

# The Manosphere Didn't Invent Anything

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*This essay was originally published on March 24th as "Three Generations of Men, One Unsettled Question." It's already one of the most widely read pieces on this blog, but several readers who wanted to share it told me the title wasn't doing it any favors. They were right.*

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Growing up, there was a short pile of books sitting out on the cocktail table in the den of my childhood home, the kind of decorative arrangement that had been there so long they stopped being objects and became part of the air. One was *Helter Skelter*, Vincent Bugliosi's terrifying account of the Manson murders, complete with its blood-soaked cover and its documentary evidence of what human beings are capable of when someone with a gift for manipulation gets hold of them young.

The other was Alex Comfort's wildly popular illustrated sex manual, *The Joy of Sex*, which by the mid-1970s had spent over 70 weeks in the top five of the New York Times bestseller list and could be found on the bookshelves, and apparently the cocktail tables, of millions of American households, its anatomically specific drawings available for anyone who happened to wander through... the den.

I was maybe nine. Both books made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn't fully articulate, even to myself. I remember seeing them there together, *sex* and *violence*, sitting in the open like gardening guides. My parents had either decided there was nothing to hide or had simply stopped noticing what was on display. I think it was the second thing. I think that's how most of what gets passed down to children actually works. Not by decision but by forgetting to decide.

It's many decades later and I am still not entirely sure what those two books were telling me about the world, and especially about men—what they are, what they want, or what they do. But, I think I'm getting closer.

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Tom Junod knows something about this. The legendary magazine writer who gave us Fred Rogers and Michael Vick and the unforgettable *Falling Man* and any number of essays that made you feel the world turn on its axis, spent ten years writing a memoir about his father. It's called *In the Days of My Youth I Was Told What It Means to Be a Man* (yes, the Led Zeppelin lyric) which is not a subtle title, and it is not a subtle book.

Big Lou Junod was a traveling handbag salesman who worked the bars and hotels of the Mid-Atlantic and the South, who tanned himself 365 days a year with a reflector held to his face until he was the same color as the leather goods he sold, who dominated every room he entered, who loved Frank Sinatra and beautiful women and his own bronzed body. Who was also hiding things. Many things. Affairs, including at least one long-running enough to have possibly produced a child. A name change. Lou Junod was born Lou Scharnberger, which given the story, feels like a philosophical statement about the self he was performing. A gambling problem. A whole second life running underneath the one his family believed they were living.

What's striking, listening to Junod talk about the book and his father, is that he always knew. Not the specifics, but that wrongness was happening around him. He describes knowing something was off about his father from the age of three, a very young child's preverbal and physical sense that the man in the room had a secret. That the version being presented was not the whole version. Children have this radar and we spend most of our adult lives explaining to ourselves why it was wrong, why we must have been mistaken, because the alternative is that we were right, that we spent our whole childhoods inside a performance we *knew* was a performance but we couldn't quite understand why, and that is too much for most people to hold.

But Tom Junod isn't most people. He started the book believing he already knew most of what he'd find. He was very wrong about that.

When Pablo Torre recently interviewed Junod for the podcast *Pablo Torre Finds Out*, he asked him to read from page 73 of his book. The passage is about a briefcase. Big Lou's briefcase, which a young Tom discovered and opened, the way sons have always opened things they were not supposed to open. What he found there shook him. *The Joy of Sex* (yes, that, again). Pornography. Coarse, dark pornography. Two large vibrators. Unambiguously physical evidence of the life his father had been living all

those years on the road. The man who came home every night and sat at the head of the table, who told his son *learn my secrets*, who presented himself in every room he entered as a celebrity. That man had a briefcase, and that briefcase told a very different story.

The *Joy of Sex* alone might have been explicable. It was, by the mid-seventies, practically a mainstream artifact, one that lined bookshelves, and apparently sat on cocktail tables, including the one in the den of my childhood home. Finding it in a briefcase, surrounded by the rest of what Big Lou was carrying around, made it something else entirely. A flag planted. A declaration of the self that traveled. *This is who I am when I'm not here with you.*

The briefcase is a whole theory of masculinity compressed into a single image. It contains the man's real priorities, the evidence of his interior life, the portable temple of his appetites. The son who opens it understands, in that moment, that the man he thought he knew was only ever the *home* version, the one edited for the audience of wife and children, the real contents locked away and taken on the road.

