winning actor, most recently known for his lead role in *Adolescence* (Netflix), which he co-created, co-wrote and starred in. Produced by Matriarch Productions, which he runs alongside Hannah Walters, the one-shot limited series became Netflix's second most-watched English-language show worldwide. It earned thirteen Emmy nominations winning eight, including Outstanding Lead Actor (for Graham), Outstanding Writing, and Outstanding Limited or Anthology Series. Stephen also earned a BAFTA TV Award, a Golden Globe, a Critics Choice and an Indie Award for his role. Graham recently starred in and exec-produced BAFTA award-winning *Boiling Point* (BBC) and *A Thousand Blows* (Disney/Hulu). Other notable credits include *This is England*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Help*, *The Virtues* and *Time*. He can next be seen in *Ibelin*, *Bunker* and an untitled Apple TV project based on the novels by Lars Kepler.

Orly Klein is a psychology lecturer with over twenty years' experience. She began her career working with homeless people in central London, which shaped her interest in inequality, identity and belonging. Her work explores families with disabilities, peer support, and the psychological impact of poverty and stigma. Orly recently spent two years conducting research with Audioactive's Room to Rant, a groundbreaking project using rap as a therapeutic tool for young men aged 16–25. She grew up in London and lives in Brighton with her partner, son and a goldfish named Dorothy.

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RAISING READERS

Books Build Bright Futures

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WorldBookDay.com, Nielsen BookData's 2023 "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer"

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