



# GIRLS WITHOUT



EVERY YEAR many of the city's MOST ELIGIBLE 15-YEAR-OLD BACHELORS depart for boarding school, leaving behind A BEVY OF OVERACHIEVING (and unspoken-for) GIRLS at SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS. The upshot: a daunting, competitive, and sometimes extreme QUEST for MALE COMPANIONSHIP.

NICOLE WAS A BREARLEY development director's dream student—brainy, gorgeous, and thin, with shiny dark hair that brushed her cashmere-covered shoulders. She'd studied abroad summers, had one of the highest GPAs in her class, and aced her SATs for early acceptance to a prestigious Northeastern university. Ever the overachiever, Nicole discovered when she got to college that she had outscored her classmates in more ways than one.

By the time Nicole graduated from Brearley, she'd already had sex with six boys and had given even more blow jobs in her friends' Park Avenue apartments. She was shocked when she found out that most of her new college friends from coed schools had had sex with only one boy—if they'd had sex at all. "I sort of thought, I've got to be careful, because I don't want my numbers to go up. If I go on this trajectory through college, I'll have had sex with, like, 18 people by the time I graduate. That's way too many!"

Nicole's dilemma is a direct result of a different set of numbers: the unusual (some would say unnatural) numbers faced by girls who attend single-sex private schools in New York. Not only are their classrooms boy-free, but beginning in 10th grade girls face a sudden and citywide dearth of boys from corresponding all-male schools. Just at the point when many teenagers are dying for relationships with

by BRONWEN HRUSKA

the opposite sex, four of the six all-male schools in Manhattan—Buckley, Allen-Stevenson, Saint David's, and St. Bernard's—end, and the majority of their boys ship off to New England boarding schools. With approximately four females for every male in 10th through 12th grade, girls from Brearley, Spence, Chapin, Nightingale, Sacred Heart, Marymount, and Hewitt find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. "There's a ratio problem," Nicole admits. "There are girls who want to meet private-school boys in their own age group, but they can't, because there's a drought."

Trained not to be quitters, some (like Nicole) attack the interschool social scene with the same intensity that will

of the gate. "At an all-girl school, it's 'Do you know boys?' and if you do you're in the it crowd," she says. While many of her classmates sat out the ungainly middle-school years, Nicole was one of the "more mature, outgoing, boy-crazy" girls who actually met boys. Since her parents didn't let her go to parties at night, she started lying to them to better her odds: "I said I was going to the movies until 10:30 every single weekend." Even an extrovert like Nicole wasn't about to call a boy she met at a seventh-grade dance. But she did figure out that by instant messaging, e-mailing, and visiting chat rooms, she could advance those friendships quickly.

By the time of the 10th-grade exodus, Nicole had a top-flight social circle. Some of the boys she knew went off to boarding school, but most were from Collegiate. Once she realized how good she had it, there was no way she was going to give up her spot at the front of the line. She's a New Yorker, after all. "The disadvantage of being at an all-girl school is that you have to try so hard to have a social life," she says. Every weekend she put on heels and short skirts for parties at her friends' apartments; either their parents were out of town or they simply didn't care about the exhaustive "experimenting" taking place down the hall or in the other wing.

"There's nothing to do on a Saturday night at somebody's house," Nicole says. "You were all so excited to know members of the opposite sex. What else were you going to do but go into the

bathroom or something? You have to make out with the boys before they'll ever consider being in a relationship. Sex occurs before anything becomes exclusive." And, like her friends, Nicole doled out blow jobs as a way of remaining in the game while holding onto her virginity. But when she had sex at 15 with a short-lived Collegiate boyfriend, that changed: "After you lost your virginity, it became: Oral sex is so gross, why don't we just have sex?"

Nicole describes this drunken, fumbling, foreplay-free sex as anything but sexy. "Physically it wasn't enjoyable at all," she admits. "Sex was enjoyable because you had the undivided attention of a boy for a short amount of time on a Saturday night. But you felt guilty the whole time. Either you had to be quiet or you were in the bathroom and under time constraints or you felt uncomfortable about your body. All those things they tell you in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*-type books about making sure you feel comfortable and everything is right for you? That didn't apply." What did apply, at least, was what Nicole calls the "no duh" birth-control policy among her friends. Even though she started taking the pill in 11th grade, she never went to a party without condoms. That would have been like sitting down for the SATs without a No. 2 pencil: it's simply not done.