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Cut to Netflix. 2026. Louis Theroux, the great BBC documentarian who has built a career out of sitting still and letting people hang themselves with their own words, has released a new documentary, *Inside the Manosphere*, which sits today as one of the most watched films on the platform worldwide.

As a serious fan of documentaries, and in particular Theroux's work, I was curious what he would do with this subject. I turned it off halfway through, repulsed and angry.

I want to say something about that, because the not-finishing is part of the story. I am not a squeamish person. I have watched and read and written and experienced a lot of difficult things in my life. But something about spending time with these overgrown adolescents—calling them "men" grants them a stature they have done nothing to earn, and insults every man who actually taught me something about what the word means—produced in me a physical, involuntary refusal. A deep, loud, biological *nut uh*.

Harrison Sullivan, who goes by the preposterous handle HSTikkyTokky and who, within the first five minutes of Theroux's film, referred to a woman sitting in his living room as "his dishwasher." A twenty-four-year-old hiding from the police in Marbella, Spain, who has somehow convinced a generation of teenage boys that he has wisdom to offer about life. Myron Gaines, a podcaster who practices "one-way monogamy" with his girlfriend Angie (not anymore; she left him after filming), meaning he expects her fidelity while explicitly reserving his own right to sleep with whomever he wants, and who has actually and unironically written a book called *Why Women Deserve Less* (sorry, this blog doesn't link to garbage) while insisting he isn't a misogynist. Justin Waller, a self-described construction magnate who stood on his Miami rooftop with Theroux, looked out at the skyline, and asked with total sincerity whether anyone could name a single thing a woman had invented. A man with two daughters. Sneako (real name Nicolas Kenn De Balinthazy), who told Theroux on camera that the world is run by Satanists and the Rothschilds are behind it all, and who has said on multiple occasions that women should not be allowed to vote.

These are not men I recognize as men. As I watched, I thought about my grandfather, gone now for more than three decades, rolling in his grave. These "*men*" are a performance of masculinity that has shed every element that ever made masculinity worth taking seriously and kept only the part about dominance. I have a 21-year-old son. If he said a quarter of what I heard in Theroux's documentary, a tenth, there would be a lot to talk about, and it wouldn't be pretty.

Theroux tried to get Andrew Tate for the film, the self-professed *godfather* of this mano-nonsense, the man who mainstreamed the ideology for a generation. Tate's team, according to Theroux, got nervous. He didn't participate. That tells you something about the manosphere's actual nature. These men are fearless on camera when they control the narrative. Put a genuinely intelligent interviewer in the room, one who asks real questions and waits patiently for the silence to do its work, and the bravado evaporates. The product is male grievance. The target audience is highly impressionable teenage boys. The business model is manufactured outrage sold by subscription.

Myron Gaines, Justin Waller, Harrison Sullivan, Sneako, Tate, and thousands of others like them are in the business of telling young men what it means to be a man. That is the pitch. The content touches fitness and finance and how to talk to women, but the through-line never changes. *You are lost, we know why, here is the code.* Dominance is the natural order. Women are hypergamous by design and will always seek the higher-status male, so the move is simply to become *that male*. Emotion is weakness. The modern world has emasculated you, and we can sell you back your masculinity.

