

“Manslation”: How Important Is Sexual Literacy?

Description

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So much of the research on the male condition and sexual literacy focuses on the extent to which its toxic manifestations denigrate or endanger the well being of women, homosexuals, the transgender community, and men themselves. While few would argue against the necessity of such conversation, one might reasonably argue that to focus solely on toxic masculinity’s social impact is to also nurture an imperfect understanding of why “safe spaces” are needed in the first place, and how the male psyche arrives at those perceptions that ultimately limit the expressive lives of non-dominant cultural groups.

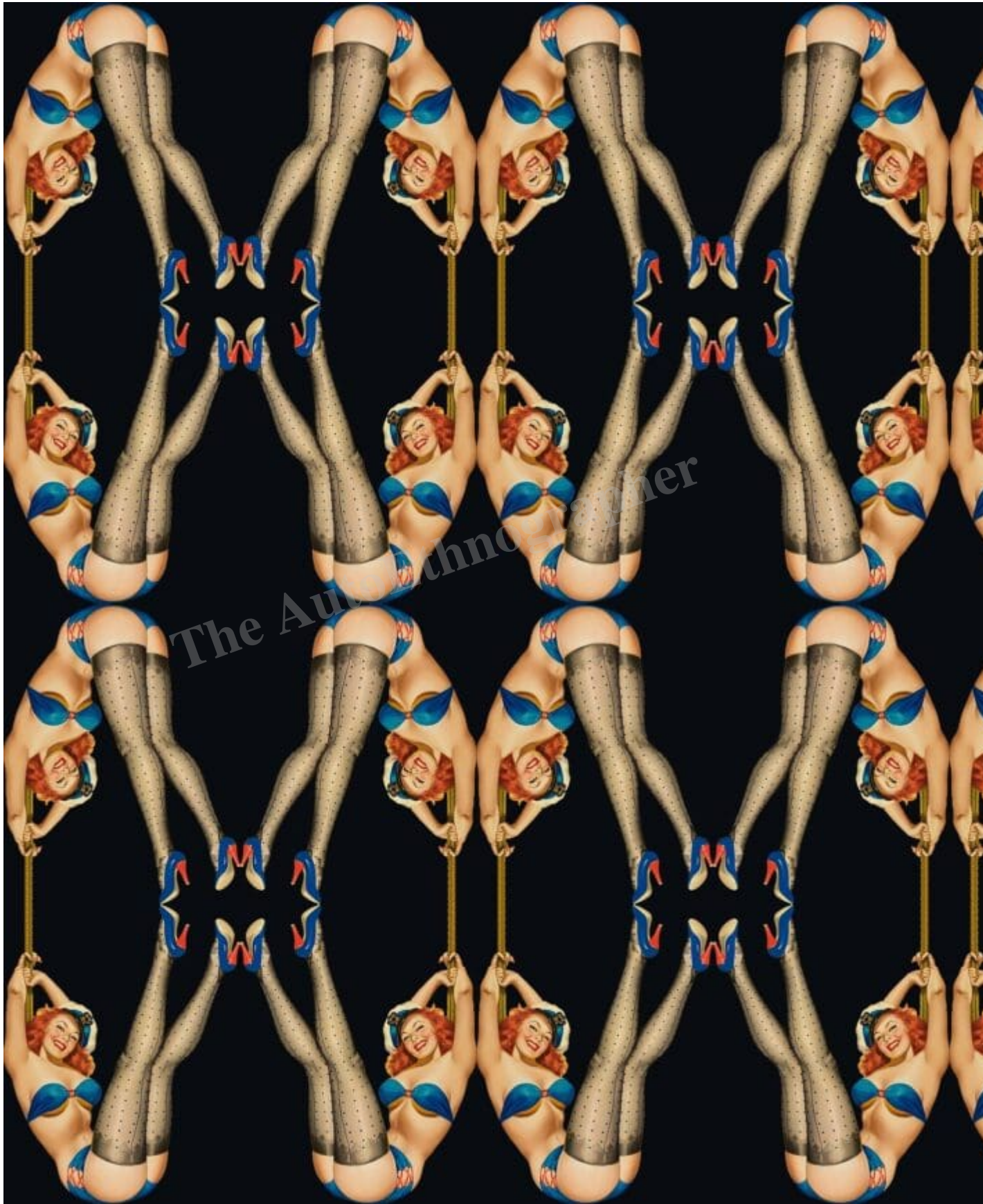
Machismo. Entitlement. Stoicism. Pornography. Each is a central focus in the fields of feminist and masculine study; and each, in its own formidable way, presents a challenge to curtailing toxic masculinity, a social dilemma easily more widespread and virulent than the COVID-19 pandemic. But on the topic of gender relations, how do these elements, taken as a whole, coalesce and form a foundation for how many young men learn to interpret, and often misinterpret, female behavior in potentially romantic or sexually charged situations?

