

JAZZ BROS

Essay 03 in a Series by Owen Earl

I've had this experience that is somewhat common. A friend of mine calls me on the phone, late at night. He's been drinking, he sounds drunk, and he tells me that he loves me in a way that he doesn't ever while sober. He tells me that he admires me, our friendship is important, and that he would be devastated if we couldn't be friends. I've also had the reciprocal experience, where I've gotten really drunk, and in my drunken state I've sent soppy texts to loved ones telling them how I feel.

There is a common attitude in our culture that sees people as having an inner and outer self. Our inner self reflects our true, often dark, desires, and our outer self is the mask we wear to appease society.

It's easy to believe this is true because there are some obvious situations where our private and public selves diverge. I hide my naked body when I'm in public, but enjoy being naked at times in private. I wouldn't poop in front of anyone, nor



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would I pick my nose or masturbate in public, but these are all things I sometimes do when I'm alone. I feel, for whatever reason, that they are inappropriate to do publicly, and so I really do have a public and private life.

Are the aspects of myself I hide from the world indicative of more honest desires? A truer, deeper, darker self? Is there something dishonest about wearing clothes while in public? I don't think so, and I doubt most people think so either, but you don't have to believe that your private self is somehow more true or honest to believe that we have public and private selves.

I want to talk about football, drunk phone calls, and the spaces where the lines between public and private blur. I want to talk about compartmentalization, sexual shame, and the ways we deny the meaning of the things we do. I want to talk about jazz bros.

WHAT ARE YOU
HIDING?
BOOOO!



Is there something dishonest
about wearing clothes while
in public?

For two years I went to school to study music and the social environment there was unpleasant. The music department was male-dominated, and there was a kind of socially enforced apathy to anything and everything. If you acted genuinely interested or enthusiastic towards something, especially learning about music, people would ridicule you. People would make disparaging comments, as if engaging in class was pathological and I was off my meds for doing so. It was a deeply unpleasant environment.

Apathy is a defense and these were people who at one point or another learned to be apathetic to protect themselves. People can hurt you by attacking the stuff you care about. If you care about nothing, you can't get hurt in that way.

But in a culture where enough people have learned to be defensibly apathetic, it becomes a social norm. Acting enthusiastically about something in public is inappropriate, just like swearing in front of



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children or taking your shoes off on a bus.

There's something very gendered about a cultural norm of apathy. The attitude of the music department reminded me of the attitude of boys I went to high school with. There, I could be in a math class and face backlash from peers for engaging enthusiastically, where female classmates who displayed the same enthusiasm would be met with indifference or even encouragement.

A lot of the gendered nature of this cultural norm comes down to who is supposed to be strong and therefore needs to protect themselves.

Traditionally, men are assigned the task of being the protector, and to fulfill their duty to society they must possess some resilience. Being enthusiastic about stuff is opening yourself up to a line of attack and potential vulnerability, and so it can be seen as irresponsible and immature. Women are less likely to have those same responsibilities placed on them,



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so even if they are displaying a kind of strength through apathy, they are seen as doing something manly.

Music school encouraged apathy in us all, men women alike. It felt like the boys had learned to be apathetic elsewhere and they brought that cultural artifact with them when they started music school, and, outnumbering the girls, they set the tone for us all.

In any case, it was clear that displays of enthusiasm or vulnerability were frowned upon if one was too public about it. It was understood that all of us possess a love and passion and enthusiasm for music, as music education is not the kind of thing parents pressure their kids into, but that love and passion was relegated to the private self, and the classroom was treated as a public space.

The campus was open until quite late into the evening, and hanging around there you might start to notice



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something. It was common for the jazz enthusiasts to gather in a practice room and hold jam sessions together. These would go on for hours and hours, and they occurred with some regularity. Presumably this was to practice, but this was a group of kids that were flakey about homework, and treated people who were too gung-ho about schoolwork with some ire. What's up with the jam sessions?

If you've never jammed out with people before you won't know this, but as someone who has I can say: it is quite an intimate and vulnerable thing to do. There's something spiritual about making music with others, and when it is improvised the experience is heightened. Art creation typically includes a production and editorial process. I'm writing these words now in the privacy of my own home where I can write and rewrite and edit my words until I'm satisfied that it's good enough to share with the world. Improvised music doesn't offer those comforts, there is only unfiltered creation, no edits. There is some



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safety in jamming out in front of non-music people, because they don't know enough to be critical of you, but in front of other jazz bros? It is one of the most vulnerable things you could do. You are making art, thinking and creating out loud, in front of people who are shaping and creating with you. It can be like sex in its level of vulnerability, its feeling of nakedness.

