



How  
to Be a  
Man

*stories*

Tamara Linse

**How to Be a Man**

**Stories**

**Tamara Linse**

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*This is a work of fiction—names, characters, places, and events are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously*

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## **How to Be a Man**

*To Steve, the foundation under my feet and the grit I rub against*

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*“If you're white, and you're not rich or poor but somewhere in the middle, it's hard to have worse luck than to be born a girl on a ranch.”*

Maile Meloy  
“Ranch Girl”  
*The New Yorker*

## How to Be a Man

NEVER ACKNOWLEDGE THE FACT THAT YOU'RE A GIRL, and take pride when your guy friends say, "You're one of the guys." Tell yourself, "I am one of the guys," even though, in the back of your mind, a little voice says, "But you've got girl parts."

You are born on a ranch in central Colorado or southern Wyoming or northern Montana and grow up surrounded by cowboys. Or maybe not a ranch, maybe a farm, and you have five older brothers. Your first memory is of sitting on the back of Big Cheese, an old sorrel gelding with a sway back and—you find out later when you regularly ride bareback—a backbone like a ridge line. Later, you won't know if this first memory is real or comes from one of the only photos of you as a baby. You study that photo a lot. It must be spring or late fall because you're wearing a quilted yellow jacket with a blue-lined hood and your brother's hands reach from the side of the frame and support you in the saddle. You look half asleep with your head tilted to the side against your shoulder, a little sack of potatoes.

Your dad is a kind man, a hard worker, who gives you respect when no one else will. When you're four, if he asks, "Birdie, do you think the price of hogs is going up?" ponder this a while. Take into account how Rosie has just farrowed seven piglets and how you're bottle-raising the runt and how you've heard your brothers complaining about pig shit on the boots they wear to town. Think about how much Jewel—that's what you've decided to name the pig—means to you and say, "Yes, Daddy, pigs are worth a lot." He'll nod his head, but he won't smile like other people when they think what you say was cute or precocious.

Your mother is a mouse of a woman who takes long walks in the gray sagebrushed hills beyond the fields or lays in the cool back bedroom reading the Bible. When your brothers ask "Where's Mom?" you won't know. You don't think it odd when at five you learn how to boil water in the big speckled enamelware pot and to shake in three boxes of macaroni, to watch as it turn from off-yellow plasticity to soft white noodles, to hold both handles with a towel and carefully pour it into the colander in the sink while avoiding the steam, to measure the butter and the milk—one of your brothers shows you how much—and then to mix in the powdered cheese. You learn to dig a dollop of bacon grease from the Kerr jar in the fridge into the hot cast iron skillet, wait for it to melt, and then lay in half-frozen steaks, the wonderful smell of the fat and the popping of ice crystals filling the kitchen. When your brothers come in from doing their chores, they talk and laugh instead of opening the cupboards and slamming them shut. And your dad doesn't clench his jaw while washing his hands with Dawn dishwashing liquid at the kitchen sink and then toss big hunks of Wonder Bread into bowls filled with milk.

When you wear hand-me-downs from your brothers, be proud. Covet the red plaid shirt of your next older brother, and when you get it—a hot late summer afternoon when he tosses three shirts on your bed—wear it until the holes in the elbows decapitated the cuffs. If you go to town with your dad for parts, be proud of your shitty boots and muddy jeans and torn-up shirts. It shows that you know an honest day's work. Work is more important than fancy things, and you



are not one of those ninnies who wear girly dresses and couldn't change a tire if their lives depended on it.

Be prepared: when you go to school, you won't know quite where you fit. All the other kids will seem to know something that you don't, something they whisper to each other behind their hands. They won't ever whisper it to you. But they won't make fun of you either because—you'll get this right away and take pride in it—you are tough and also you have five older brothers and the Gunderson family sticks together. Be proud of the fact that, in seventh grade social studies, you sit elbows-on-the-table next to a boy about your size, and he says with a note of admiration, "Look at them guns. You got arms bigger than me." It's winter, and you've been throwing hay bales every morning to feed the livestock.