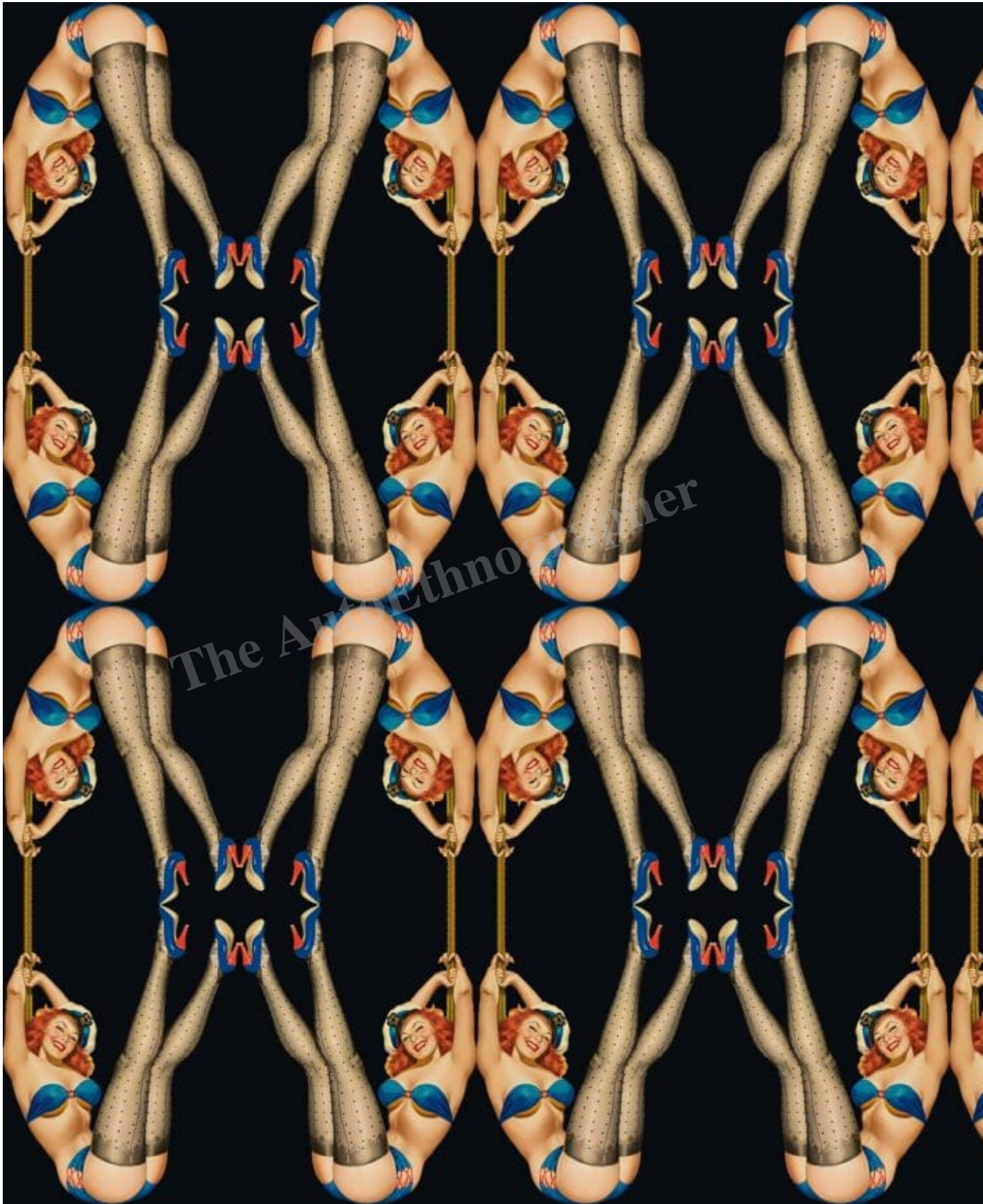
From eye contact, to facial gestures, to banter and dress, the ways in which a man can “read” a woman’s expressiveness are as disparate as they are nuanced. In the fight against toxic masculinity, a good deal of writing focuses on teaching men to be emotionally honest and embracing the full range of their humanity. Unfortunately, owing largely to reputation and fear of professional consequence, men have initiated far less exploration (particularly those belonging to the scholarly community) into their *own* experiences misconstruing female behavior and perpetuating harmful socialized norms.