PASQUAL PANTONE, a Manhattan psychologist who treats adolescents in private practice, says these girls are doing the best they can under tough conditions in a culture that

THE GIRLS who are DETERMINED to know boys TRANSFORM THEMSELVES for the task. They trade in their SCHOOLGIRL-UNIFORM SKIRTS for sophisticated weekend attire. "SLUTTINESS is OPTIONAL," one senior says. "Baring skin is NEVER a BAD THING."

later get them into Harvard and Yale. Those who are pretty and outgoing enough—and willing to work hard and spend hard—compete for the lucky remaining Collegiate and Browning boys. It's a male buyer's market, and the currency is sex. Many girls find themselves engaged in a frantic social life, spending their weekends downing vodka and cranberry juice and fooling around in the bathrooms, bedrooms, and dark corners of some of the poshest addresses in Manhattan.

Other girls cobble together coed lives from their extracurricular contacts: boys they meet in summer camp, Hebrew school, interschool drama clubs. Some flee the interschool system completely, seeking male companionship alongside the *Sex and the City* demographic. And then there are the girls who simply resign themselves to not meeting anyone of the opposite sex until college.

Academically speaking, the girls (whose names have been changed in this story) are big fans of their schools and of single-sex education in general. Freed from all that roiling testosterone in the classroom, they can hunker down in high school and develop the focus, drive, and competitive edge of outstanding students. But intellectual pursuits—and college acceptances—aside, the day-to-day absence of male peers has a significant and often problematic impact on the lives of these high-achieving girls.

NICOLE SOON FIGURED OUT that to secure herself a place in the interschool elite she would have to get an early start out

sets them up for—and seems to require—success in all things. They're not accustomed to failure, in part because they've never been allowed to fail. "One reason girls at these schools have such academic success is that it's facilitated by their parents," he says. "Advanced classes, tutors: schoolwork is supplemented in any way needed to get success. When it comes to success with boys and the self-esteem that comes from those relationships, it's suddenly very different. It's like girls are isolated with fewer resources than if they were having trouble with chemistry." Left on their own to ace this one, girls like Nicole who want and need the attention of boys figure out a way to get it. "The girls who are shyer are going to have trouble doing the legwork necessary to meet boys," he says. "And, if they desire contact with boys, it's going to be a setback for them."

The girls who are determined to know boys transform themselves for the task. They trade in their schoolgirl-uniform skirts for sophisticated weekend attire—Marc Jacobs, Prada, and Diane von Furstenberg for going to bars, clubs, and urbane restaurants like Pastis, Balthazar, and Dos Caminos; it's Juicy Couture, Solo, and Theory for house parties. "Sluttiness is optional," one senior says. "But baring skin is never a bad thing." The girls go for it, trying to outdo each other. It's their one chance to make an impression, and they grab it.

That competition can be hard work, as Anna, a Chapin senior, has learned. She's put in long hours every weekend to secure her coveted social life. This January she wasn't about to let a little blizzard get in her way. While the rest of New York shuttered itself inside, Anna pulled on some tight pants and a strappy low-cut top and braved seven inches of snow to keep her dinner appointment at an Upper East Side restaurant. Then, instead of heading home, she found a cab that would make the trek down to 14th Street. She and some friends were greeted by a promoter they know who raised the velvet rope for them and made sure they drank free all night.

"It's so annoying. I have friends who say, 'Will you take me out with you?'" Anna says. In school mode—a plaid uniform skirt topping black sweatpants, long hair parted girlishly on the side—she looks half a decade younger than she does on the weekends. "It's like 'Build your own social life!' I had to go through the bad to get to the good. If you want to develop relationships, you can't go out once a month." Like cheating on a test, ripping off someone else's hard-won social connections is seriously frowned upon. It's every girl for herself out there.

But even the most aggressive approach can fall flat. Jill, a Spence junior, is an actor, singer, and dancer. She's pretty, with confident blue-green eyes set off by her pink scarf and her bright green Polo sweater. She says she's one of the most social people in her grade, out every weekend night with her Spence friends. But she can't quite find a niche in the interschool scene she's been in and out of for years.

It all goes back to middle school. "I was chubbier then," she says. "My mouth was so much bigger than my face. I hadn't grown into myself yet." She got through her awkward phase before some of her male Collegiate friends and advanced on and up socially. "Once you move on to another group of friends, you never talk to old ones. It's gone." Now

those boys have set their sights on freshman and sophomore girls. Jill's interested in senior boys anyway. "For some reason so many guys in that grade went to boarding school. So that kind of leaves no place for us," she says, sounding at 17 an awful lot like single women in their 30s and 40s trying to find a man in this city. "I think that the guys in Manhattan, regardless of what school they're in, think they own the world. A lot of them have this cocky attitude. Which is why at our age people start to go out to clubs and stuff."