One thing I want to be clear about. The hard takedown I'm writing here is aimed squarely at the men in the documentary, not at Theroux himself. He did what he has always done brilliantly, which is point the camera and let these people reveal themselves. Theroux barely has to try. He asks one real question and these self-proclaimed alphas start unraveling on camera, emasculated by nothing more dangerous than a polite, bespectacled Englishman who waits patiently, quietly for an answer. *Good job, alpha boy.* What his documentary captures, plainly and without editorializing, is the performative long con these men never stop playing. The longer you watch, the clearer it becomes that there is no *off-camera*. These charlatans exist inside the content. The performance and the person have fused into the same thing, the self and the brand so thoroughly welded that neither can survive without the other. Which is either the ultimate freedom or the ultimate trap, and I know which one I think it is. *Wanna take a guess?*

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Here is what strikes me, holding the manosphere documentary alongside Tom Junod's memoir alongside those two books from the cocktail table of my childhood den. The manosphere is the masculinity of the previous generation taken to its logical, grotesque endpoint. The same impulse, stripped of every civilizing restraint, fed into an algorithm that rewards the most extreme version of itself.

Big Lou had a secret life. He cheated on his wife. He tanned himself like a piece of luggage and moved through rooms like he was the main event. He told his son *learn my secrets*, and those secrets were partly about grooming and swagger and how to enter a room, but also about something darker, something void of shame, about the male

prerogative, the conviction that the rules simply don't apply to you. In the language of the manosphere, Big Lou was an alpha. He just never needed to call himself that, because the society of his era didn't require the label. The *thing* was assumed.

All these years later, the impulse hasn't changed. The medium has, and the marketing has. And it's worth pausing on something the Epstein case made impossible to ignore, which is that the behavior was probably never as contained as we thought. The rooms where men misbehaved were just harder to see into, harder to get into. Epstein didn't invent anything. He ran the members-only version of something that had always been happening somewhere, to someone, with no camera present. The manosphere turned on the cameras and turned those rooms into content.

Big Lou could be who he was because postwar American masculinity carried an off-the-books prestige that required no advertisement. He was the breadwinner. He traveled the country, he worked the room, he came home. His affairs existed as open secrets among the people who would have been most embarrassed to acknowledge them. The whole arrangement depended on a social consensus that certain truths were best left sealed by everyone except the man who benefited from them.

That consensus is gone. The social structures that enforced it are weaker. Women have options they didn't have in 1968. The automatic dignity of the male breadwinner has eroded in an economy where manufacturing work has collapsed and wages have stagnated for decades and a whole generation of young men is underperforming in education and falling behind in the job market. And where the comparison to Big Lou fractures completely is in what the manosphere offers the young men watching Sneako rant about the Antichrist. Something Big Lou never had, and never needed. Fame. Celebrity. The possibility of actual money, life-changing money, built on audience size. Sneako has millions of subscribers and the income to match. A 16-year-old can see exactly what that adds up to.

Now, it would be dishonest to say Big Lou simply didn't care about fame. He cared about it enormously. He carried himself like a celebrity because he desperately wanted to be one. One could argue that the cruelty in men like Big Lou, the dominance and the compulsive womanizing, was itself a response to the gap between the fame they craved and the anonymity they actually lived in. The manosphere has closed that gap. These

men don't need secrets because their appetites *are* the content. Big Lou hid what he was. Sullivan and Gaines and Waller broadcast it on a schedule. Big Lou didn't want the shame that came with exposure. These men have no shame to speak of. They are going for theirs, and the algorithm is cheering them on.

The Big Lou arrangement collapsed, and no one explained to the men who had been promised it why the world changed. Into that vacuum poured an industry that figured out you could sell them the explanation at a premium. The buyers are young men who are lonely. Measurably, documentably lonely. Maintaining fewer friendships, having less sex, spending more hours alone than any comparable generation in living memory. They have absent or checked-out fathers. Schools with fewer male teachers. Communities with fewer male mentors. The entire architecture of male formation that existed from Big Lou's day through my own—coaches, fathers, older men who showed you by the way they actually lived what a decent man looked like—is largely gone. What fills a vacuum like that is whatever gets there first, and what got there first was an industry of grifters and carnival barkers with a very simple promise. *We know why you feel like this, and we can fix it.*

The fix is Big Lou's methodology without Big Lou's restraint. The affair is now a "soft harem." The compartmentalized life is now "having abundance." The secret briefcase is now a verified subscription channel. Big Lou's secrets required a life to contain them. The manosphere requires only a ring light, a camera, and the conviction that *this* is all life is for.