In the following work, the author endeavors to fill that gap in a small, though meaningful way. Historically, hetero pornography has aimed to present females as objects for the pleasure and ego formation of men. In the world of X-rated fiction, women are the single-minded inducers of seduction, assertive prowlers of indiscriminate sex, or else cast as voraciously-willing recipients of fleeting, shallow, purely physical worship.

From an early age, through crude encounters with pornographic magazines, the author developed a kind of gender illiteracy based upon a perception that females — if viewed and approached in a service-oriented way — would never, or could never, deny a man's romantic interest. "Manslation" explores several episodes from the author's childhood and early adulthood in which this flawed thought process plays out. The nonlinear essay captures a profound misunderstanding of female sexuality reinforced by the media and male role models in the author's life, and culminates in a mother's gentle but urgent attempt to grow her son into a fully-literate reader of the opposite sex.

The AutoEthnographer





Kaleidoscopic image of pin-up girls by [Perlinator](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Manslation: 1

Only a statement of such magnitude could've wrenched our attention from that photo. We were stunned. In 3rd grade giving a girl an ice-cream sandwich, the most coveted lunch treat at school, was the equivalent of an engagement ring.

One morning in third grade, Jimmy Fektie showed up to school knowing how sex worked. He broke the news before class and at recess we huddled around him by the chain-link backstop. All the boys, not even blinking. "So you know your wang, right?"

"Yeah?"

"So your wang gets hard?"

"Hard?"

"It gets hard like a stick. Then you just put the stick in the girl's hole."

"What hole?"

"They have holes between their legs. Soon as your wang gets hard you just find a girl and give her the stick."

This was our introduction to mating, but it was only an abstract. An enormous idea superficially presented. We needed more.

Looking once to his left, once to his right, Fektie reached into his back pocket and removed a single square of paper. The torn bit of magazine was folded in halves over and over. Gently, as though revealing a holy scroll, he unfolded the page before our eyes. The picture showed a naked woman on her hands and knees. A naked man with the stomach muscles of a superhero knelt behind her, yanking her yellow hair. There was a tattoo rose on the woman's neck, tattoo flames covering the man's arms, and sure enough there was the man's wang, hard as a stick, poking the woman's rear end.

The evidence was impossible to fathom.

"Bullshit," said one boy.

“Looks nasty,” said another.

“It’s not,” said Fektie. “My brother says it’s great.”