And while Jill slips into her black stilettos, adding several inches to her petite frame, to go to clubs like Manhatta and Pioneer Bar with her Spence friends, she's not seeing any action there, either. "There are no hookups. It's bizarre," she says. Part of the problem is that her girlfriends "literally don't know any guys" and as a result have no idea how to talk to them. "There's always some hope that you'll hit a bar right when there are a lot of college kids there. It seems to me whenever that is that no one ever goes up to them. Nothing ever happens. I'm kind of sick of being dumb."

Recently Jill has been back on the house-party circuit, hitting an exhausting average of three a weekend night. She's trying to chip away at the tight coed-school social cliques, but it isn't going all that well. When she started talking to a boy at a Horace Mann party, she was frozen out. "These girls were looking at me like, 'What does she think she's doing?'" she says, crossing her arms over her chest in mock disgust. The last thing girls from coed schools want is fresh blood in designer labels sniffing around their boys. "They grabbed this guy my friends and I were talking to and said, 'Come dance with us!' And they pulled him away."

Jill is persistent; you've got to give her that. Even though most of her friends consider organized events during high school "lame," Jill got a \$150 ticket to the Gold and Silver Ball at the Supper Club this winter. The idea was to meet some boarding-school kids at the annual black-tie event. But, after planning her outfit for months—a silk taupe Diane von Furstenberg gown and beaded Pucci pumps—she stayed at the dance for just an hour. "I don't know what the boarding-school kids did before they got there—drugs, alcohol, I don't know—but they were raping each other on the dance floor."

It's not that she's above a little dirty dancing. In fact, Jill would love to get some attention for once. She says she feels all but invisible at house parties where she's trumped by girls who are happy to catch and release. She's interested in more than a no-strings night of fun, but the boys she's met are not. Just last weekend she found herself talking to some cute Collegiate boys at a party. "It was cool"—until the sharks descended. "This bunch of too skinny girls with platinum-blond hair extensions, wearing really skimpy clothing, come in. They're just idiots. They look dumb too. But the guys, who've had what they've had to drink, are like, 'What's the easiest way I can get some ass tonight? That's what they go for.'"

She chalks it up to immaturity. "Spence girls are very proud of who we are. We're taught to speak our opinion. I think these boys can read that confidence from a mile away and run the other direction. They're just petrified of it."

WHILE JILL IS WIDENING her circle these days, hanging out with kids from NYU and Professional Children's School she knows through drama camp, some of her good friends from Spence who go to Temple Emanuel and Rodeph Shalom have built an entire interschool social life around the boys they met at Hebrew school, an unexpected hotbed of middle-school dating. Synagogue-sponsored youth groups, especially at Rodeph Shalom, act as clubs for their teenage members, who hang out exclusively with one another.

Heather, who graduated from Spence last year, begged her mother to let her go to Temple Israel Hebrew school in seventh grade, even though her family was not par-

middle school. For girls like Regan, a Brearley junior with thick lashes, a devilishly sweet smile, and metallic-blue enamel coating her stubby nails, they've helped her find her niche—and a set of boys to hang out with on weekends. She explains that while the interschool guys available may not be ideal, you work with what you have. "A lot of times you hear people say, 'Well, I'd hook up, but I wouldn't go out with him,'" she says. Five months into the school year, Regan says she's already fooled around with three boys but isn't attached to any of them. "It was a little like, Oh, I shouldn't have done that," she says, blushing. "But people didn't ostracize me. Nobody's calling me a slut."

And there it is: the S-word. Girls throw it around all the time, but it seems nobody quite knows whether it's a good or a bad thing to be one. "It's used to describe somebody you already disliked," a Spence senior says. "If she happens to get around and she's your friend, good for her—if that's what makes her happy, that's what she should do. But if you already don't like her, then you'd use that term."

WHEN GIRLS REALIZE they're never going to make the interschool social scene work for them, more often than not they turn to clubbing for some male attention. They usually find it. Rebecca, who graduated from Spence last year, simply didn't fit the interschool mold. "At my school," she says, "it's looks, who your guy friends are, and how smart

you are. In that order, unfortunately." Her curvy body and nervy demeanor may have been too much for teenage boys, and she ultimately abandoned the hope of finding one. Instead she and a friend from her debutante ball spent every weekend during their junior and senior years "getting drunk and dancing" at trendy clubs like Crowbar, Suede, Lotus, Butter, and Bungalow 8. "At the end of the day, it's a lack of options," she says flatly. "The Collegiate guys that are around have been your friends since seventh grade. It's pretty likely they've hooked up with some of your friends. There's no new blood."