Your friends will be boys. You understand boys. When you say something, they take it at face value. If they don't understand, hit them, and they'll understand that. For a couple of months—until your dad finds out about it—your second oldest brother will give you a dime every time you get into a fist fight. The look on your brother's face as he hands you those dimes will make your insides puff to bursting. Use the dimes to buy lemons at the corner grocery during lunch time. Slice them up with your buck knife and hand them out to see which of the boys can bite into it without making a face.

Leave the girls alone, and they will leave you alone. When you have to be together, like in gym class, they'll ignore you, which will be fine with you. Always take the locker by the door so you can jet in and out as fast as you can. You'll be mortified that they'll see your body, how gross and deformed it is. Be proud of the muscles, but the buds of breast and the peaking pubic hair will be beyond embarrassing. Still, you'll be fascinated with their bodies, not in a sexual way, but in that they seem to be so comfortable with them, even—to your disgust—proud. They'll compare boobs in the mirror, holding their arms up against their ribs so that their breasts push forward. One girl, Bobbie Joe Blanchard, won't stand at the mirror though because she'll get breasts early, big round ones. She'll quickly go from a slip of a girl who never says anything to the most popular because the boys pay attention, and the attention of the boys is worth much more than any giggling camaraderie of the girls. You'll agree with this, but you'll also be mystified as to the boys' motivations. Ask your best friend Jimmy Mockler, "What's up with that?" He'll just shrug and smile, sheepishly but with pride too.

In middle school, don't be surprised if the guys who used to be your friends forget about you. They'll still be nice, but they'll spend their time playing rough games of basketball and daring each other to talk to this girl or that. You won't be good at basketball—you're tough, but you don't have the height or the competitiveness. Plus, they don't really want you to play—you can tell. Think about this a lot, how to regain their respect. Go so far as to ask the coach about trying out for football. He'll look at you like you're a two-headed calf and say, "Darlin', girls don't play football." You'll want to scream, "I'm not a girl!" but you won't. Instead, never tell anyone, especially the boys, and hope to God that the coach never mentions it in gym class, which he teaches. He won't. He'll agree with you that it's embarrassing.

One day at lunch time, Jimmy Mockler will tell a story to the other guys about Bobbie Joe Blanchard and how he's asked her to meet him under the bleachers in the gym during fifth period study hall. There is no gym during fifth period. He and Bobbie Joe are going to get passes to go to the bathroom and sneak in when no one's looking. "I bet she lets me kiss her!" he says and laughs and the other boys laugh. Then he says, "Maybe she'll even give me a hand job." He'll glance at you and this look of horror will come over his face. They'll all look at you. Right then you'll know you've lost them. At home that night, cry in your room without making a sound in case your brothers walk by.

Realize at this point that you have two choices: either you have to win back the boys or you have to throw in with the girls. But you don't understand the girls at all. You wouldn't know the first thing about it. How do you talk to girls, anyway? Don't lose heart. Maybe there is a way to make it through to the boys. If pretty girls are what gets their attention, maybe you'll have to learn to look like a girl, even if you aren't really one. You can learn. Didn't you teach yourself how to make peach pies from scratch? How to braid horsehair into hat bands? How to pick the lock on the second oldest brother's bottom drawer, only to be disgusted with the magazines you found there? You can do this.

Imagine the looks on the boys' faces. The admiration filling their eyes. Respect, even. And the jealousy in the girls' eyes. Jimmy will walk up to you and put his arm around you and say, "Where you been?" There'll be no more awkward silences, no more conversations that switch when you walk up. It'll be the same as before, once they notice you. All you have to do is get their attention.

Raid your mom's closet for a dress. Smuggle it into your room. It's the one you've seen her wear to church—knee-length, sky blue with a white scalloped collar. You are her height now, and it'll fit you. To your surprise, you'll even fill it out in the bust. Surreptitiously steal a copy of a girls' magazine from the library and study it—the way the girls' hair is curled, the way their lips shine, how clean their hands are. Decide to try it the following Monday. Sunday night, take a long bath and try to soak off all the dirt and scrub the elephant hide off your feet. The leg bruises from working in the barn won't come off, but sacrifice your toothbrush to scrub your fingernails. Tie up your wet hair in rags like you've seen your mother do on Saturday nights before Sunday church services. The next morning, get ready in your room so no one will see you. Climb into the dress. You will feel naked and drafty around the legs. This is normal. Brush out your hair. Instead of nice wavy curls, it will stuck out all over the place. Wet it down just a little, which will help, but it will still look like an alfalfa windrow. You don't have any lip gloss, so use bag balm, the sticky yellow substance you put on cow teats when they chap. This won't really be new because when your lips crack from sun or wind burn, that's what you use. It will feel different though.