And these jazz bros are cramming into a room, night after night, for hours on end, to jam out together, to participate in something spiritually and creatively intimate, to share in a love and passion and joy for music. And they are all in the deepest denial about what they are up to. They will spend hours in sweaty cramped room, being vulnerable with each other, and get up the next day and lash out at the same people they were with the night before for being a little too excited to learn in class.

You could look at their actions and see a kind of contradiction there, but

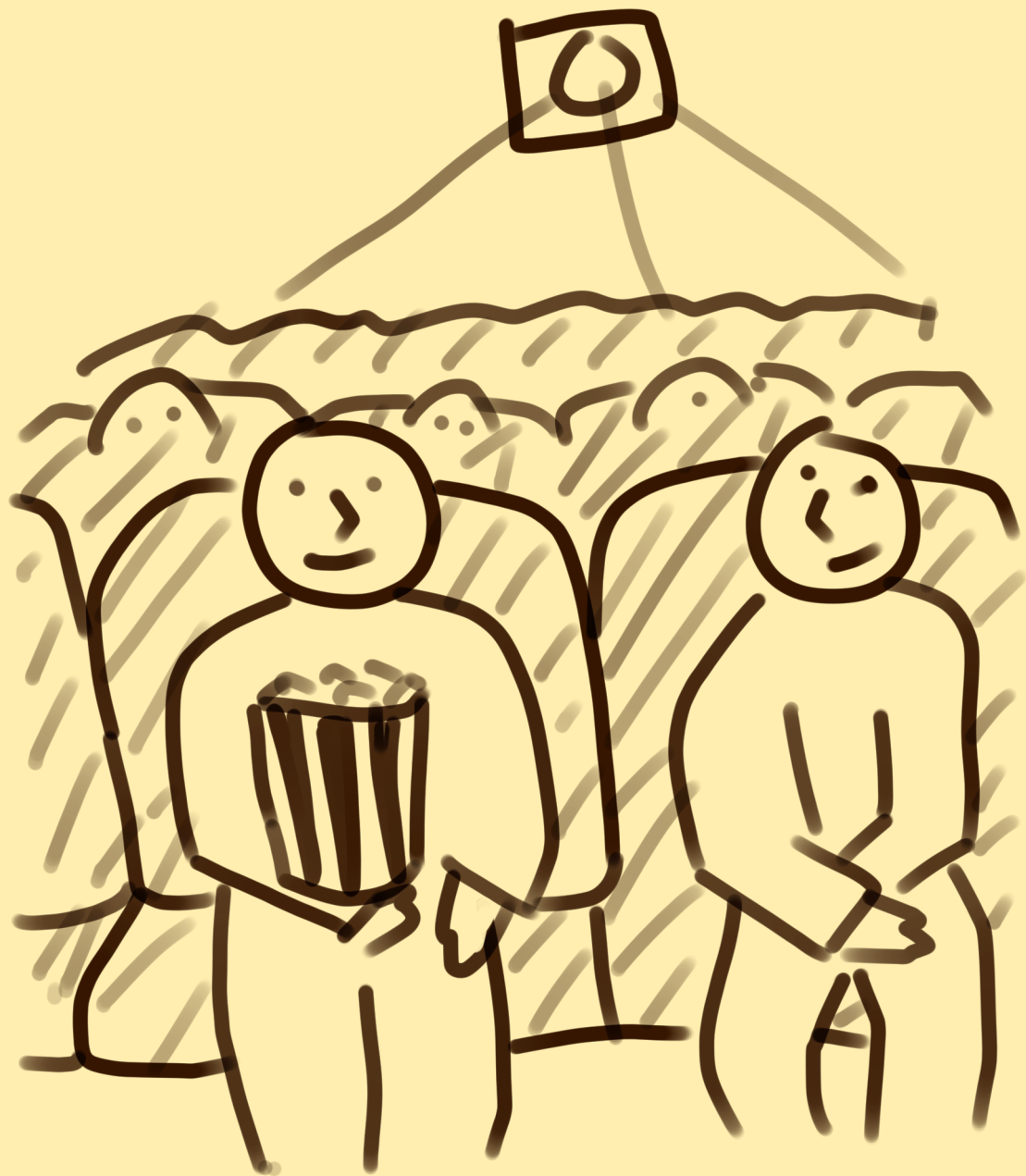


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they didn't see it that way. If asked, they would tell you that jamming out isn't very vulnerable and doesn't mean much of anything and that you're reading too much into an activity that is about as intimate as watching a movie with a friend.