Our little hands grabbed greedily at the picture. The woman was about the age of our mothers. She squinted her eyes and scrunched her face. She looked in pain.

“And you take off your clothes?” we asked.

“I think so,” said Fektie.

“All of them?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“And you put it there in the back?”

“You put it wherever you want,” Fektie corrected. And he flipped the page around and showed us a different picture of the same couple. Except now the stick was in the woman’s mouth.

Then something astonishing happened. In the midst of our fascination Nolan Mavar, the youngest boy in our class, detached himself from the group and made an announcement.

“I’m going to give Christy Lupo an ice-cream sandwich,” he said.

Only a statement of such magnitude could’ve wrenched our attention from that photo. We felt stunned. In 3rd grade giving a girl an ice-cream sandwich, the most coveted lunch treat at school, was the equivalent of an engagement ring.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” we asked.

“I think so,” said Mavar. “I’ve thought about it for a while and I think I’m ready.”

He was deadly serious, if totally uncertain, and suddenly we were scared for him, though we didn’t know why.

“If you give her an ice-cream sandwich she’ll be your girlfriend,” we warned.

“I know,” Mavar said.

“You’ll have to kiss her.”

“I understand.”

“You’ll have to give her the stick.”

Mavar studied the couple in the picture, making little bites on the inside of his lip. This last phase was otherworldly and he was scared of it — we could tell. — Maybe! — he said, hesitating a moment, — maybe she won't want that. —

It was Jimmy Fektie who'd unveiled this new reality, so it was Fektie who we waited on. He took a second to weigh the possibility, then shook his head.

— That's not the way it works, — he said. — If she takes the ice-cream sandwich, she wants the stick. —

Manslation: 2

Any young male who received his sexual education through the exaggerated nymphomania of pornographic starlets was sure to remain ignorant in his comprehension of the opposite sex. He would, in short, remain a poor reader of women, forever repeating the same misinterpretations, never advancing beyond an ice-cream sandwich translation of female behavior.

My mother, a school teacher, resented pornography with an educator's eye. Rather than bewail its degradation of women she would speak directly to my mental development. There was nothing — adult — about adult material. Any young male who received his sexual education through the exaggerated nymphomania of pornographic starlets was sure to remain ignorant in his comprehension of the opposite sex. He would, in short, remain a poor reader of women, forever repeating the same misinterpretations, never advancing beyond an ice-cream sandwich translation of female behavior.

But in my teenage years, when my hormones were a madness tearing at my brain, my mother's viewpoint fell on deaf ears. With mindless regularity I stole pornography from convenient stores, borrowed pornography from friends, and lived my nascent male life prowling and marauding for any X-rated tutorial that might enlighten me on parts or proper technique. Yet some part of my mother's attitude must've imprinted, for my taste in porn was rather sophisticated, I thought. Full-throttle content was an unfailing turnoff, and whenever friends or classmates presented me with such materials I would feign appreciation and privately look down my nose at them. That hardcore stuff was smut, and smut was for lowlifes. If you didn't want to feel weird about what you were doing, you got your hands on a Playboy.

The difference between Playboy and obscenity, I figured, was that Playboy models never looked powerless to be there. They weren't spread-eagled on a secondhand couch or touching their ankles to their ears on some budget motel bed.

The impression was that you, the gentleman viewer, had walked in on a woman of glamor during a private, sensual moment. She was reposing on lavish linens or standing half-nude in soft window light, removing her bra, erotically contemplating the act of undressing. And she wasn't offended to see you; in fact, there was something baiting in her look that suggested she had calculated the whole thing. She *wanted* you to walk in on her. Her beckoning mien, as much as her nudity, had a way of making it seem like a welcomed gesture as you locked your bedroom and attended to your arousal. The image staring back at you wanted that kind of attention. The look on her face was asking for it.