Look at yourself in the mirror. You won't recognize yourself. It will be a weird double consciousness—this person in the mirror is you, you'll know it, but you'll have to glance down

anyway just to match the image in the mirror with the one attached to your body. Beware. It will creep you out. It looks like a girl in the mirror, but it can't be because you aren't one of them.

Whatever happens, keep telling yourself: it'll be worth it if it works.

Don't go downstairs until just before your brothers are ready to drive to school. When you come down, your brothers will stop talking. The brother just older than you will laugh, but then your dad will whistle and say, "My, don't you look pretty today." This will make you feel a little better and stop the boys' wolf whistles, though they'll keep glancing sideways at you in the car. If the brother just older than you whispers, "Look who's a ger-rel," the oldest one will tap him upside the head to shut him up.

Make your oldest brother drop you off two blocks from school and hide behind a tree until you're sure school has started. You won't want anyone to see you ahead of time. In fact, you'll be having second thoughts about the whole project. Be brave. You'll think of Jimmy Mockler and the embarrassed way he looks at you, maybe even avoids you when you come down the hall, and that'll help. Creep in a side door, scoot to your locker, get your books, and go to homeroom. If you feel like you might let loose in your pants as you peek into the classroom through the wire-latticed window, wait—this will pass. Mrs. Garcia will probably have everyone working in groups, and desks will be pushed together in four messy circles. The guys in the back will be in one group, including Jimmy. Rest your hand on the door knob for a long time, take a deep breath, and then push through the door.

The noise of everyone talking at once will hit you as the door opens. That and the smell of the fish tank and Mrs. Garcia's sickeningly sweet perfume. Stutter-breathe and make a beeline toward the boy's circle. Talking will begin to peter out as you enter the room, and you'll make it halfway along the wall toward the back before there's dead silence. Everyone will be looking at you, but keep your eyes on the boys' circle. The looks on the boys' faces will be wonderful. All their eyes fastened on you, looking admiringly, small smiles in the corners of their mouths. They will be looking at you, noticing you. Jimmy, particularly, will have a wide-eyed slack-jawed grin on his face.

Celebrate. You've done it. You've regained their attention. You are once more an honorary boy, respected and included.

But then it'll be like a slow-motion horror movie. From behind you, Mrs. Garcia will say, "Why, Birdie Gunderson, I almost didn't recognize you." Watch these words register on the boys' faces. Some of them will give a little shrug and turn back toward the others, but it's Jimmy's reaction that will bruise you to the core. You'll see the time delay of the words entering his ears and then his brain and then the look on his face fix as his brain processes the words and then his eyes widen as he finally understands. Then, it'll be as if someone grabs the center of his face and twists. The look will be so awful your body will wander to a stop, and you'll stand, unbelieving, still caught in the adrenalin of the moment before. You're going to cry, so flip around and push back out through the door and run down the hall and out the big double doors

by the principal's office. Run until you can't breathe and then walk, taking in big hiccupping breaths of air, all the way to the high school. Make your oldest brother take you home.

Accept your fate. You'll never regain that special place with the boys, and you become a second-hand friend. Every once in a while your brothers will say, "Remember the time Birdie tried to be a girl?" and they'll laugh. Laugh with them. You know how ridiculous it was.

High school will be a long lonely blur, but take it like a man. Never go on a date, never kiss a boy. Instead, watch football and memorize the stats and, if anyone tries to strike up a conversation, bring up the Dallas Cowboys. Take your one stab at getting outside your life—after high school, go to community college for a semester, but when your mom dies of some unnamable female ailment, your dad will need you on the farm. You'll tell yourself that you can always go back and get that degree, but you won't. Fill your days with the routine of agriculture. The animals won't care if you're a boy or a girl—they just need to be fed and watered. Same with your dad and brothers. Don't think about being a man. Or being a woman. You are an efficient cog in the machinery of the farm.

"Sis, you're the best," they'll all say. "Birdie is as faithful as a hound dog."

