what makes a man

22 writers imagine the future

edited by

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AT SEVENTEEN, I already knew the pleasures of sex but I hadn’t yet come to fully understand the power of touch. It was senior year. We were fresh, we were fine, and soon we’d be free, legally admissible to adulthood, that much-anticipated paradise of privilege. By “we,” I mean my friends and I, that gang of girls to which I belonged back then. We were known as “The Hallway Crew” because we spent more time loitering by the school lockers than we did in class, preparing for our futures.

It seems amazing to me now, given all the hours we spent obsessing about men, how little we really knew about them. From time to time we did actually talk to them, but not nearly as much as we talked about them. When we went to watch them play sports, we concentrated not on their moves, but on their parts, those thick arms and muscled thighs, those firm butts. We oohed and aahed and imagined ourselves holding those perfectly sculpted bodies. We believed, I suppose, that by filling our open embraces, those young men would somehow also be filling our empty hearts. Little did we know that nothing could be further from the truth.

I remember those days so well, getting dressed in front of the mirror for a Friday night in the city, my clothing so tight and inappropriately inviting I could barely exhale for fear of coming undone, the Pointer Sisters on the stereo declaring their desires: a man with a slow hand, a lover with an easy touch. And me singing along forcefully, as if I really knew anything about either. On one of those nights, the crew and I, fake IDs in hand, decided to go to Genesis, the newest, hottest club around. It was a theme club, devoted solely to R&B or Rock & Roll on some nights, and House Music or Over-Thirty-Only or Ladies-Get-In-Free on other nights. That one time we went, it just so happened to be Gay night.

Back then, my friends and I liked manly men, the shoot-'em-up-bang-bang types, the tall-dark-and-handsome brothers, the strong-but-silent ones; you know, all those cliched descriptions that somehow slide themselves into a heterosexual woman’s vocabulary as she paints her picture of Mr. Right. When we walked into Genesis, the room was full of them: tall and short men, black and white men in dinner jackets and in blue jeans, men in leather and pastel-colored Miami Vice–style linen suits. There were women too, but not very many. In fact, we had already plopped ourselves at the bar and ordered drinks before any of us in my group realized that it was a same-gender coupling scene.

“Oh my god,” one of the girls I was with screeched. “They’re all gay.”

“What?” asked the rest of us in unison. Before she could repeat herself, we saw what she was about to say. Right in front of us strolled two men holding hands and gazing deeply into each other’s eyes. It was arresting. I couldn’t stop staring at them, at the shy, bashful way they smiled at each other, the way they slowly laced their fingers together only to unlace them and gently caress each other’s palms. Their tenderness took me by surprise. They were clearly in love, oblivious to everything and everyone around them.

I was not as interested in the other guys at the club, the ones who were on the shiny wood floor with their mates dancing suggestively, or following a flirtation that would later lead them into some back room where they would tongue and grope and moan their way into ecstasy.
What they were doing was nothing less than what my friends and I would have also been doing had we been provided with either an opportunity or an accomplice. I was used to that kind of passion, that kind of lust, raw and urgent and ravenous.

“Let’s get out of here,” my friends suggested, “and go where there are some straight guys.” They gulped down the last drops of their drinks and got up to leave. I couldn’t move. My eyes were still fixed on the two men. “Stop staring and come on,” they insisted, while leading me to the club’s exit. My girlfriends assumed the reason I was so taken by the couple was that I had never seen two men together. Not so. I was extremely comfortable with the concept, as well as the sight, of men partnered with other men. It was as much a part of my world as a so-called traditional marriage, one with a Mr. and a Mrs. I had an uncle who was in a committed relationship with a man, and theirs would ultimately end up being one of the most compassionate and stable unions I would ever witness in my life.

What held my attention was not the sexuality of the two men at the club; it was, rather, the lack thereof. It made me realize that I had never been touched like that. I had never held hands with a man for nothing more than the sake of holding hands, of being close. I wouldn’t have even known how to approach a man for that purpose, how to request such a simple gesture. In my young adult reality, when you were touched by a man, it was one of two things—a sexual overture, or an act of violence. Men were to be feared or they were to be fucked. And that’s all. To expect more was to court disappointment.

It seemed as though with each other, men were often easily able to achieve, and display, a certain type of sensitivity that they were not able to with women. Sure, the men at the club were probably not the best examples of this theory because they were gay, but I believed that it also applied to men who weren’t gay—the frat rats, the boxer buddies, the Saturday-morning hoop-shooters, and the Monday-night cigar-smoking poker players—all the guys who usually went out of their way to avoid touching with one another for fear that they might be seen as gay. (And what could possibly be worse than that?)

