LETTERS TO OUR SONS

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Stephen Graham

with Orly Klein

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For every father and every son.

Stephen Graham

To Danny,
everything, always x

Orly Klein

Content warnings

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

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 or it was removed for legal reasons.

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. Bloomsbury are also making a donation to the chosen charities.

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 about this.

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, this book 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. 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



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, UK • 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 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

My son,

It's been a year since your arrival and it still feels dreamy that I get to put those two words together: 'my' and 'son'. I'd been longing to be a part of a loving father-son duo for most of my life, so my prayer for you was conceived long before you were.

Then you arrived. You brought nirvana with you, so much power from such tiny feet. I remember wondering where those feet would take you! I was consumed by love – smitten, besotted, a feeling I had with your sister Avani, and now with you.

As a father, I cannot fathom how two souls can be entirely separate yet an extension of one another, who in most cases share blood, looks and even behaviour. It's even crazier when I look at you and see my mother, who was only four months shy of meeting you; though you never met, she left you something important: your name. 'Hunter, for he will be curious, strong and courageous, just like a lion.' For her I am so grateful.

We come from a culture that praises us for having sons, with rituals and customs focused on male birth. The obligation to continue our family name should be a top priority, but for me… all I ever wanted was a best friend, a gift for our lineage, a version of myself like no other, to raise the little boy I once was but better, stronger, happier and far more fulfilled.

As you grow, I wish for your confidence to flourish too; learn to master it and use it in every aspect of your life. Confidence has the ability to catapult you to greatness. I know this because mine came much later. Adolescence as a British Indian navigating the Western world and a culture where identity is everything was not an easy task. I just wanted to fit in like those around me, and there may come a time where you think the same, but despite what some people say, the world is different now, and opportunity is for everyone, especially those who are confident in their skin – or, in my case, a turban!

There was a time I tried hiding my religious and cultural identity because cool kids, superheroes and celebrities didn't wear turbans or have grown-out facial hair. While I tried my hardest to secretly lessen the layers of my bulky turban, making it unnoticeable, there came a day that changed my perception completely.

I was at London's most famous market. It was summer and footfall was at an all-time high – people from all walks of life were there to revel. A woman in her thirties, European with small children and little English, was almost in tears. She stumbled past crowds of people and directly over to me, saying, 'Please help me.' She didn't want money or free food; overwhelmed by the chaos, she just needed a hand. I helped her buy her own food, found them a place to sit and made sure her children were happy and fed. She chose the right person because I thrive off giving... but thinking back, how did she know? Why on earth did she choose me out of all those people? Then it dawned on me: I was the only one wearing a big, bright layered Turban, a beard and a friendly smile! My religious identity did what it was supposed to do, protect, help and serve – a fundamental Sikh value passed down from the gurus to my grandfather, to me and now to you.

Never shy away from the crown you were born into because we are so lucky to have it. Regardless of the material, the value is immeasurable and if I had known that sooner, I just may have used my own superhero power to help more people along the way.

One day I'll teach you to tie the most beautiful turban, and together we can make the world a better place, that world being exactly where those tiny feet will take you.

With much more to come…

Love,
Papa

Daya • 25–34 • London, UK • Filmmaker

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 camaraderie 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