

I don't like being touched.

Especially not by strangers. I went to an EDM concert in jeans and a long sleeved thermal my freshman year of college and it was a literal nightmare.

Sweaty, high young people flailing their arms. In SWATHS. It was hot. Did I mention they were sweaty?

Anyway.

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So, this 6ft thing we have going right now is really working out for me.

When I think of toxic masculinity, I think of a gas. A noxious fume filling the air and stinging the inside of my nostrils. Green and thick. I think of the film it forms when it lands on your skin. I think of that sensation, that touch. I think of my grandfather who, when I was little, said to me over and over and over again, "Kelsey, don't touch that."

My grandfather wasn't a particularly warm man. He was tall, over 6 feet, with a prominent nose and detached earlobes I always found fascinating as a kid. He played basketball when he was in high school. In fact, he was super popular and an all star. At least. That's what I heard.

As I knew him, he'd offer the occasional wise crack and a Ricola cough drop from his pocket whenever you cleared your throat. He'd rub his fingernail across the coins in his pocket when he was waiting; like a melodic rhythm that always accompanied him. He often fell asleep in church, strategically placing his hand over his mouth and bowing his head as if in prayer. My grandmother nudged him reprimandingly in the arm until he stirred awake. He served in Korea and he worked at ComEd for 40 years. (40 YEARS?!) And my grandmother always had his meals ready for him when he returned home.

In retirement, he'd come downstairs from breakfast and recline in his lounge chair. He'd watch Westerns. Matlock. Murder She Wrote. MASH. Until lunch. Then, Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune, the news, maybe a nap in between, until it was time for dinner. After dinner, my grandparents settled down to watch the latest Hallmark Channel Movie with their late night (7pm) scoop of ice cream before bed. And so it goes. Sometimes, I'd sit in his chair and he'd pretend to be mad at me, but then sit in my Grandma's chair instead. And he'd let me watch Arthur and Clifford and Big Comfy Couch until naptime. I think it took me until now to figure out this is a way he showed me he loved me.

When my grandfather died in 2018, there was a photograph on display at his funeral that I'd never seen before. It was a photo of him as an actor in his high school production of the Mécado. He was young, the youngest I'd ever seen him. Smooth skin, wide eyes, prominent nose, full, black hair. The same smile, a kind of quiet grin with a touch of mischievousness, and with a captured joy I'd never seen before. An aliveness I'd never before witnessed. Long legs tucked under sinewy arms. His face, ears, hair, head, in focus. He was probably 17 in that photo.

That photo struck me. I remember staring at it for a long time. I'm an actor and writer, but I'd never known my grandfather to be creative or expressive like me. I'd never before seen his fire, only his embers. Only his ash. Worn down and burned out from passing time.

His favorite thing to say to me when I was growing up was "Kelsey, Don't touch that." Especially when we would venture out to the local Chippain's for groceries and my favorite snacks of Kraft Cheese Singles and tortilla chips, I'd touch EVERYTHING. The packaging. The fuzzy peaches. The bumpy cantaloupe. The plastic displays. The cardboard displays. The paper prices that slid back and forth on the aisles. The coupon machines that'd dispense grand prize tickets just for me! I'd be sure to take 8 or 12 just to be safe.

But "Kelsey, don't touch that." Still echoes in my brain when I'm at a store. And both defiance and delight bubble up in me when I do touch things. I feel a little devilish, a little mischievous, a little joy.

But my grandfather? Was not like that. His preference was a hug hello and a hug goodbye. I really don't remember anything in between.

My family came to build a narrative around him. That he was "No fun," a "Grumpy Old Man" story that never settled well with me, but one that he played along with and I came to understand as custom.

"Now, you know the rule," he'd say and we'd answer "Not have any fun!" Squealing in delight and running off to the fun thing we were about to do.

My Grandpa would also say the same prayer at every meal, head bowed, hands folded. "Dear Heavenly Father, We thank you for this food that we're about to eat and we ask you to bless it into our bodies. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Meals were always a utilitarian affair, a race to the finish. Robotic in nature and a prime demonstration of gluttony. "You don't eat because you're hungry. You eat because it's time to eat." (I'd never heard something more Boomer or more Scottish in my entire LIFE.) In f

act, we'd had assigned seats at the dining room table. Spots that were sacred, in a way, and not to be disrupted. I remember one time I wanted to sit by my favorite Aunt and I did and there was UNREST, but eventual, begrudging adjustment because I WAS NOT moving. After eating, he'd always say "All right, that's enough."

On the other hand, my Dad. I remember we were at Mama and Papa Salerno's, an Italian place where the dinner came with soup, salad, appetizer, entree, and dessert, (all for the low price of \$12.99.) I'd gobbled. LITERALLY GOBBLED. My food. I mean. That's what I'd been taught. To eat. Not to savor. Not to luxuriate in the food or the company. And I'd never know there to be another option until my Dad asked me that night, "What's the rush?" This startled me. The idea that time was mine. That I could take it. And be with it and savor it and caress it. My Dad and I sat and talked in that booth for another hour over a mug of decaf and a lemonade.

My Dad and my Grandpa were the most prominent male figures of my childhood. So in response to toxic masculinity, I think of the latter. My grandfather. This man. This. Perfect Idea of a Man. This towering figure of discipline, solemnity, and wit. A good Christian man and father, who, from my understanding, didn't really embrace his children much either. This tower that, after his retirement, allowed his scaffolding to crumble and his body to fall into disrepair. At the end of his life, he surrendered to dilapidation and vacancy.

The thing about living your life as the idea of a man..

Ideas don't have skin. They don't have bodies or fingers or hearts.

Ideas can have smart mouths and pristine morals, but ideas are incapable of expressive love. Of touch. Of compassion. Only souls and bodies can provide these sensations. When you allow your body to be infiltrated by noxious fumes, what's left? Perhaps the idea of you and the narrative which you have willed yourself to become.

And who does that impact? How does living with a concept rather than a fully fleshed out human affect those around you? Toxic masculinity erased my grandfather. Extinguished his flame. Erased the starry eyed boy I'd come to only witness in photographs. Erased the softness and gentleness and emotions that humans, that men, are fully capable of expressing. Toxic masculinity (and frankly, western religion) demanded my grandfather show up a certain way, to be perfect, to follow the rules of man and father and left him living as a vague notion of himself rather than the human he truly was. A noxious gas, rather than a solid. Not fully fleshed out, but cool and restricted. Resolute in his personal beliefs and way of life.

I still don't like being touched but I do love hugs from my friends and I love holding hands with my partner. I love the electricity and the energy that's exchanged. I love feeling the rise and fall of a rib cage and the tightness of arms around my body. And I am so grateful for that gift.

What I've learned is that compassionate touch is imperative in developing secure attachment and boundary setting. Taking ownership of one's body and comfortably communicating one's needs. Gentle touch. Honest touch. Understanding touch. Empathetic touch.

As we collectively evolve, learning more about ourselves and each other, I advocate for a touching love, not a tough love. One with meaning and seeing the person you're with fully. Honoring their experience. A soft love. An understanding love. An empathetic love.

I advocate for a touching honesty, not a brutal honesty. A soft honesty. A curious honesty. A holistic honesty. An honesty that's rooted in wonder of oneself and the other while honoring the experience of each.

My grandfather's touch doesn't exist in my memory, but his essence remains. As well as the wonder of who he might have been had a different narrative existed, one that was more in touch with his humanness and his fire inside.