I had noticed that even those men shared a deep emotional connection, an intimacy that was commonly referred to as “male bonding.” At times that intimacy was manifested physically, too. The way, for instance, they lightly tapped each other’s asses on the courts and on the fields, the way they leaned on each other in the ring between rounds, bare shoulder to bare shoulder, their sweaty chests meeting somewhere in the slick middle; or the way they sometimes embraced, their arms tightly and fully wrapped around, their noses resting on the fleshy bridge between neck and shoulder.

In those rare moments when it was, for whatever reason, permissible for a man to place his hands on another man as an outward show of affection, I saw a vulnerability that completely challenged my preconceived notions of masculinity.

And what were my preconceived notions of masculinity? Those images and ideas that were written in books and song lyrics, shown in movies and on television, of what men—real men—were supposed to do and be: breadwinners, white-collar businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and accountants, blue-collar contractors, plumbers, and mechanics; strong, stoic, aggressive, dry-eyed and unemotional. What else, at seventeen, did I know but that? Sure, I could probably blame it on my upbringing, come up with some Freudian explanation like “such ignorance would be expected from a girl with an absent father and no male siblings in the home.” But what of the other girls, my friends who were raised with their nuclear families intact, with a daddy and a big brother or two? What excuse could they offer for their knight-in-shining-armor expectations that mirrored my own?

That night at Genesis something momentarily shifted in me. Suddenly, surrounded by scores of men—gay men, some of whom were visibly effeminate, some of whom were frighteningly macho, and the remaining majority of whom were ordinary, everyday people—I
found myself wondering how it all fit into the larger picture of masculinity. At least, the larger picture that I had been envisioning. I wondered if masculinity was as much a show, a well-constructed myth, as femininity. I thought about how my girlfriends and I doted ourselves up in silly, ill-fitting girlie-girl clothes, how we polished our nails, brushed our cheeks, lined our eyes, and colored our lips; I thought about how we wasted our money on magazines with enticing names like Allure and Glamour and Cosmopolitan, magazines which were supposed to teach us how to be more feminine, how to be the sort of women that men would want. None of it was real.

When my friends and I were together, when we were dressed down and not made up, we were no princesses or damsels in distress; we were simply ourselves. We didn't smile and giggle coquettishly like we had learned that ladies were supposed to; we laughed, deep-bellied and loud. We cussed if we wanted to, and when we grew tired of talking about men, we turned to topics of greater substance, topics that required us to use our intelligence, to show that we were actually capable of originality.

Was that true of men as well? Were they only free to be themselves, their real selves, when they were together, when they were shielded from the quixotic wishes of women? I didn't have the answers, but those questions inspired me to consider the possibility that my search for a flesh-and-blood man who could fit perfectly into my fantasies was, perhaps, a wasted effort.

That was a huge idea, maybe too huge; it was definitely one whose implications I was not prepared to accept because if not the dreamy Don Juan, then who? The tragically thin president of the AV Club? The bespectacled pedant who, though Harvard-bound, was neither hot nor cool? Not a chance because I truly believed that I would find him, the man that I was looking for. If not through destiny, then surely as a result of my determination. So no amount of time or energy devoted to that cause would be done in vain.

Adulthood altered my priorities and, in the process, the nature of my encounters with the opposite sex. By the time I reached my thirties, my life was filled with men. They were no longer these curious creatures that I watched, and wanted, from afar. They were my colleagues, my friends. Over the years, some of them had even slowly come to occupy the “best friend” and “confidant” positions that had once belonged solely to women. Not unlike my sister-friends, these men laughed with me and kept my secrets. These male friends of mine—gay and straight alike—knew me as well as, or better than, any woman had ever known me. The friendships were platonic, but they were not devoid of touch. There was hand-holding, light lip-to-cheek kissing, and there were hugs, lots and lots of hugs. How I relied on those embraces, on the ability to be held without the prospect of sex, the awkward anticipation of it on the part of either individual.

There were moments, in their presence, when I completely lost myself, when I forgot that they were men, that I was a woman. With the handicaps and hindrances of gender gone, we were just people who understood each other, people who loved each other, who had each other’s best interests at heart. Ironically, it was this same fluency, this kinship that was warm and plant and enduring, that I attempted to duplicate with my boyfriends. Except it never worked, because the men with whom I had these relationships never bore any of the likable and essentially kindhearted traits as the men with whom I had friendships.

Any ability that I had with my friends to see past the smoke and mirrors that separate men and women did not apply when it came to me and potential lovers. Where romance was concerned, my faith was still firmly placed in some intractable vision of men. It seemed as if I chose my male friends expressly for who they were, for their humor or their compassion or their creativity, whatever characteristic that was uniquely their own, that touched my heart and moved us confidently into each other’s lives. Yet I chose my lovers not for who they were, but
for who I wanted them to be—the hard-muscled miracle that I was waiting for, the one who would come and sweep me off my feet.