Maybe they are lying to you, but more likely they are lying to themselves. I suspect that these are people who have internalized a set of social norms or ethics and view themselves as adhering and respecting that ethical code.

Their alignment to these rules is, in some way, important to their sense of self, and if they looked at their own desires and motivations and realized that they really wanted and needed this intimacy it would conflict with their own perception of themselves. They've discovered an activity that provides them with the intimacy they're desiring, but also provides them with a convenient excuse. It's just jamming out, and it doesn't mean much of anything.



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I'm hardly the first person to notice this pattern, and in many ways it is better illustrated with other examples. The music school I went to had a very specific culture, and I doubt most people can really relate to my experiences going there.

An area where it is often talked about is the culture surrounding sports. I've never been a big sports person, so my personal experience is limited, but what I gather as an outsider is this:

Playing competitive sports such as American football is a very intimate experience. Exercising together, tackling each other, working as a team to accomplish a goal, these are both physically and emotionally intimate things. Going through that with a group of boys can be a real bonding experience, and much of the value of sports is that emotional bonding.

But football is also very violent. It is an exercise in physical strength, domination, and competition. It is



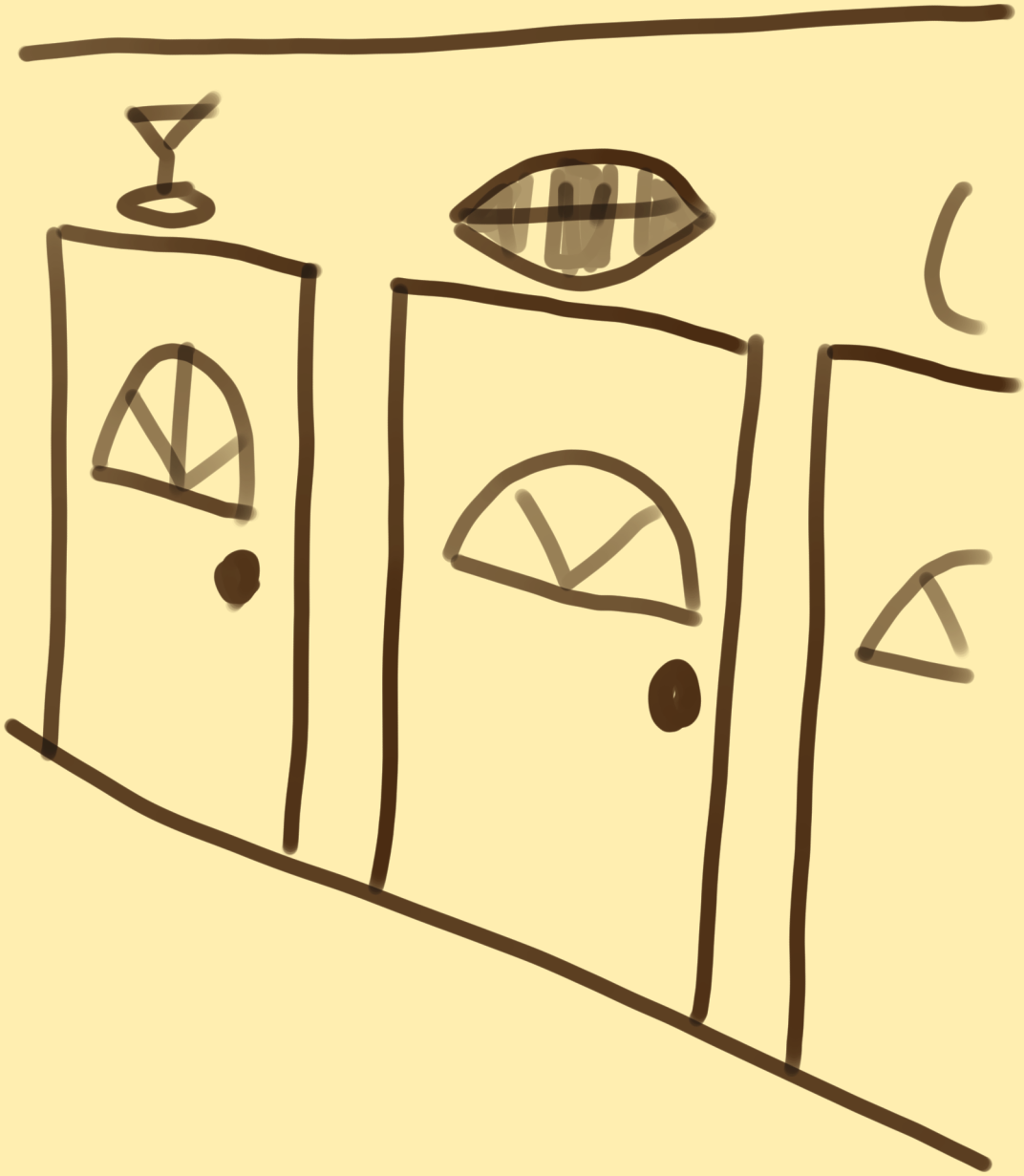
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easy, if you are someone that feels like valuing comradery is inappropriate or embarrassing, to explain your passion for football to yourself and to other on the terms of beating people up and winning. You can feign ignorance. It hadn't even occurred to you that people might be bonding over football.

