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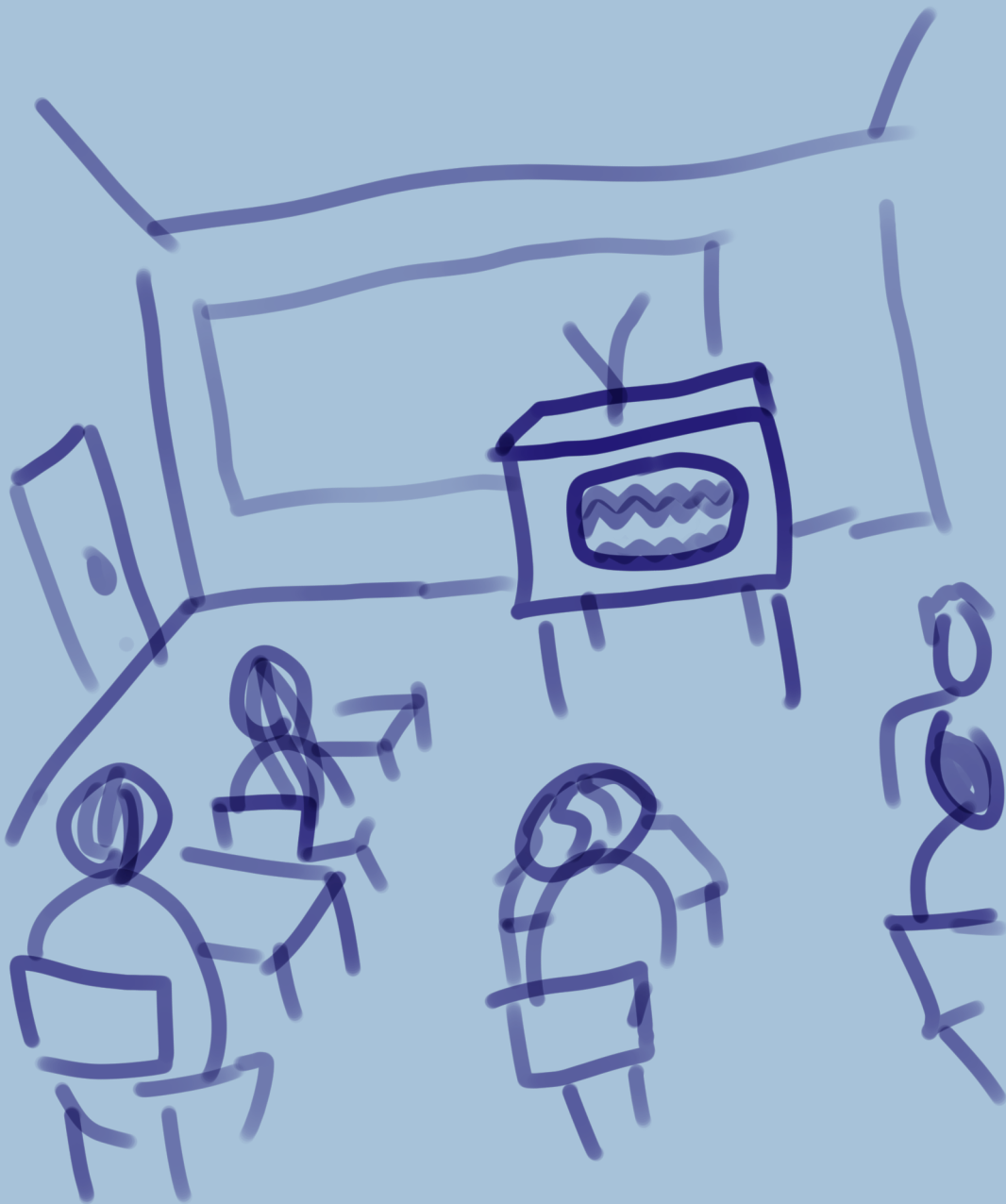
# MEN CAN'T MASTURBATE

Essay 06 in a Series by Owen Earl

I, like most people I know, took a sex-ed class during middle-school. I was living in Los Angeles at the time, a progressive part of the country, but I still managed to walk away with my fair share of misleading or unhelpful information: stuff I've had to work through or unlearn.