It shouldn't be much of a surprise that I found myself involved with creeps—emotionally crippled misogynists and smooth-talking philanderers—who, while giving me that which I wanted, the seductive pretense of masculinity, always left me with much to be desired. There were no comfortable exchanges, no inside jokes or knowing glances. What existed were silences that drew us deeper into our distance from one another, no matter how lip-locked and horizontal we were. We played our parts, acquiesced to those paralyzing roles—me as the coy, obedient, batting-eyelash lady, the prey; him as the dynamic, self-assured pacesetter, the hunter. It was a terrible masquerade, a dance that swung me back and forth between the cultivation of fear and the surrender of flesh.

To be sure, it was a mindless pattern, one that I drew from habit or memory; but I didn't recognize it as such. Not at first, anyway. I thought I was just unlucky in love, kissing the proverbial frogs until I found the one with the crown. I still believed. Why? Mostly because I wanted to believe. But also because I was encouraged to keep believing, to keep hoping that despite every ill-fated liaison, despite all the heartache that I had experienced, there was a man out there waiting for me, a man on bended knee, with a glass slipper and a diamond ring, who would make it all worthwhile. "Hold out," so many had advised, "for the one." "Hang in there for Mr. Right." It was such a familiar refrain, so overplayed. I had heard it, sung it, and seen it so many times, why wouldn't I want to believe?

WHEN I LEFT for a month-long sojourn in Ghana, I was ready for a new reality. A native, I had emigrated to the United States during elementary school. It was my first time there in over two and a half decades so, by all reasonable definitions, I was a stranger. It was, I knew, a trip that would change my life, if for no other reason than that, the fact that I would be courting my past, returning to the customs and lifestyle that had shaped my early consciousness. I expected whatever new insights I would gain to center around language, food, clothing, music, family—all the immediate representations of culture and home. It never occurred to me that I might also gain a greater understanding of relationships and the impact that society has on the way in which we imagine and arrive at them.

While in Ghana, I stayed in Accra, the capital city, and spent as much time as I could with relatives, matching the faces that I was seeing as if for the first time with the names that I had read in volumes of letters and the voices that I had heard through so many static-filled phone calls. When I wasn't at the home of an uncle or an aunt, I was at the beach, or the busy downtown market, at a restaurant, or a side-of-the-road chop bar, taking in the landscape, studying the movements and the routines of the people who came and went, the people who could just as easily have been me, had I not left and been brought up elsewhere.

There were a few nights when a good family friend, with whom I had been fairly close while he lived in the United States, took me around to some of his haunts. One night, early in my stay, we went to a neighborhood jazz joint where they served kebabs, grilled tilapia with banku, and tall bottles of the nationally brewed beers, Star and Club. The place, which was packed, had indoor seating, but nearly everyone was outdoors. There were a few couples in the area reserved for dancing, but most of the patrons were standing around in groups, loitering in the various corners and at the entrance nearest to the parking lot, a small rectangle of red earth that was full of Peugeots and Mercedes-Benzes.

As soon as my friend, whom I'll call David—a slender, late-forties financial analyst—and I were shown to our table, he was spotted by a friend, who took it upon himself to join us. In a matter of minutes, we
were joined by yet another friend and pretty soon, our table was full and there were a few other friends standing around us—all men. After the obligatory introductions—which were always courteous and accompanied by polite handshakes—my presence became meaningless to them. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was a stranger, or because I, a woman, had no place in their discourse. Whatever the reason, I was happy to observe, to eat, drink and listen as they talked politics and economics, punctuating crucial points with raised voices and animated hand motions.

I’m not sure how much time had passed before I noticed that the two men standing behind David were holding hands. They had, for some time, been engaged in their own side conversation, but would periodically jump into the main discussion when things seemed to be heating up. I searched the faces of the men at the table to see if they, too, had noticed. As I looked around, I saw that many of the men there, at the establishment, were also holding hands. At that point, I didn’t know what to think.

On our way back to his car, David and I were walking behind two men who were holding hands. Actually, they weren’t holding hands; their pinky fingers were hooked around each other and they were slightly swinging their arms back and forth, back and forth, as they walked together through the parking lot.

“I think it is really cool,” I said to David, “that people here are so out and open about homosexuality.”

“What?” he asked, stopping cold in his tracks. “Homosexuality? We don’t have any of that stuff going on down here. Not out and in the open anyway.”

“Then what do you call that?” I pointed to the men in front of us.

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?” David asked. He looked at the men, again, and then returned his gaze to me. It was obvious that nothing seemed out of the ordinary to him.

“They’re holding hands.”

“So what? It doesn’t make them homosexuals,” he laughed. “They’re friends. In places all over the world, men hold hands, and it has nothing to do with sex. It’s quite common, you know.”