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I said earlier I couldn't locate anything in the world of the Theroux documentary that I recognize as masculinity. I want to be specific about why.

For as long as I can remember, my mom worked, even at a time when most mothers in the suburbs still didn't. She had started in real estate before moving to the iconic fashion house Chanel, the actual Chanel, out of the office at 57th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City, with its sweeping views of Central Park below. She remained at the company for nearly thirty years, her responsibilities growing with each decade, through what many in the fashion world consider the brand's golden era. I would bring friends there to visit her sometimes and watch their faces change when we walked in.

What that job did to our family is hard to overstate. It gave us a cosmopolitanism we wouldn't have had otherwise, a window into Manhattan and fashion and international culture that seeped into how my siblings and I saw everything. Without even trying, that's what parents do to you. The life they build outside the house becomes the lens you look through when you leave it. My mom worked at Chanel and she was good at it and the building smelled like perfume and ambition and she belonged there.

My dad, to his credit, made dinner for us most nights, drove us where we needed to go, picked up the domestic slack in a way that was quietly unusual for suburban fathers in the 1980s. Nobody in our house treated any of this as a problem worth discussing. It was just how things were. And what it meant, growing up in that house, was that the question of whether women were capable, whether they deserved their place in any room they chose to walk into was simply never a live question for me. It had been answered before I could form it, by a woman who happened to be my mother, answered every morning when she left for work and every evening when she came home tired and satisfied. It was something I never had to think about, the way you never think about the climate you grew up in until someone tells you it's different somewhere else.

My daughter. My sister. My ex-wife. Her mother. Most of the women I have known closely have been, in important ways, the center of gravity in their households, and what I mean by that is something specific. When life got difficult, they were the ones who knew what to do with difficulty. When the noise got too loud, they could hear through it. I don't think the men around them were diminished by this. They were lucky, and I include myself in that count. I couldn't have done any of it without them, and that is something I've known since before I knew I knew it.

When Myron Gaines explains to Louis Theroux, on camera, with perfect composure, that women should clean the house and be available for sex whenever he wants, I don't even know where to put it in my brain. It's something said in a language I don't speak, by someone who has clearly never stood in an office on 57th Street watching his mother work.

I am of Tom Junod's generation. His father belongs to the generation before us. The manosphere belongs to the generation after. We are in the middle generation, and the view from here is complicated. Men of my generation were far from perfect. We

inherited plenty of Big Lou's assumptions and spent years, sometimes decades, learning to see them for what they were. Some of us are still learning. But what many of us did see, if we were paying any attention at all, were women who were simply, visibly, necessarily there. People the whole thing depended on.

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What Tom Junod does in his memoir that makes it more than a son settling scores with a philandering father is sit with the genuine complexity of who Big Lou actually was.

The man was cruel in specific ways. He tried to mold Tom in his image and was disappointed when Tom became a writer, someone empathic and literary and shaped by Fred Rogers of all people, a detail that reads in context like a quiet rebellion so deep it barely makes a sound. Big Lou ran a secret life with real victims. But he was also, and this is where the book becomes genuinely difficult, a great father in many of the ways that count. A man who was present. Who loved his son, and who told him as much all the time. Who had a theory of masculinity that was internally coherent, even if the foundation it rested on was the lives of the women he used. I am not excusing any of it. Junod isn't excusing any of it, either. But he's looking at it whole, and the wholeness is what makes the book matter.

The manosphere influencers have the posture without the presence, the theory of dominance without any rootedness in actual life. Myron Gaines is not Big Lou. He is Big Lou's ghost—hollow, perpetually performative, optimized for the camera with nothing underneath worth protecting. The distance between them is the distance between a man who had secrets because he was living something real, even something wrong, and a man who performs having secrets because the performance is the only thing there is.