Out of this develops a compartmentalization. There are rooms, sometimes figurative, but often literal, where you can be vulnerable, intimate, or whatever it is you feel is inappropriate, without it truly counting. What you do in the practice room doesn't count because you're just jamming out.

We all have our rooms where what we do in them doesn't count. For me it's getting drunk. This is a common one.

I'm in love with my friend, and I want to kiss her, but I fear that if I tell her she will think our friendship is a hoax and I'm only interested in her as a possible sexual partner. I don't



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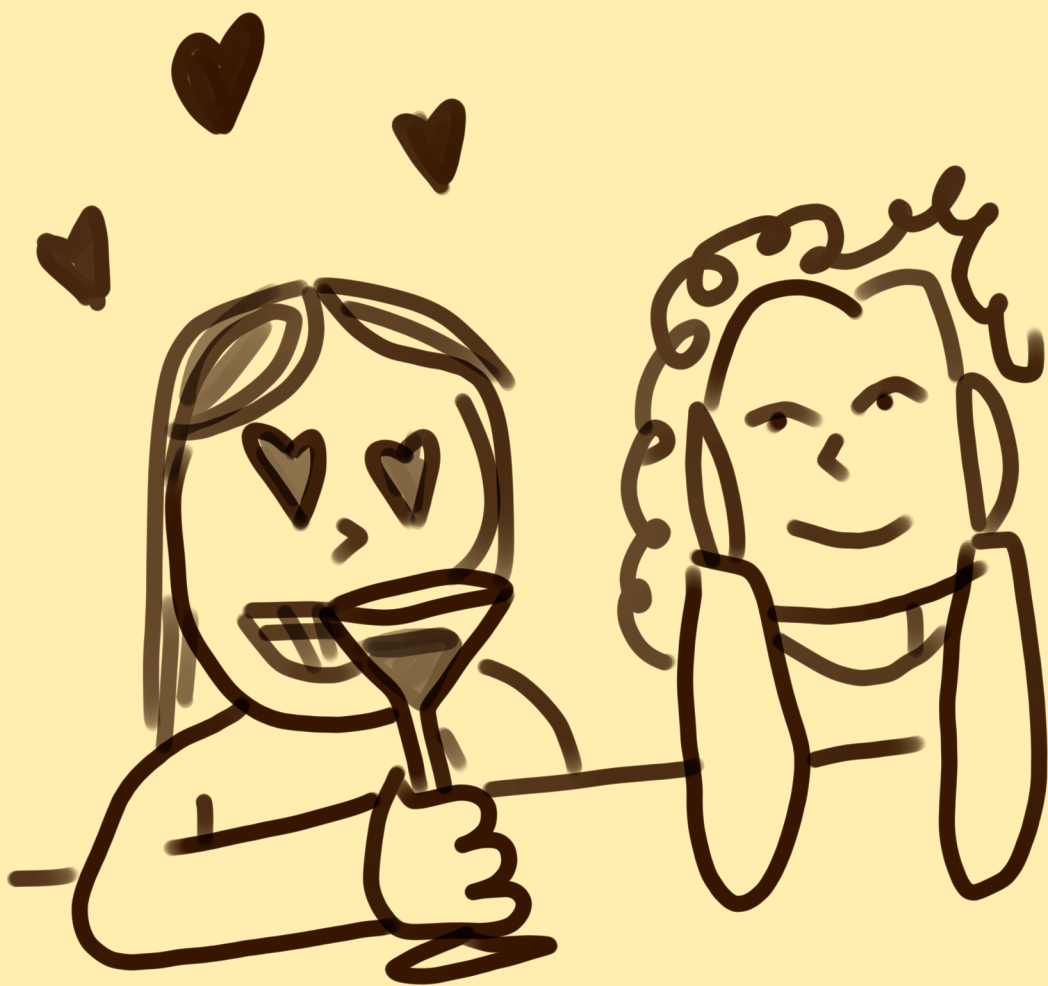
want her to feel that way so I keep my feelings to myself, but when I get drunk I tell her I'm in love with her.