One particularly unhelpful thing I was taught is something that most people would probably not bat an eye at. I remember as a class watching a video for boys aimed at explaining various aspects of puberty. It told us about how our penises would grow and change, how our voices would drop, how we'd start growing "hair in new places," and how we'd start "noticing girls."

"Noticing girls"—what does that mean? Half my class had been girls since I started school, and I had certainly noticed them before. Girls tend to start puberty before boys, so perhaps it was about noticing their changing bodies. But the video, produced by Disney in the '90s, dedicated a whole section to explaining various aspects



I remember as a class watching a video for boys aimed at explaining various aspects of puberty.

of female puberty. Breast development and periods and hair in new places and "noticing boys."

It's a euphemism. The makers of the video were afraid to say plainly that we would start feeling horny. That we might develop an erotic appetite, a libido, a sex drive. And so they substitute discussion about horniness for the euphemistic and more parent-friendly "noticing girls."

Setting aside the heteronormativity, or the problems with refusing to talk about something openly and how that might lead to unnecessary shame and secrecy around our collective horniness, there's something about this idea of "noticing girls" that I want to challenge. Is my horniness a hunger for the flesh of another human, or is it perhaps, simply, a hunger for an erotic experience? "Noticing girls" suggests that it's the people around me that are causing my pent-up sexual desire, not something within myself.



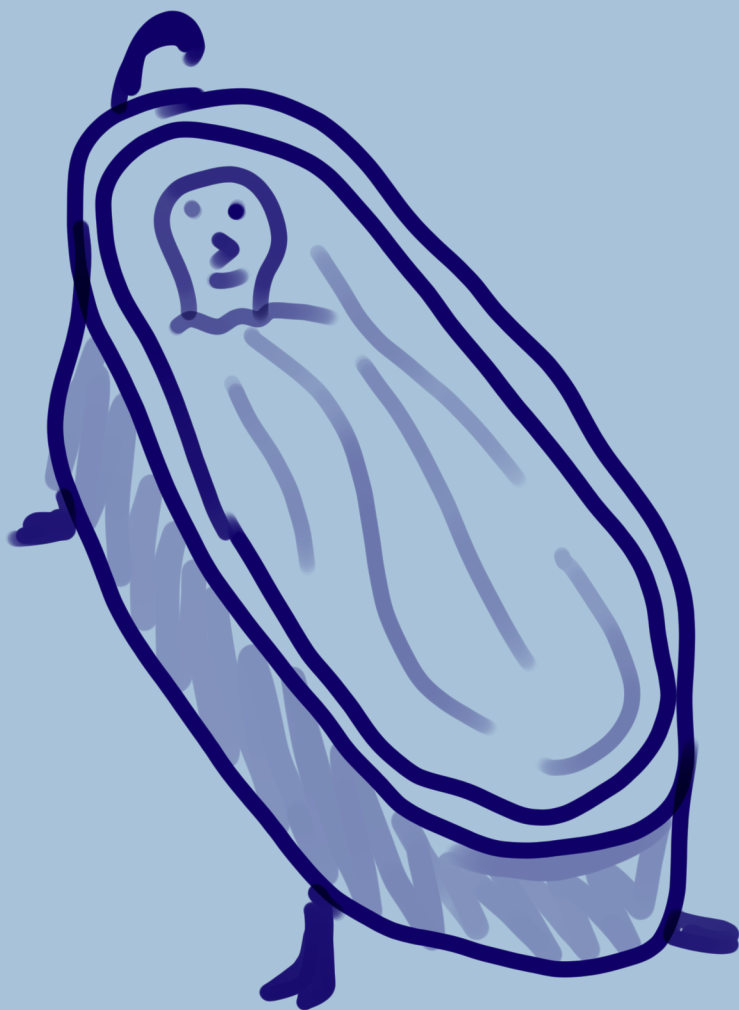


Brest development and periods  
and hair in new places

I remember one of the first erotic experiences I ever had. I don't remember how old I was, but it was before health class and clear signs of puberty. I was less than ten.