Manslation: 3

Nine out of ten guys who came into Sidetracks could decipher the waitress's body language: *This is just a little sugar to sweeten the environment, fella. Don't get your hopes up.* Then there was Stuckey, the tenth guy, who couldn't read the language at all.

Just down the road from the university physical plant, where I worked for rent money during graduate school, sat a proper low-country tavern called Sidetracks. By any standard the place was a dive. Its patrons were almost exclusively heavy, stoic males who'd long since lost the enthusiasm for bar life. Those who drank here did so dutifully and wearily, and as a counterweight to this trodden patronage management had staffed the tavern with several student waitresses, each endowed with snappy attitudes and high lunging bosoms in plunging tank tops.

One of the waitresses had the odd habit of winking an eye whenever she smiled, as though she was beckoning you, teasing you, saying, "Shift's over at ten, hot rod. Let's see what you got." But she wasn't winking. And she wasn't saying that. And nobody ever went home with her.

The one-eyed smile was just something her face had started to do at some point, perhaps when she began working at the bar and discovered its lucrative effect on the shy, profane men who drifted in from the plant. A little wink with each drink served could induce a good bit of gratuity by night's end, though I never believed she did it for this. My hunch was that she liked her job and enjoyed the atmosphere of shy, profane men and that this happy feeling naturally bubbled to surface in ways she didn't worry about.

Once or twice a week when we finished our shifts a crew of us from the plant gathered at Sidetracks to

spend an evening pouring two-dollar pitchers into our faces and gazing like cows at several mounted televisions tuned to ESPN. One evening our crew included Bill Stuckey, who operated the pallet jack. Stuckey didn't exude much experience with women. Often when he talked of them it was with the raunchy over-eagerness of one much younger than his middle-aged years. Throughout the night as the waitress delivered our beer, she would unfailingly flash her wink-and-smile; and each time after she walked away Stuckey would watch her intently and then lean across the table with cagey, impulsive eyes. "Did you see that? You see what she just did?"

"Forget it," we'd tell him, knowing what he meant. "It doesn't mean anything."

"No, no. Did you see THAT? The way she smiled?"

Nine out of ten guys who came into Sidetracks could decipher the waitress's body language: *This is just a little sugar to sweeten the environment, fella. Don't get your hopes up.* Then there was Stuckey, the tenth guy, who couldn't read the language at all. With every frisky, winking exchange his misreading escalated. He began to comment on her clothes and figure, her eyes and hair. Once, after depositing our beers on the table, the waitress set her hand absently on his shoulder, resting it there while she asked about our day, and when she was gone Stuckey wedged his beer bottle between his thighs and moved his calloused hand up and down the neck with a slow masturbating motion.

"I'm telling you, man. I'm goddamn *telling* you!"

We watched the misinterpretation and did nothing, afraid our intervention would be misconstrued. Cockblocking, we called it. Present, too, was the notion that it was part of the waitress's job to humor men like Stuckey, to permit the occasional lonely heart to sputter suggestive flatteries and get his hopes and crotch impossibly up.

After enough advances the waitress sensed the problem. She became conscious of her winking tic and shut it down at once. There was a blunt retraction of personality when she waited our table. The more Stuckey leered and flirted, the less engaging she became. Any gesture that could be misread as romantic interest was nixed, until finally she refused to look his way at all.

At last Stuckey made his move. Grabbing the waitress by the wrist as she placed his beer before him, he smashed his nostrils against her arm, slid his upper lip from her elbow to her hand, and planted a heavy kiss upon her knuckles.

For a moment the waitress was incapacitated, frozen with disgust. Then with a violence of emotion strong enough to make the tavern turn and stare, she jerked her arm away and told Stuckey that if he ever touched her again she'd have the bouncer crack his skull against the curb. All the sound in the room dropped off a cliff. Stuckey, in wretched astonishment, searched our faces for something that would explain her reaction. For the rest of the night he could only sit and fester, muttering foully in his confusion.