But getting into clubs at 16? No problem for a savvy Spence girl like Rebecca, who, unlike most of her friends, didn't even own a fake ID. In two solid years of weekend clubbing, she says, she was only carded twice. The men who bought her drinks and fooled around with her in dark corners never suspected she was underage. "It's like that Eagles song that says that city girls learn early to open doors with just a smile," she says. "It's totally true. Spence girls are über-city girls."

Lisette is 16, and although she's supermodel-gorgeous, with milky skin, naturally flushed cheeks, and perfectly mussed brows, she hunches her shoulders and speaks in a voice that's barely audible. She hasn't learned to open those doors yet. She's dying to meet boys but just doesn't know any, she says, sitting in her tidy Riverside Drive bedroom. She spends most weekends with a pack of her classmates

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ticularly religious. "There's no way at age 11 I would have started going if it weren't such a social thing," Heather says. "In middle school—especially at all-girl schools—the bar and bat mitzvah scene is a staple of your socialization." With up to three invitations every weekend during the nonstop bar mitzvah fest of seventh grade, Heather's social life boomed. Her non-Jewish Spence friends used to tag along on Hebrew-school days and sit in on the class, which happened to be packed with cute boys. Later, in high school, she widened her social network but still held onto her male Hebrew-school friends who went off to coed schools. She even had a "substantial" seven-month relationship with a Columbia Prep boy she met at Temple Israel. "At an all-girl school you look at boys primarily as sexual objects. The boys I knew didn't know I was class president or head of Model Congress. I was just a girl they were having fun with. There's a sense of alienation, like you're living two lives." Hebrew school offered something beyond the surface weekend flirtations. "I guess religion really was part of it for me," says Heather, who surprised herself in high school by becoming very involved in Judaism. "I wasn't just meeting a boy, I was going to High Holy Days and meeting his family, too."

GIRLS WHO CAN'T RELY on religion to get them action often resort to theater. Interschool plays can serve as a social vehicle for girls who didn't get to know boys in

from Brearley. "Mostly we walk around on Park Avenue. We're on our cell phones calling friends trying to find something to do." Carefully arranged shelves display an extensive collection of Pez dispensers and glass animals. "Either it ends up happening or it gets late and you go home."

Sometimes they stop in at Cosí for s'mores or at a hookah bar for a flavored smoke. Occasionally they'll go to teen clubs like Shelter, Mumbai, Octagon, and Exit. She's hoping to meet boys in Frost Valley. The mandatory interschool trip takes 10th graders from Chapin, Brearley, and Nightingale on a two-night retreat with boys from Collegiate and Browning. Spence girls hated the trip so much that the school pulled out of it a few years ago. But it's one of the last-gasp chances for girls to meet boys. For the most part, the kids tend to stick with their friends, but occasional strays do find one another.

It didn't work out that way for Sam, a Brearley junior who commutes from Brooklyn every day. "I detested Frost Valley," she says. She's funny and intelligent; her choker and thumb ring are more hippie than hipster and her body takes a stance against anorexic chic. "It was like 13 degrees and there were these girls in tights and miniskirts. They were all blond, and they flocked around the same guy." She doesn't even bother going out on weekends. "I have no social life," she says, adding that she doesn't like drinking or dancing and couldn't afford the price tag of a night on the town with the interschool elite even if she were invited. A senior

from her school breaks down the cost: "I've seen kids shell out \$1,000 in a night, which includes multiple cabs, multiple \$7-to-\$10 drinks, paying for various drugs—including cocaine, weed, prescription drugs—often paying to get into clubs and bars, and paying for dinner for your friends." Instead, Sam babysits for her little brother or sees friends from grade school who live nearby. She says she has nothing in common with the Collegiate boys she's met and has pretty much resigned herself to not meeting a boy she likes anytime soon. "Guys will be more interesting in college," she says. Then she adds, with a laugh: "That's the bright star on the horizon."

BUT FOR NICOLE college was a chance to take a breath. She didn't realize how spent she was until she stopped for a minute. Nicole came home for winter break this year and, for the first time since her preteens, opted to spend quiet nights staying in with her parents while her college friends were out doing what she'd done in high school. She's just over it, she says, and sums it up with a line from *Sex and the City*. "Remember when Charlotte says, 'I've been dating since I was 16—I'm done already. Where is he?' All my friends from Brearley totally get that. We've been doing this tumultuous socializing, the regrettable one-night stands and the meaningful boyfriend, whether it was meaningful or not. And we are just desperate for our lives to begin." ■