I remember I was taking a bath, and I was submerged in the water with just my head sticking out. I thrust my hips forward until my penis was lifted out of the water and into the open air. The air was cold on my still damp flesh, and it made my already naked penis feel all the more naked. There was something so erotic and thrilling about this feeling of nakedness, of exposure. I relaxed my body back into the water before trusting my hips forward again, re-exposing myself to the air. I imagined some kind of scenario where I could expose my penis in a similar manner to the world. Perhaps a stage with a hole cut in it for me to stick my genitals into.

This is my memory of my verging sexuality. There was something so erotic about the physical sensation of emerging from the water. I had a



I remember I was taking a bath,  
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fantasy in my head, but I was also so attuned to my own body. I was locating the erotic within myself. Within the motion of thrusting and the feeling of nakedness.

I have other memories from this time. There was a time I stripped totally naked in the men's changing room and used the scale to weigh myself. *How could I ever get an accurate measurement if I was still wearing clothes?*, I reasoned. But it was an excuse to revel in my own erotic nudity. I remember there was a bush with red flowers in our backyard that was empty on the inside, and so it was possible the sit inside the bush while remaining hidden from view. I went into the bush and I removed my clothing, one item at a time, until I was fully naked, feeling the outside air on my skin.

I don't think "noticing girls" really captures what it is that I was going through. I think I was noticing myself, and my potential to be an erotic being in the world.



I went into the bush and  
I removed my clothing

Not that I didn't possess a certain curiosity about girls. I remember me and my best friend at the time once showing each other our bodies, and that being very interesting to me. And I remember wanting to see pictures of naked women, googling the term "naked" which, frustratingly, was only giving me results for the juice company. I discovered that "naked bicycle" returned results for the naked bicycle event in Seattle which was more satisfactory. But I'm not sure if I was locating something erotic in these naked women, or if it was to do with a kind of curiosity.

And I'll never know for sure because discussions of sex became more common in my life, which would interpret my feelings of eroticism as being about women. I started to internalize this notion, and fantasized about naked women, instead of naked me. And then I discovered porn and all hope was lost.

It was bound to happen. Googling "naked boobs nude beech naked womin" for long enough is eventually going to



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yield a website of the adult variety, despite whatever safeguards Google has in place. And once you have the search term "porn" in your back-pocket, finding adult material is pretty easy.

I imagine watching two people have full on intercourse for the first time after having been getting off to pictures of middle-aged women covered in blue paint doing yoga in a Seattle park for years is akin to trying heroin. It's pretty hardcore stuff in a way I'm not sure my body was fully prepared for. I remember probably the first proper porn video I watched was a school-teacher getting fucked over her desk, and when I saw the view count of millions I basically lost my mind. To think that millions of people had seen these two people have sex was hot beyond my comprehension.

And just like heroin, when you have access to the good stuff, why waste your time masturbating to your imagination? Porn was so much more intense, and quickly made trying to orgasm without it all-but impossible.