"Stupid bitches. Give me what they want and watch me act like they don't want it."

Hearing his words I was both astounded and unsurprised. The man's illiteracy was unbelievable. And yet, at the same time, it wasn't.

Manslation: 4

There's a look a girl gives when she's ready to fuck. Don't worry about recognizing it, bro. You were born knowing what it looks like. •

It is 1997. Cousin Bobby is 22 and I am 17. I have never met or listened to anyone like him. He is confident and sure of everything. In romantic retrospect it is as if he is on top of everything every complicated aspect of existence and I am beguiled by his masculinity, by how he never seems to hesitate or lower his voice in compromise. Like a living vending machine inexhaustibly supplied with every manly attribute I desire: confidence, experience, audacity, swag.

In this memory we are cruising Pacific Coast Highway in his raised '84 Bronco. He has replaced the original wheels with 35-inch mud tires, making us the biggest on the road. He has modified the engine and exhaust system, so we are also the loudest. At 17 I am still a virgin. Cousin Bobby is not. And whenever in his company it is a precious opportunity to not only learn about women, but to learn how to be a blatantly heterosexual male.

We are headed nowhere in particular just scoping the scene. The windows are down and the stereo is up. My cousin drives with his right hand on top of the wheel, his left side slouched against the door. His plain white T-shirt is too small for his buffed-up torso and his pummeling arms are dented from wrist to shoulder with hard, meaty muscles. There is barbed wire inked around his bicep.

The music blaring from the stereo is sublime. Literally that is the name of the band. As we prowl the palm-lined avenues he sings along to songs about date rape and pimping while dispensing observations.

There's a look a girl gives when she's ready to fuck. Don't worry about recognizing it, bro. You were born knowing what it looks like. •

All afternoon we talk like this, or rather he talks and I listen. As we drive he impulsively beats out salvos of hornblasts at female joggers in fitness shorts or teenage girls cruising in their own cars. Occasionally when he stares too closely we veer into the other lane or must quickly brake to avoid hitting the vehicle ahead of us. Sometimes the sight of a female makes him slightly aroused, and when this happens he thrusts his shoulders back against the seat, lifts his pelvis off the upholstery, and shoves his hand deep into his pants to maneuver his genitals.

The towns drift by, slow and easy. Hermosa, Redondo, Torrance, Manhattan. We are somewhere in Redondo, paused at a stoplight, when my cousin unleashes a rhythm of hornblasts at a girl standing by a liquor store. She is around my age, perhaps a bit older. She is wearing a high purple skirt with laced up boots, and there is uneasiness in her manner. As if she is waiting for someone who has failed to show up.

My cousin hammers the horn until she acknowledges us. His over-muscled truck rumbles and shudders. Leaning across my body he calls through the window, asks the girl who she's waiting for.

"A friend," she tells him.

"I'm a friend," he says. "What's your name?"

To my amazement she tells him. My cousin moves boldly and swiftly. What are you up to? Where are you headed? How about a ride? He is like a bombardier dropping the ordnance of his personality all over her, and I am compelled as his rookie wing man to remain quiet in my seat so as not to ruin the mission.

And yet, judging by certain tells, it is clear that all this is unwelcomed by the girl. The liquid of her eyes is filled with panicked energy and she has protectively crossed her legs, then crossed her hands over her legs to shelter her bare thighs from sight. My cousin presses for her phone number. And though she smiles and acts receptive to his assertion, something tells me that her participation is about appeasement, not interest, as though it is easier or safer to deal with us this way.

The light turns green; the car behind us crowds our bumper. The girl waves goodbye and ducks into the liquor store. As we pull away my cousin emits a wishful, craving groan. Were there a parking spot within sight he would stop and go back for her, I am sure of it; and I am angry with myself for being relieved that he doesn't, for feeling disconcerted by the girl's reaction. For that is the way a chickenshit feels and not the kind of attitude that will rid me of my virginity. Minutes later, the girl well out of sight, my cousin is still groaning, clucking his tongue hungrily.

