Male Offense: Fear?

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I evaluated possible exit strategies. The variables were carefully considered. Standard Operating Procedure relied on the proximity of Best Friends, otherwise known as the "Safety in Numbers" option. This required revisions in the event of lunchtime activities meetings, the dreaded B lunch assignment, or God forbid, Chris' absence. (In Sickness and in Health applies to the unspecified Best Friend pledge too.) The Book Decoy was reliably effective, but had to be utilized sparingly.

My unofficial high school schedule included these daily planning sessions, preoccupying thoughts that seeped into my chemistry notes with invisible ink, and distracted my daydreams of labs with Jim. I remember that my salad (even at my so-called progressive public school, the cafeteria was not yet Politically Correct in recognition of vegetarian nutritional entrees) became more tasteless as the bell loomed. Time to leave the cafeteria, and face the psychological gauntlet—maybe every school has one.

Mine took the form of the Jocks, the Male Rulers of the Turf. While they graciously ceded authority to the Adults in Charge within the classroom, the hallways were their Domain of Impunity. And after lunch, these judges casually assembled, lining both sides of the main corridor, to "rate" their female peers. A numeric value was assigned, based on appearance—the standard 1 to 10 format. "Fours" and below were reserved for Losers. Of course, no other skills, talents or traits were noted; you were what you looked like, and the Jocks got to decide. That was the code.

By junior year, I learned the Power of the Stare—sometimes straight ahead, sometimes a direct gaze with eye contact. It was unfailingly met with unease, a glance away…on to the Next Contestant. I wore indifference as armor—it all came down to attitude. I was very convincing.

Looking back, I recognize the comic elements in this perverse rite of passage. The exaggerated machismo posturing of adolescents with acne and bad haircuts now seems pathetic rather than threatening, but in that world, they had power. I am struck by the unquestioning acceptance; I recognized early on that I could choose my response, but the males' right to judge the appearance of their female peers was never challenged, by me or anyone else. This was internalized; as a sophomore, I was secretly flattered on the days I was greeted with "eight-and-a-half." Of course, the reverse was also true. A great day could be invaded with self-doubt when you were labeled "five." Somehow, the A on the history exam seemed inconsequential. Girls were consequently robbed of the freedom to be unselfconscious of our looks; it mattered. This could not be forgotten in high school.

It permeated every aspect of identity. No. If you were female, it was your identity.

At the time, I was unaware of the universality of this experience. Adolescent rituals in this society are based on the Ratings/Dating Game, even if it does not consist of literal numerical scores. This is consistent with the tradition in many cultures. It is seen in myths, fables, and legends that convey a fear of the feminine, particularly the female body. An omniscient view of the high school gauntlet would reveal that the males were physically less prepared for the adult role they would assume. Their insecurities adopted the offensive, displaying outwardly a mastery of the sporting philosophy they

embraced. Ironically, while the focus appeared to be the females (in the egocentric world of adolescents, it certainly felt like the focus, at a very personal level), in practice it served as a male bonding rite. The motivation for male participation had little to do with females, but everything to do with belonging to the Boys Club. Girls didn't really count, except as status. For example, if you had a date with a girl given a "10" by the quarterback, you earned the ultimate respect of the male peers. The fear of female was expressed as control by ostracizing. Those in power never fully trust the status quo; oppressors fear the oppressed, as they are the ones with something to lose.

Within the broader context, male fear of the female body is exhibited differently, but always targets perceived sources of autonomy or power. This manifests in many guises. It is seen in the (not-so-ancient) Chinese practice of foot-binding; feet represented the power to leave. Thus, the practice evolved to deify grotesque deformity and mutilation as the standard of beauty, literally binding women to a life of dependency. Female circumcision, also, is a brutal product of male fear of female's power of sexual fulfillment. It constitutes another form of crippling, this to physically coerce sexual fidelity, or dependency.

Male fear is also reflected in the common practices of many native cultures' restrictions on women who are menstruating, and thus exhibiting their reproductive power. Western societies have adopted a variation of this theme; while it would be unsound in an industrial society to bar a woman's economic productivity on a monthly basis, her intellectual and emotional input can be readily dismissed if she is rumored to be "on the rag." It is not coincidental that traditionally, a woman past their child-bearing years often can assume a greater role in a community's decision-making process. Her presence may be seen as less threatening to the male leaders and institutions when her reproductive power is no longer a force.

Western society's focus on the physical may be viewed as a response to the male's need to control, driven by fear. The current model for female beauty, in its thin and youthful form, is perhaps the most physically non-threatening female image. The feminine strength valued most by society is that of sexuality, the expression of which (generally) necessitates men. Thus, female strength that is valued is not autonomous.

It appears that the male fears of femininity in current society are more subtle than traditional beliefs that mandate the covering of hair, for example. This results in mixed messages about female identity and power, as in the dichotomous nature of feminine sexuality as a source of power and exploitation. However, of all the fears that evoke measures of male control over women's autonomy, the most formidable control is that of the suppression of creativity (including expression of ideas). This is a force of particular power, as by definition, art does not conform To create is to rebel.

It is difficult to assess the impact of the insidious assaults on the female psyche. As the complex dance of experiences interact, they weave influences in a pattern different from one that would emerge without any one color. Fortunately, experiences that would silence individuality are often counterbalanced by forces that invite its presence. Human nature gravitates to such forces, finding refuge for expression in self-discovered "free zones." Internal voices are nourished by the recognition of the strength and beauty of the self, and fight inhibitions to find avenues of expression. (This could take many forms, from athletic

confidence to a book club or even a journal.)

It is ironic that while my sense of self was ruthlessly pelted in an institution of supposed Higher Learning, it was reinforced in my Ozzie and Harriet household. My parents served as the epitome of the fifties caricature (still going strong, entering the 21st century), yet their security offered the freedom of individuality. Gender roles were exemplified in traditional fashion, with an uncharacteristic distinction of respect for the contributions of each role within the family. I recognized that my own choices would prove different from my mother's—this was never discouraged. Self-expression was taught, and individual challenges to societal gender assignments and limitations were supported, even with parental pride.

There have certainly been encounters since that have attempted to silence me; I am not so naïve as to deny their impact, though they have also strengthened my determination. For example, in a past work environment dominated by males, I discovered that my femininity posed an unexpected threat—my interactions with males challenged the belief that respect relied on physical dominance. In past years I invited such challenges with abandon. Now, I am less reckless in investing in such confrontations, as I feel they are seldom winnable. Or rather, I feel that the cost is high, and must be weighed carefully.

If I could re-write the story, I would urge my female peers to reject the gauntlet in unison. I would urge that together, our voices would not be silent.

I mastered nonchalance; I spoke no words, but my look was not *silent. This strategy, perfected by my senior year, (usually) exempted me from The Game. Yet, this did not constitute Victory—only a resentful truce. In the politics of high school, to be unrecognized by the Powers That Be was to choose to be solitary— to not exist. I accepted these terms as Reality; I was without power to refute the Verdict. My weapon was my intellect; my mind rebelled.*

In the classroom, I felt empowered. I was no longer bound by the social etiquette of holding back the Right Answer. I knew what I knew, without pretense. I paid a price for my disguise. I had lofty ideals of integrity, but most days it just felt lonely. My aloof demeanor was seen as haughty, even by many girls. Not by those who knew me, but in high school, who really knew anybody? We all had masks, I suppose, even the self-appointed Kings.

Still, I threw away my invitation to reminisce at the upcoming reunion.