You are, you know? You're a good cook, you know a lot about football, and you work hard. It doesn't matter that you don't have any friends, men or women. It doesn't matter that you don't get out much and you'll never be kissed, much less married. When you have needs, take care of them yourself. Don't think about becoming a skinny whiskery-chinned old batty with too many dogs. You're happy. Or at least you're not sad. You're comfortable. You have a full life taking care of your dad and your brothers. You do. You really do.

Or, maybe this isn't the way it goes.

Maybe, when you're in your early thirties, your fourth oldest brother will bring home an old college buddy for two weeks one summer. Conrad Patel. You'll resent the hell out of it, this change in routine. This guy will make you uncomfortable. At first you'll think he's gay because he's thin and has a loose-limbed way of walking. This will make you wonder about your brother. Then you'll understand by the way they talk about women that they're just comfortable with each other. They understand each other. It'll remind you of how it used to be with you and Jimmy Mockler—you'll be sad at first and then angry. Go out of your way to avoid this Conrad Patel. You might even do little things to make yourself feel better, like flushing the downstairs toilet when he's in the upstairs shower. Every time you get the chance.

A lot of your energy during the summer goes into growing the garden, and after your dad and the boys leave for the fields, spend your mornings watering and weeding. In the evening after the supper dishes are done, walk through the garden and inspect things—pollinate the tomatoes, check for potato bugs, and shut the hothouse boxes. You will love this time of cool breeze and setting sun. But it will annoy the hell out of you when Conrad Patel breaks away from the card game or the sitcom TV to follow you out the back door and down the porch steps. He won't seem to understand the very strong hints you drop. Start sneaking out the front door, but don't be surprised if you find him already there in the garden.

“But you don’t grow coriander?” Conrad Patel will say. “You don’t grow fennel? Not even tarragon?” He will say this with wonder, as if these things are essential to life.

Say, “If you don’t like what I cook, don’t eat it,” and turn your back.

If he says, “Oh no—your cooking is a marvel. So very different from my mother’s,” you won’t be sure how to take this, just like you’re never quite sure how to take anything he says. Say, “You’re comparing me to your mother?” It will irritate you. Really irritate you. You’ll wish you were ten again so you could sock him.

“Yes, of course,” he’ll say, once again as if this were a given.

Realize that he doesn’t understand you any more than you understand him. You won’t know what to say so don’t say anything and hope that’s the end of it.

But it won’t be. He’ll say, “You would drive across this country to eat her mashed potatoes. The key is browning the mustard seeds, with just enough chilies to make your lips burn. This makes me want to drop everything and go for a visit.” His voice will be both intense and wistful.

As you finish up in the garden, he’ll talk about cooking but then about his family. He’ll tell you about his mother and his aunts and grandmother. Also about his brothers and his dad, who has passed away. It’s not what he says so much as how he says it. Women to him are a mystery, much like they are to you, but not in a contemptuous way. He talks about them with such respect and such admiration, like they are men and men are women. To him, women are the source of all goodness and men are the source of all evil. Women are the ones who get things done, the practical ones, and men spend their time being frivolous with money.

It will all be so foreign to you that when he stops talking it’ll be as if you walked out of a movie theater. Remind yourself of where you are. And who you are. Your body and your approach to the world will have traveled to another place where what you were supposed to be doesn’t seem so far from what you are. You’ll want to reject it whole cloth, but there’s a part of you that will want to break into tears.

Shut the last hothouse lid and turn to leave.

Conrad Patel will say, “I have said something wrong.” He will step in front of you. “What I meant was that your potatoes are the same. Not the same—they don’t contain mustard seeds. But the same in that they are wonderful. And your beef stew is wonderful. You are a wonderful woman.”

Are you? Do those words go together?

It’s dark enough that you won’t be able to see his face, but if he steps closer to you, don’t step away. He’ll stand in front of you and you’ll feel the heat of his body through the cool of the evening. You’ll like this feeling. You might wonder what’s coming, if he’s leaning toward you ever so slightly—it will be hard to tell in the fading light. Don’t let this frighten you. Don’t run away. Face your fears. Be a man.