"Girls who dress like that are begging to be undressed," he assures. "Seriously, bro. You best believe."

Manslation: 5

It is women who should know better: women who do not grasp what their outfits communicate, who neither know nor care how their actions read to men. It is days before I let the insult go. And it is years — several companionless and frustrated years — before I rethink any of it.

Seven years later I am crammed inside the kitchen of a house party in Santa Monica. Kegged beer is freely flowing; cheap dope is steadily blazing. I am enclosed on all sides by stoned or tipsy girls who are dressed to party and, so I believe, looking for the same thing I am.

Periodically through the evening I have exchanged smiles with a young woman I somewhat know from other parties. At 24 I am no longer a virgin, though I am not nearly as sexually rampant as I think I should be. I am convinced at this age that males are meant to tantalize and stud. It is our fundamental role in nature. And every party or night on the town that I do not fulfill this role fills me with guilt and insecurity, the sense that I am performing inadequately as a man.

We mingle on the fringes of the crowded kitchen, talking closely over thumping hip-hop. As we chat I am conscious of my cousin's words and alertly pore over her physical text, scanning her expressions for that "go time" look. The material reads plainly enough, I think. Her ripped denim shorts ride up her thighs, telling me she is sexually eager. She talks openly of her last boyfriend, a bad relationship full of anemic affections, and this tells me she is receptive to advance.

The kitchen is at maximum occupancy and we are pressed against the stove. As partygoers plow through the room I am forced to scooch closer, which she does not mind. And this, too, reads like an approval. When her ride to the party falls through and she accepts my sheepish offer to drive her home, it feels as certified as a signed contract. She has taken the ice-cream sandwich.

We head to her townhouse near UCLA. Although we are by the ocean and the windows are down, it is very hot, and the sexual anticipation intensifies the feeling of heat. I am nervous and excited, wondering whether we will go all the way when we get to her place. Yet as we drive I am also sensitive to another kind of tension, this one neither anticipatory nor sexual. The nearer we get to her place the more she distances herself from her earlier mood. She meets my efforts to extend the flirtation with short, detached responses. Her body grows stiff, her extroversion recedes. It is as though I have said or done something to make her suddenly uncomfortable.

At her townhouse she tells me not to park; it is fine to drop her off in front of the building. I brush the instruction aside as one of those empty motions girls go through so as not to seem easy. I pull into a space and cut the engine. And though she invites me to call her, she is quick to say goodnight and get out of the car. The message is loud and clear, but I do not, or will not, believe what I am reading. Spurred by ignorance or denial I follow her out and accompany her toward her door. We have not gone more than a couple feet when she whirls abruptly and halts me with a stabbing, dirty look.

“Enough,” she commands.

Her tone possesses the heat of pepper spray and for a moment actually disables me. It is a good few seconds before I find my voice.

“I was thinking I’d come inside,” I explain.

“I was thinking you’d go home,” she replies.

The rebuff is stupefying. Her simple text, which I have so confidently interpreted the entire night, has suddenly transformed into some illegible script, and in my confusion my illiteracy sputters meekly from my lips.

“But I gave you a ride home.”

She regards the remark with a cocked head, genuinely puzzled. Then she comprehends something and the nervous hot glare scrunches into a look of wonderment, a pitying squint. Though I do not understand this, either.

There is no enlightenment to be gained. I drive away livid and profane. She is a bitch. A cunt. A skanky tease. These ugly words feel proper as I spew them, for what I have assumed about females is beyond conjecture. It is women who should know better: women who do not grasp what their outfits communicate, who neither know nor care how their actions read to men. It is days before I let the insult go. And it is years—several companionless and frustrated years—before I rethink any of it.