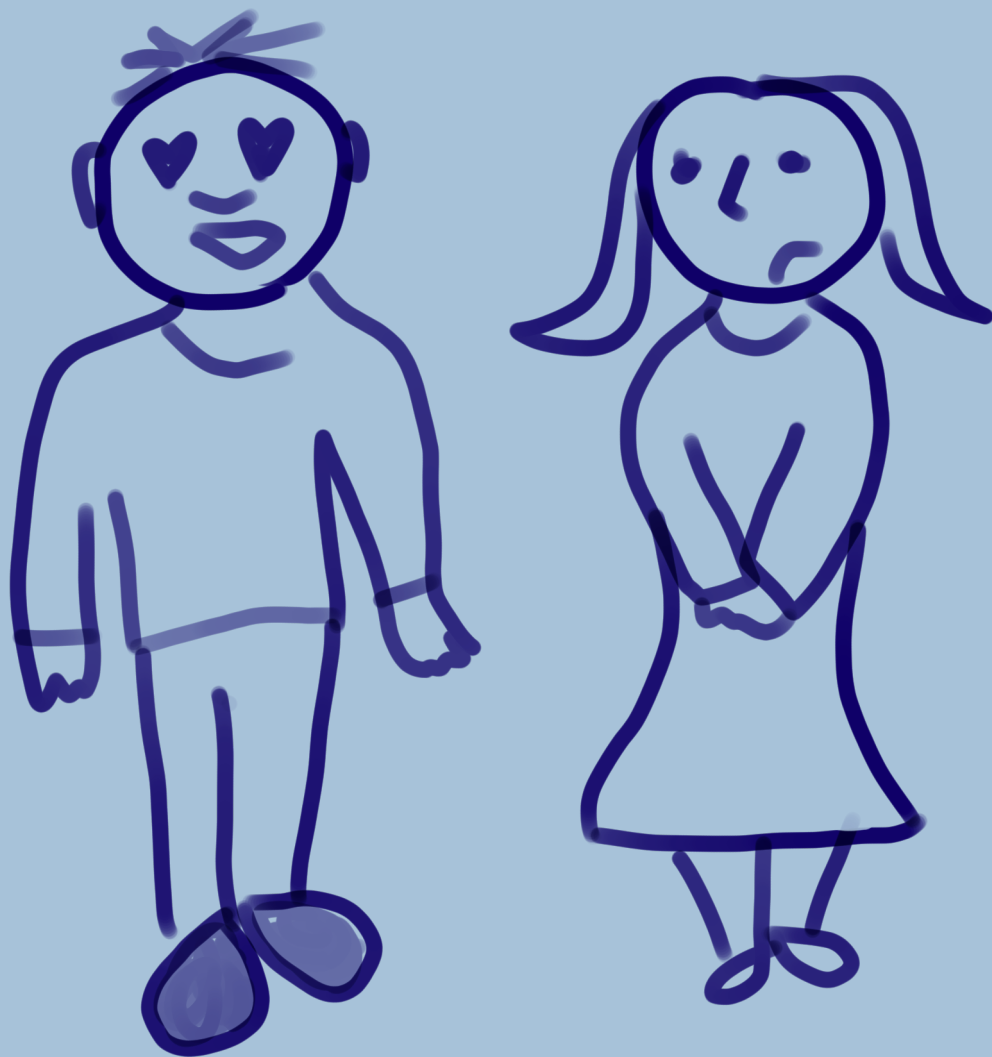




pictures of middle-aged  
women covered in blue paint  
doing yoga in a Seattle park

I spent years masturbating to porn and hardly anything else. In some ways I'm grateful for porn, and I'm reminiscent of this chapter in my sexual past. I think at the time I recognized how harmful and destructive, sometimes violent, our sexual culture is. I think I realized that introducing a sexual dynamic into my female friendships would likely destroy those relationships. In fact I lost close female friends at that age due to our sex culture. I didn't want to make the girls in my life feel unsafe by acting too horny with them, and porn was a great tool to compartmentalize my sexuality. I could only orgasm to porn, which made me asexual in my public life. It gave me some genuine control over my own sexuality.

But those years I spent reinforcing some pretty harmful ways of thinking, and when it came time for me to come out of my sexual shell I had to confront some deeply entrenched and problematic beliefs.



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And there's one particularly troublesome belief that had been reinforced two ways. It's this notion of "noticing girls," or more specifically, the idea that my horniness required a female body.

In mainstream heterosexual porn, there's one narrative that gets told over and over again. Women are sexy. It is their bodies that are sexy. They possess some kind of innate sexy because of their lady bits. A vagina, a boob, these things are sexy, irrespective of who they're attached to. Men are sexless, ugly. Their bodies do not possess any sexiness. The only way for a man to possess the sexy is through the body of a woman. Sex is an act of taking. The man takes the sexy from the woman who possesses it because of her body.

In porn men are horny and this is synonymous with wanting sex with women and the only way to deal with horniness is through a sexy woman's body. She is the facilitator of the sexual experience. The gatekeeper of



Women are sexy.

the sexual experience. If there is a story in a porno, much of it is dedicated to the horny man convincing the sexy women to have sex with him through any means necessary. Wearing her down with lies or coercing until she enables his sexual experience.

If this story is to be believed than I, as a man, am like a hungry hobo. Forced to beg and plead those who have food for a meal. I have no sex of my own, and no means of attaining sex without it coming from those who have it. I must request, then plead, and in desperate times lie, cheat, and steal to feed my sexual appetite. How many times can a person hear this story without believing in it somewhat?