Big Lou, in the most honest reading, was a man whose era had a specific contract with male ambition and male sexuality. The contract was bad. It required women to accept things they should never have had to accept. But it was at least a contract with reality. With an actual life. He tanned himself in the backyard. He sold handbags on the road. He was a father, with all the mess and weight and complexities that carries. He came home, every time. The briefcase sat in the corner of the closet, and it held what it held, and most days nobody opened it.

The manosphere has no briefcase, no corner, no home to come back to. It is a screen, always on, always performing, always selling. It cannot close, and it does not know how, and that absence of closure, that infinite broadcast, is precisely what makes it so dangerous and so empty at the same time. Big Lou, for all his betrayals, had a life he kept his secrets inside of. These men have made the secrets into the product and thrown the life away.

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So what do we do with this? Forget about Myron and Justin and HSTikkyTokky (*my god*) and the rest of them. They're a lost cause, the lot of them, running a grift they may not even fully understand themselves anymore. The real question is the boys watching.

A 2023 survey by the UK charity HOPE Not Hate found that 79% of British boys aged 16 to 17 had consumed Andrew Tate content. Only 58% could name then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak. Before we write those boys off as stupid, we need to ask what we gave them instead. They are, the research consistently shows, lonely and anxious and increasingly angry. Having less sex, maintaining fewer friendships, spending more hours alone than any comparable generation in living memory. They have real anxieties about a world that is genuinely harder to move through than the one their fathers and grandfathers moved through, partly because that earlier world had a thumb on the scale for men from the start, and partly because nobody sat them down and showed them what a good man actually looks like in the world that replaced it.

The coaches are gone. The teachers are gone. The fathers are gone or checked out or themselves lost inside their own version of the same confusion. And into that vacuum floods an industry that has reverse-engineered the wound precisely, that knows exactly what these boys are missing and is selling them a counterfeit of it at a scale Big Lou could never have imagined.

What they're selling is dangerous in the specific place where it counts most. It correctly identifies that something has been lost and that young men are suffering. These observations are true. And then comes the lie, dressed up in courses and subscription tiers and seven-module programs and Telegram channels. That they are not dominant enough. That women are the variable to control. That the code, if purchased and properly applied, will fill the hole.

They are wrong about this. Moronically, aggressively, profitably wrong.

The hole will not be filled by a subscription tier. The hole is the absence of men who actually know things, who have lived something and failed at something and come back from something, and who show up, consistently, and say the true thing that no course can teach. *Here is what I know. Here is what I still don't. Here is how I sit with both.* There is no content vertical for this. There is no flag or catchphrase. There is just a son, opening a briefcase, deciding what to keep and what to leave behind, and doing the slow, unglamorous work of becoming someone worth listening to.

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The manosphere will not end in a revolution and probably not in a correction either. The more likely path is harder to track. Boys reaching their late twenties and early thirties and finding that the code didn't work. That after paying thousands to Gaines or Sullivan or whoever replaces them when the algorithm moves on, they are still lonely. That the domination they were promised, to whatever extent they managed it—and I suspect a large majority of them won't ever manage it, and never should have tried—did not fill whatever needed filling. That the men who sold them the answer have moved on to selling something else entirely. What they do with that discovery is the real question. Some will find their way to something better. Hopefully many. Some will keep paying, because admitting you were sold a lie by men who were themselves lost is harder than just buying the next course. The algorithm will keep running either way, stocking the pipeline with new sixteen-year-olds who don't know yet that the briefcase is empty.

What I keep coming back to, underneath all of it, is those two books on the cocktail table. *Helter Skelter* and *The Joy of Sex*, sitting there like they'd always been there. The adults had long stopped seeing them, and that's the thing I can't get past, because it keeps happening. The culture leaves things out in the open until they become invisible, and then a nine-year-old wanders through the den and understands, without having any words for it, that the world contains things he doesn't yet know how to look at.

Big Lou's briefcase. The Chanel office on 57th Street. Harrison Sullivan calling a woman his dishwasher on camera, grinning, in front of millions of teenage boys. Justin Waller asking, with complete sincerity, whether women have ever invented anything. Sneako explaining that women should not be allowed to vote.