He was right. Riding around Accra the next day, I saw more men holding hands. I found it all rather unsettling, and was both shocked and embarrassed by my level of discomfort. Had I been in America, I thought, I would surely not have responded that way. I would not have even given it a second thought or glance. But in America such activity was restricted to specific locations. There were places where you know there is a greater likelihood of witnessing it: the Castro, Dupont Circle, West Hollywood, the Village. These men in Accra were presumably heterosexual; they were black men; big men with well-defined everything from head to toe. And they were holding hands. Holding hands! I just couldn’t seem to bring myself to think of it as anything other than bizarre.

That was the first week. After the second week, I got over it. I started adapting, reminding myself that I was not in America; I was in Ghana, where the gestures of intimacy were different, assigned by the societal mandates and mores of that land. Those differences were not brought to light solely by the way the men interacted with each other. They were evident in the way the men interacted with the women as well. If all of that hand-holding and emotional bonding made the men more sensitive, it didn’t show when they were dealing with women. The only time during my stay that I saw men publicly touching women was when they were dancing. Not once during that trip did I spy a couple stealing a kiss, standing with an arm around the other’s waist, holding hands.

What I saw were women preparing meals, hand-washing clothes outside in the scorching heat, and selling meat, fish, and vegetables in kiosks and at outdoor markets. I saw a line, that was clear and pronounced, a line that placed men on one side and women on the other,
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a line that was as real and recognized as the prime meridian that ran directly through the country. As is usually the case with segregation, separate was not at all equal. One gender held power, with free access to all its privileges and rights; the other did not. It was as simple as that.

One evening, shortly before my departure, I stopped by the Shangri-La for a drink. David had taken me there on one of his guided tours. It was a fancy hotel for moneyed tourists which though occasionally frequented by the local bourgeoisie was, for the most part, a place for foreigners. With the exception of a few masks, bows and arrows, and patches of mudcloth sewn into this and that, the bar there was nothing special. It was your average Western watering hole with uncomfortable stools and a jukebox in the corner.

I ran into one of the guys I had met with David at the jazz spot. He was alone, and he waved me over to join him at the other end of the bar. I was impressed that he even remembered me, seeing as how the night we’d met he had barely spoken two words to me beyond the “hello.” He bought me a beer and we made small talk for a few minutes about the few weeks I’d spent in Ghana. Then he told me he wanted to take me out to dinner, to spend some time with me before I returned to the States. At first I thought it was a joke, the way he’d slid his hand along the bar until it was touching mine, the way he’d cleared his throat and delivered the words, not as a question, but as a request, a demand. I soon got that he was serious. Not knowing what else to say or do, I pointed to the gold ring on the third finger of his left hand.

“Aren’t you married?” I asked, as if that was even the point, the part that was offensive. He pulled the band off, held it up with the fingers of his right hand for a second, as if to inspect it, then he put it back on.

“Ah, this,” he said, staring at the ring. “It’s for my wife. She is the one who is married, not me.” I was too stunned to conjure a witty comeback, or even an insult. He seemed to find the situation amusing; he smiled and shook his head.

“What can you do?” he shrugged. “Men will be men.” Still speechless, I gave his words some thought.

“You’re right,” I managed, with a smile. “Men will be men.” I thanked him for the drink, and left.

LATER THAT NIGHT, when I took the time to think through it all, I knew that he was right. Men will be men. It was such a simple truth, one that I had been unwilling to accept until that very moment. But just then, it made perfect sense to me. All those years I had spent thinking that there was some mystery to masculinity, some secret code that I had to learn to crack. Being there in Ghana, so far away from the cues to which I had been conditioned to respond, being able to watch the men and the women there as they went about their lives, as they flirted and flaunted and flexed and fought, made me appreciate that it was all a performance. Like a peacock fanning its tail feathers, we attempt to lure others to us by exhibiting the assets and behaviors to which we think they will be attracted: the tight pants, the thousand-dollar suit, the plum lipstick, the patented pick-up line. More often than not, we learn to accept those traits that others—magazines, movies, sappy song lyrics, romance novels—have defined as appealing, empowering, deserving. And so the games begin!

That’s not masculinity. It may be insecurity, it may be arrogance, it may even be stupidity. But it’s not masculinity, as defined by the heart of an individual, the truth of who they really are. Men will always be men if they hide behind that mask, that term, that generic, nameless, faceless word. They will always revert to type.

I was correct to wonder, at seventeen, whether men were better able to be themselves when they were not around women or, more specifically, when they were not in the company of those whose expectations set the stage for a farce, a fantasy. I could tell by the way they
talked, by the way they touched when there was no judgment, when they were not required to be the object of anyone’s predetermined desires. There was freedom, there was laughter, there was a person, a real individual, someone with whom you could possibly even fall in love, someone who could possibly even be the one.