And by seeking out porn whenever I felt horny, I was, in a very literal way, depending on a woman's body for my own sexual experience. The porn I watched featured women in sexual situations, and so my sexual experience was facilitated through their bodies. My orgasm required the participation of a woman I will never



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know, who was kind enough to share videos of her sexy lady bits with the internet so men around the world may have a sexy time. My behavior embodied a kind of sexual dependence on the body of a woman.

I internalized this belief so wholly and completely that it didn't even occur to me that an alternative was possible. In my mind, satisfying a sexual craving required the facsimile of a woman the way satisfying hunger required food. Even when I used my imagination instead of porn to get-off, I pictured a woman masturbating or stripping. I never thought of myself in a sexual context and I never paid any attention to my physical body or the present reality of masturbation.

I didn't just get this idea from porn or sex-ed. In movies boys steal underwear from girls, or plot ways of looking through door cracks and windows to try and catch a peek of a woman undressing. Ritualized violence depicted as if it's natural and





looking through door cracks  
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inevitable. What assumptions lead us to excuse boys' rapey behavior? Watching these movies, I understood the boys' actions as the inevitable consequence of their castration. Like a starving person who is reduced to steeling to eat, the boys in the movies are forced to resort to nonconsensual means to satisfy their needs. Their actions are pitiful more than anything.

It's a tough position to be in, as a man. To desire sexual or erotic experiences but to feel unable to produce them on your own.

What makes matters worse is the degree to which we pathologize men who please themselves.

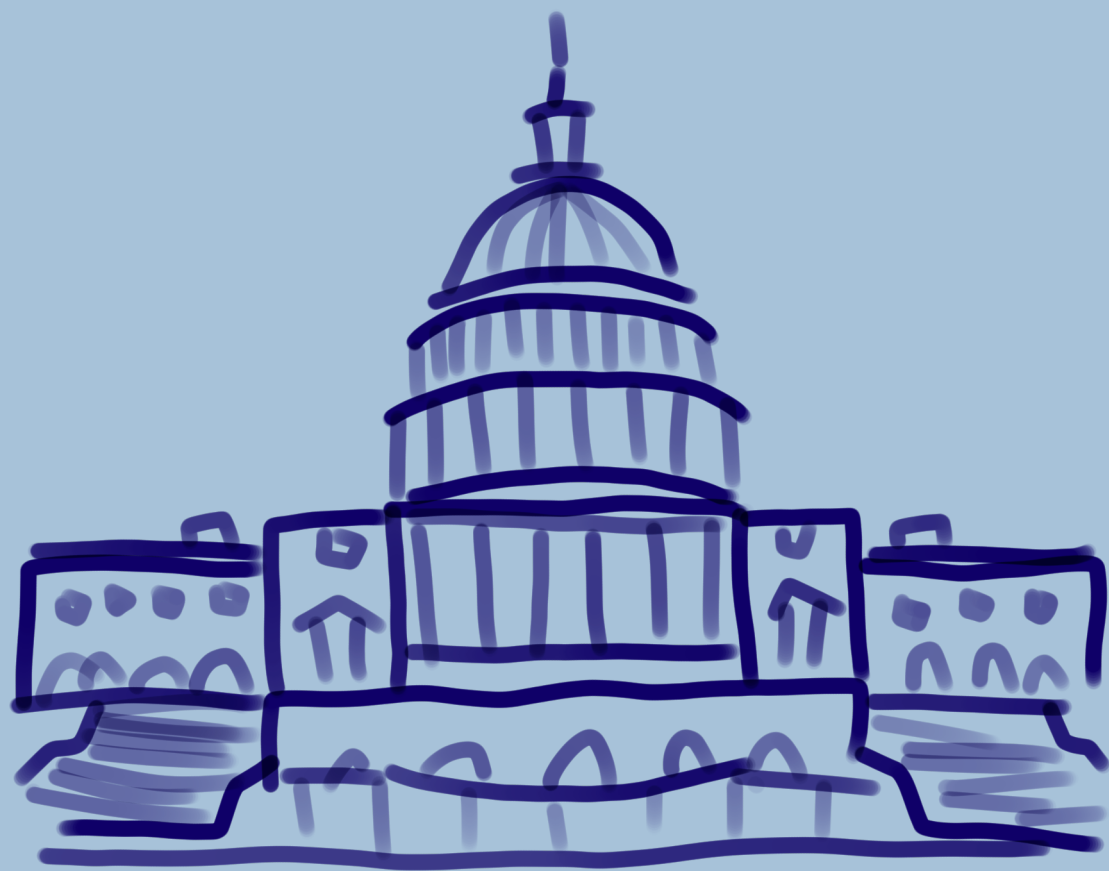
Masturbation is treated as dirty, embarrassing, sometimes threatening. This is especially true for men. Buying sex toys is taboo. I once watched a stand-up comic say that buying a flesh-light is probably a sign that a man is a serial-killer.