Did the alcohol make me say it? Not literally. The alcohol had no effect on my feelings or desires. But if she reacts badly I can wake up the next morning and say "crazy night. I had a lot to drink. I hope I didn't say anything too embarrassing."

She knows I'm drunk, and I know I'm drunk, and we are jazz bros in the practice room and nothing that happens here counts. Whatever violations to social norms I make while drunk don't reflect on any true feelings because drugs make you say all sorts of crazy things.

The alcohol is a literary device I use in my personal narrative to explain away character traits I'd rather not have.

Most men I know would rather not have a desperate burning need and desire to be intimate with someone else. They'd



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rather not want someone to cry or be weak in front of. They'd prefer if they didn't need love and support.

Many of them have constructed an image of themselves as someone who doesn't need or want those things. How do they explain away their constant yearning, dissatisfaction, and need for human connection? They tell themselves it's a want for sex.

Sex is the ultimate excuse, because it is well understood that healthy, manly men crave sex. Like with football, there is a framework for understanding this desire. Sex with women is a conquest, it's a competition, it's a form of domination.

And like with football, it really can be all the things we say it is, but sex is also intimate, loving, and vulnerable. It is spiritual, and it is deeply human. It can satisfy the need for intimacy that some men are ashamed of.



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But in a heterosexual context this creates a big chasm between the narrative framework men and women are applying to their shared sex. Women don't have the same set of pressures that would lead them to feel shame about a desire for emotional intimacy, and moreover, in the narrative of sexual conquest they are the object being conquered. What woman in her right mind would agree to that interpretation of the sex act?

A woman may rightfully experience sex with a man as a loving and intimate act. It is spiritual. The feelings of intimacy and emotional fulfillment are only possible if they are mutually felt. He is participating in creating the sex. He is participating in something vulnerable. But like the jazz bros after the jam session, he is incapable of recognizing what should be an obvious reality outside of the metaphorical room. When the sex ends, he is emotionally distant, and, if confronted, he will speak about sex only in terms of conquest and animalistic desire. If questioned by



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the women he's having sex with he will see it as a challenge and respond with something vague, disingenuous, and reassuring.

There is no shared language to talk about sex between men and women under these circumstances. Women are left with the dissonant experience of knowing their sexual partner is capable of love and emotional intimacy because he embodies those things during sex but having no way of confirming the reality of this. His puts his clothes back on and becomes his public self, who, not only refuses to acknowledge the significance of the sex, but seems genuinely unaware of it. The sex is largely nonverbal and there are no witnesses. There is nothing but a feeling.

He is a stranger during the day, with a bewildering world view. He takes offense at prying questions, dismisses the possibility that there is greater significance to all, sees her belief in the significance of the sex as a symptom of female weakness. Women are