## Men Are Like Plants

IF A GERANIUM WERE A MAN, it'd be a pimp. No kidding. All those showy flowers, sort of like gold chains and purple polyester, don't you think? And those leaves, all romantic ruffle, like the artist formerly known as Prince would wear. And they're persistent. Prolific. Hardy. The whole New York police force couldn't stop 'em. Heck, a nuclear war couldn't stop 'em. The bomb would hit, they'd wilt a little, and as soon as the sun stimulated them—Bam!—another bloom would poke its head up. And the smell—like bad aftershave mixed with pepperoni, persistent and annoying.

Now, your philodendron on the other hand—he's a guy I could get to now. A little bit of pizzazz—those broad split and elegantly arched leaves, so simple and grand, sort of like tuxedo tails, sturdy yet supple. Doesn't move too fast, doesn't rush things, makes his way from the pot to the wall, growing out faithfully and steadily.

Hmmm. Maybe a little too steadily.

Your cacti, now, they're the *nice guys*. You know what I mean. The guys that you just want to be friends with, the ones you think of as brothers. The spines, you ask? Well, of course—you'd get a little prickly too if you were always the last choice, the one asked to the Sadie Hawkins dance only after the girl's best friend's ugly kid brother was already taken. They don't look so sexy, and they're shaped kind of funny, but they're the best guys to have around when you need your car worked on or someone to go to the movies with. Heck, they're probably the best type to marry, too, if you can get past the spines and bulges. I have lots of cacti in my apartment. Like I said, they're great company.

On a first date, I have a question I ask. It's a great litmus test, never fails. I ask, "If you were a plant, what kind would you be?" Sometimes they give me a weird look. I end the date early. Sometimes they laugh outright. If it's a good-natured laugh, that's ok, but if it's one of those you-must-be-one-of-those-hippy-dippy-crystal-beads-and-love-chicks kind of laughs, I split. Some of them take me seriously. These I let kiss me. Heck, if they give a good answer, I screw their brains out. I get a lot of trees—oak trees, pine trees, redwood trees. They have their uses, which don't usually extend more than six inches from their bodies.

"Grass," one guy said. Wow! I thought. Grass. Why would he be grass?

This guy was good looking, short, with dark spiky hair. He was a little soft but lanky. He slouched a lot. We went out for breakfast after the bars closed.

"Yeah," he said. "Grass. Not weed, not that kind of grass, though that'd be fun. Real on-the-lawn grass."

"Grass," I said. "You're the first person who's ever said grass." This could be a bad thing. Maybe he wanted to take over the world. All the grass I know is in stiff competition with the trees to cover as much space as possible. I have these huge flower gardens that I take care of for some rich friends of mine—the most beautiful bougainvillea and nasturtiums, a whole hill of portulaca. Anyway, the grass scales walls or climbs under it or through it, if there's no other

way, to lay siege to the flower beds. You can see the flowers beat a hasty retreat, their leaves and stems pumping. The lily-livered bastards run away, and the grass marches on.

“Nah. Don’t look at me like that,” Spiky-Hair said. “Grass is commonplace, the everyday, like words. Everyone knows grass, everyone uses grass. It surrounds us. We are immersed in its pollen, its sex. We roll in it. It gives us oxygen ... or is it carbon dioxide? Whatever. It’s my metaphor.” He nodded importantly.

“Your metaphor?” I prompted, intrigued.

“Yeah. I hadn’t thought about it till just now,” he said, “but grass isn’t just common. It can be beautiful, like the prairies in the flames of the setting sun, the wind fanning it.”

I love this image. This guy had me right here.

“Grass can be exquisite,” he continued. “Elegant. Ever seen pampas grass? It can also be utilitarian. Bamboo is a grass, I think. The Japanese use bamboo for everything.”

He sipped his coffee and smiled. I smiled back. We called for the check.

However, as it turns out, grass is not particular about who uses it, how many at one time, where, all that. Grass isn’t good in a monogamous relationship.

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*For more details on purchasing a copy, click over to [TamaraLinse.com](http://TamaraLinse.com).*

## About the Author

Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she's been thankful for ever since. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud.

She worked her way through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor's and master's in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called Literature and the Land, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She still lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. She writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara's website, [www.tamaralinse.com](http://www.tamaralinse.com), and her blog, Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl, at [tamara-linse.blogspot.com](http://tamara-linse.blogspot.com). You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on [Facebook](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#), and if you see her in person, please say hi.