Like a starving person who  
is reduced to stealing to eat

Incels are notoriously entitled to women and their bodies. In some extreme cases, incels have argued that the government should mandate that women become sexual partners with single men. "Government mandated girlfriends." This is ridiculous, but on some level I understand the logic. Despite what some may say, everyone is entitled to sex. Including incels. Sex is a natural and, in some cases, necessary part of being a person. It's something we're all capable of. If we imagine men require a woman to experience sex, and we acknowledge that sex is a something men are entitled to, than doesn't it stand to reason that men are entitled to women?

It's easy to see that the conclusion is false, violent even, but most people seem to believe the premise, and instead of rejecting it will deny men's entitlement to sex. "Men are not entitled to sex" feels right and reasonable to say, but as a man, deeply ashamed of my own sexuality, I could not rid myself of my hunger for sexual experiences. No matter how much



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I told myself it wasn't something I was entitled to, on some very basic and primordial level I knew I needed to experience sex. Knowing I wasn't entitled to it didn't make me need it less, it just made me feel more shame about wanting it.

I began to feel afraid of my own sexuality. If I felt even remotely aroused while going about my day I would fear that it would lead me to violate someone around me. At times, I felt convinced that I somehow had already unknowingly violated someone. After all being turned on required a woman so if I'm turned on then I must have done something against a woman already. Even if it wasn't clear to me who she was or how I violated her.

What a tragic, disempowered, and scary relationship to have with a part of myself.

At some point I became bored of pornography or needing to try something new, so I joined a chatroom on the internet, where people roleplay



I joined a chatroom  
on the internet

sexual encounters. I realized, as I'm sure many do, that men are not very desirable in these spaces, and that the internet grants us a degree of anonymity, so I roleplayed as a woman.

I realized while roleplaying as a woman on the internet for the first time, that I was capable of locating sexiness within myself. There's a half-joke, half-observation people make about these kind of chatrooms: that most women there are secretly men. People often view this as sad or pathetic, but in that moment I found it deeply empowering. To think two men roleplaying with each other could produce something sexy on their own. I knew on some level that this was a form of sex. I still believe it is.

Exploring femineity is often a necessary part of exploring one's ability to be sexy. I bought stockings and a cute skirt and looked at myself in the mirror and became aroused at my own image. It was easier to see myself as sexy in a skirt than naked because





I bought stockings and  
a cute skirt and looked  
at myself in the mirror

I already learned to associate the skirt with sexiness.

Men who dress in women's clothing for erotic reasons are seen as sociopathic murders. Like in *Silence of the Lambs* or *Psycho*. I became convinced the what I was doing was somehow linked to violence. I worried that if people discovered my stash of women's clothing they would feel threatened by me. Becoming more sexually empowered made me more scared of myself.

The journey of relating to myself sexually in a way that feels healthy and empowered is tough, painful, and full of obstacles, and it's never complete. But what hurts most of all is that I can't help but wonder what would have happened if it weren't for the narratives adults in my life fed me. If it weren't for porn and movies might I have maintained the sense of sexual self sufficiency I had when I first started gaining a sexual awareness? It feels like I've had my sexuality taken from me, stolen, and



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I'm forced to recreate it, discouraged from doing so at every step.

It feels counterintuitive to advocate for sexually empowering men. We live in a culture that excuses and emboldens men's sexual violence. Men feel entitled to women and their sexuality, their bodies. But we need men to unlearn these harmful attitudes of society, and we need men to feel self-sufficient, sexy. And these take empowerment. Men need to learn how to masturbate, without looking at the image of a woman, or imagining a woman in their head, but by getting in touch the eroticism of their own body. We need to promote narratives and images of men who are sexy by and for themselves. The legitimacy and completeness of masturbation as a form of sex.



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