Manslation: 6

The wife and husband aren’t naked at first. At first they are sitting at the dinner table, smiling into each other’s eyes with little red hearts floating up between their faces. Those little hearts are important, my mother tells me. “You wouldn’t want to do something like this without those little hearts around.”

It is the late 1980s, not long after Jimmy Fektie’s dirty photograph. In the house where I live there are two bathrooms: my mother’s and my father’s. My mother’s is the boring bathroom. There is nothing in her drawers but skin creams, makeup bottles and a weird profusion of cotton balls. In my father’s bathroom the drawers contain razors, pocket knives, vintage smelling bottles of gem-colored cologne. There are toiletry pouches with miniature combs and toothbrushes, acquired during

business trips, and a veritable sweet shop of candy-flavored lozenges. It is my father's bathroom where I try to gather intel on the murky adult existence that awaits me. And it is my father's bathroom, in the cabinet beneath the sink, where I discover a stash of Playboy magazines.

The magazines are in cruddy shape. Some are years old and heavily damaged from the leaky sink pipe. Yet they are, without question, the most exhilarating discovery of my life. Although too young to be aroused, I am fascinated by the women, by the bizarre perfection of their breasts and tummies, their mischievous smirking faces that make me feel as though they understand everything about the funny urges building within me. When I sneak these magazines out of the cabinet and ogle them from my knees on the bathroom floor, it is not only the first vague tingles of sexual emotion I feel, but the suspenseful rush of cracking an enormous code, of breaking through this tightly-guarded secret called sex. The very reason, it seems, that a boy grows up.

One day as I kneel on the bathroom rug, eyes latched to the buttocks of a high-heeled playmate bent across a diner counter, my fixation grows so intense that I do not hear my mother coming down the hall or immediately notice when she opens the door. I am astonished to see her standing over me; and I am filled at once with petrifying dread, for I have always somehow thought that dirty magazines are the highest level of naughty. There is a horrid sense that the earth will open up and thunder will explode, or that my mother will wail to the Lord and unleash a wrath the likes of which I have never imagined. But it does not happen that way at all.

All that happens is a slight heightening of color in my mother's cheeks. With odd gentleness she tells me to replace the magazines in the cabinet and go to the den. In a moment my mother enters the room with a large book I have never seen in our house. She is hugging the book to her chest with both arms, her eyes patient and calm. We are going to look at a special story, she informs me. And I know by the solemn weight of her tone that I am to sit very still and pay close attention during this story, neither fidgeting nor interrupting for as long as it takes.

We sit hip-to-hip on the sofa and my mother opens the book between us. One half on her lap, the other half on mine. The book's illustrations are naked cartoons. There is a naked husband and a naked wife, both chubby for some reason. They do not have nice bodies like the women in the magazines. The wife's breasts are globular and lopsided; her belly is like a melted cake. The husband is the same way, but going bald, as well. My mother turns the pages, her voice soft but firm.

The wife and husband aren't naked at first. At first they are sitting at the dinner table, smiling into each other's eyes with little red hearts floating up between their faces. Those little hearts are important, my mother tells me. "You wouldn't want to do something like this without those little hearts around."

The wife and husband have a special feeling between them. The feeling is so special, my mother explains, that it requires a monument to honor it. To make the monument happen the wife and husband go into the bedroom and remove their clothes. The two get as close to one another as a man and woman can get. Then the chubby wife lies on her back. They are still smiling into each other's eyes when the husband gets on top of her, and the little hearts are still floating above them.

My mother taps her finger on the wife's face. She asks me what I see, and by her tone I intuit, however incompletely, that I am being nudged away from anything I might have so far comprehended about sex or girls or being a man.

I peer closely at the wife's expression and think I see affection. Or I think I see peace. I do not know what I see, exactly. It is like no expression I have ever observed on a person's face. And for as long as we sit there I cannot be sure why it matters so dearly to my mother, or why she keeps pressing me, again and again, to remember what it looks like.

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The AutoEthnographer