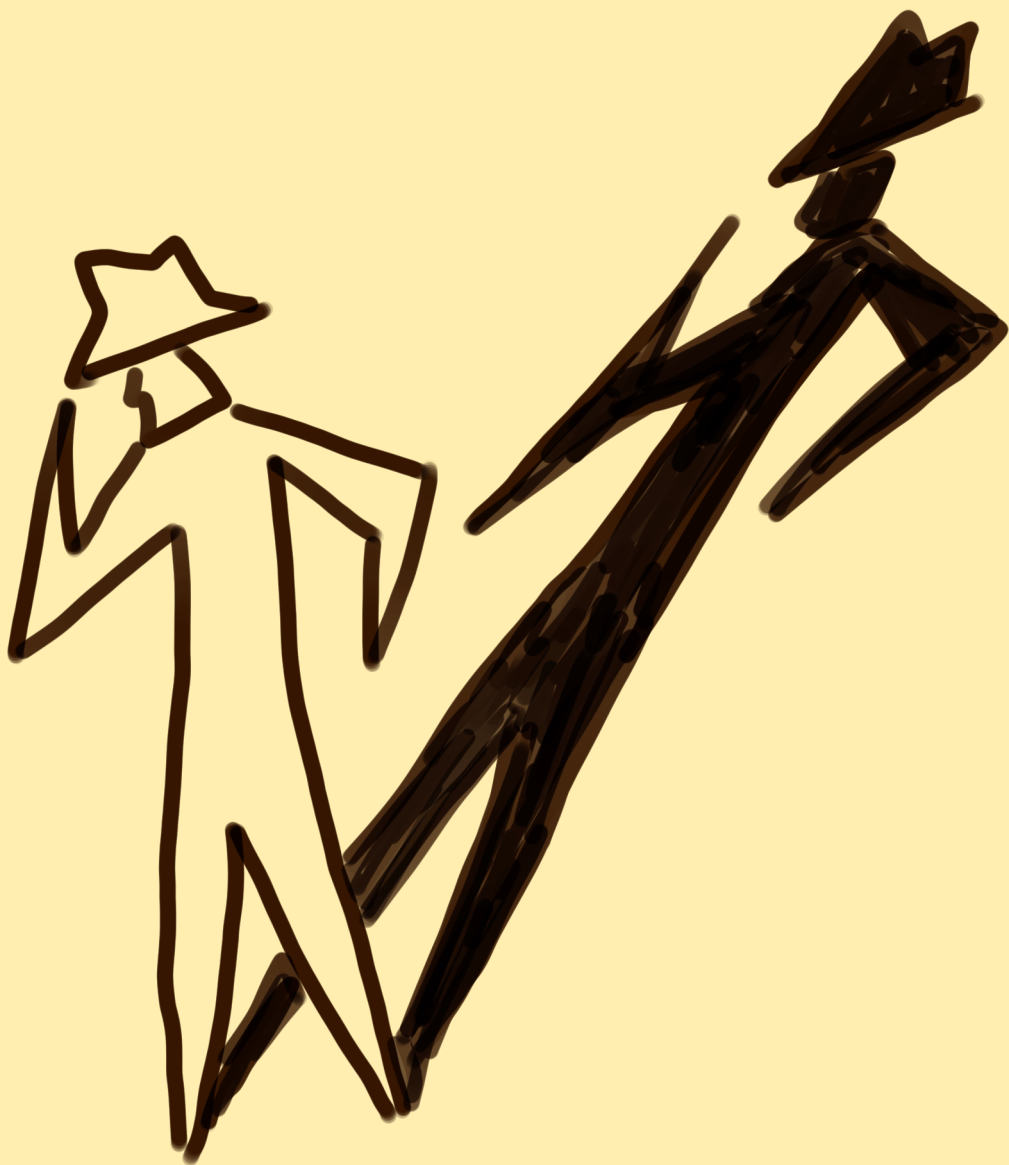
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Of course, I am describing a very
specific dynamic. There are other
strange and tragic ways the
compartmentalization and disowning of
sex can manifest.

There is the feminist man, who has
learned that displays of contempt for
women is wrong and believes himself to
be a supporter of equality, and uses
sex as a space to act out his
internalized misogyny. He is the
shadow version of the misogynist who
uses sex to be vulnerable and loving.
Both are suffering from the same
social forces, and have subscribed to
similar attitudes about sex.

Unfortunately, what happens during sex
doesn't disappear into a void. The
drunk texts you sent last night are
still there in the morning. We cannot
escape ourselves and we cannot escape
the people who witness us.



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Relationships between two people who have no shared language to talk about something as significant and intimate as sex are unstable. Either the people in them will learn to talk or the relationship will fall apart. Or maybe they will stay together in an unhappy marriage until one of them dies. Who am I to judge?

In my experience women are often more empowered to talk about these things. I have many female friends who will speak to me openly and quite articulately about their sex lives, and, recognizing the instability of a vow of silence surrounding sex, will confront their male partners about their shared sex lives.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of men. We are failing to give them the tools that would empower them to speak and process and understand themselves. The women they sleep with cannot give them the tools because they were raised differently and can't comprehend their partner's struggles. The women they sleep with cannot give



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them the tools because women are irrational, overly emotional, overly sentimental, overly complicated.

There is a rotting core at the center of many heterosexual relationships, and until we can find a shared language to talk about it, it will continue to rot.



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