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Megan Cox

Three Confusing Interactions I Had with Men Today

I do not understand men. I hear lots of talk from men about how they do not understand women. I also hear lots of talk from women about how simple men are to understand. I know one woman who claims she knows everything there is to know about a man from the way he parts his hair. How? I have known certain men for years, and have seen them through several different haircuts with several different parts and I am still utterly confused by their every move.

It's not all men who are confusing to me though. When I went to college in San Diego, I was friends with a blue haired man who was the president of Ocean Lovers Club. He wore cowboy boots daily, skateboarded everywhere, and would cry while watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*. He was certainly an interesting man, but he was not a confusing one. Furthermore, I once knew a man who started his own male supremacy podcast about how Diva Cups are un-American or whatever it is men talk about on those podcasts. He was an unfortunate man to know, but not a confusing one either.

I understand the men who are so dissonant they've become sensitive. I understand the men who are so insecure they've become combative. But I cannot understand those who fall somewhere between the extremes. The men who are influenced by societal pressure, but not completely spineless to the magnet of tradition. The most unpredictable entity is a man who is reconciling his natural human emotions with the societal pressure to feel nothing. I do not understand this man. I do not understand my dad. I do not understand my best friend. I do not understand my coworker who spent forty minutes arguing with me that *Interstellar* was sadder than *Schindler's List*.

1. THE POPSICLE

Today, I saw a man eating a popsicle. It was fascinating. I cannot stop thinking about this man and fantasizing about the circumstance which brought him to that moment. This man was walking down the street alone— just a boy and his popsicle. He was mid-twenties and was wearing a rugby jersey. He was notably tall and broad, and had the traditional but casual haircut of someone who

feels obligated to assert his heterosexuality. He was walking down the streets of New York stiffly and slowly, like if Clint Eastwood carried Bomb Pops instead of a pistol.

It was 28 degrees today. Public displays of ice cream are somewhat understandable in cold weather, but popsicles should be exclusively reserved for hot days. Popsicles outside of summertime feel vaguely threatening. Also, this man was alone! How did he acquire the popsicle? Did someone hand him the popsicle (perhaps after rugby practice)? Or did he walk into a midtown bodega with a sweet tooth and walked out with only a popsicle? His hands were empty and he was not wearing a backpack, so I know it was not some impulse buy tacked on to a more significant purchase—he went out of his way to buy a popsicle and *only* a popsicle.

This is all very inherently confusing, but it is not the most baffling part of the situation: the man was *biting the popsicle*. He was not licking the popsicle or slurping it like you might expect. He was *biting it*. The question “Why was this man eating a popsicle alone in the middle of winter?” is utterly trite in comparison to the profoundly complex question “Why was this man *biting. a. popsicle?*” The answer cannot merely be “because he wanted to,” because biting, especially in cold weather like today, is not an enjoyable or even comfortable way to consume a popsicle. But, nonetheless, here this man was, aggressively biting a popsicle as if to say “my testosterone is so high that I am immune to brain freezes.”

I made eye contact with Mr. Popsicle and smiled. He did not smile back, but boldly held my gaze as he took another bite of his popsicle. It felt like an assertion of his manliness. Like he was warning me that my delicate, feminine teeth could not handle biting into such a stiff, cold popsicle. He was reminding me that God gave women tongues solely to lick popsicles and give blow jobs.

It was a monumentally perplexing experience. I have been wondering if biting popsicles is a universally male trait, like doing pull ups on any load bearing bar you see in public. I tried thinking back to past men in my life, but I can't recall a single other time I have seen a man eat a popsicle. Not even in the summertime.

2. THE TEXT FROM MY DAD

At 11:06 AM I received a message from my dad. He said, “FYI—” and attached a screenshot of a text from a family friend telling him that her son committed suicide (oof, I am just now realizing that popsicles to suicide may be an unforgivably harsh transition).

I responded at 11:08, “Oh geez. He and his family are in my thoughts and heart,” and I tagged on the emojis that felt the least inappropriate to include when responding to a text about a child’s suicide (Heart emoji, sad face, etc.).

“Yep. Apparently, it was completely out of left field,” said my dad, “Talk about selfish.”

Talk about selfish...

I would love to write an eloquent dissertation here about the complicated intricacies between mental health, equitable medical care, and notions of masculinity, but I am still too angry about this text to write anything moderately coherent. So, instead, here is a list of things that would have been better for my dad to text me than “Talk about selfish”:

- - “I’ll pass on your regards. Love you, kiddo.”
- - “Do you want to call?”
- - “It’s very sad stuff. Makes me grateful for our family.”
- - A string of the next least inappropriate emojis (Broken heart, crying face, etc.)
- - “Just wanted to let you know. Reach out when you’re able.”
- - A GIF of Winnie the Pooh hugging Piglet
- - Literally anything else in the world

I didn’t respond to his text. I was too busy fighting off intrusive thoughts about my dad standing over my own coffin telling everyone how selfish I was. At 4:31 PM, he texted me again. It was a link to an article entitled “23 Small But Poignant Details In Quentin Tarantino Films That We Never Noticed Before.” I wondered if this was a peace offering. If he knew he went too far and this was a test to gauge how mad I was at him. Or maybe he just mindlessly saw the article, thought of me, and sent it my way without a second thought of suicide, grief, or our conversation before.

I’d bet it was the latter.

3. THE BIRTHDAY WISH

Today was my friend’s birthday. He has had a difficult month and told me he didn’t want to celebrate. This put me in the uncomfortable position of determining how big of a deal I should make his birthday without making things weird. Men are confusing, so I have to worry about these types of things. With my female friends, I’m very good at telling when “I don’t want a party” means “I don’t want to throw my own party, but you guys should” versus when it actually means

“Seriously guys, I don’t want a party.” But when my male friend said, “I don’t want a party” and opted to sulk alone in his room instead, I was at an absolute loss. I knew a big party would genuinely compound his melancholia, but I also knew letting him binge watch *Silicon Valley* alone all day would make him feel worse.

I didn’t want to overdo it, which is something I have a tendency to do. I didn’t want him to be cringing at how much effort I put in. But I also wanted him to know that he is worthy of effort.

I decided I’d just bake him a cake. It was important to me that the cake was homemade, and wasn’t something I haphazardly picked up from a grocery store while I was walking past his house. I decided a homemade cake would effectively straddle intentionality and casualness. I had this plan locked in two weeks in advance, but I got insecure about it three days ago and awkwardly blurted, “Would it be cool if I made you a birthday cake?” to my friend while we were sitting on his couch watching a movie.

There was a long pause. Then, without looking away from the screen, he said, “I really like Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.”

This complicated my plan. The easiest solution would be to buy him a couple pints of Ben & Jerry’s but that’d be even more thoughtless than buying a store bought cake. Because at least the cake was something I thought of myself, and not something he explicitly told me to buy him. The whole point of the cake was the time and forethought it took to make it.

So this morning I got up early and made a tiny, tiny batch of cupcakes. Just enough for him, me, and his two roommates. I pocketed a couple loose candles that had been rolling around in my junk drawer for months. Then, I went to CVS and bought a pint of Chocolate Brownie Fudge, which is the Ben & Jerry’s flavor I’ve seen him purchase most frequently.

I went to his house and hugged him and said surprise and said I know he just wanted ice cream but it’s good luck to have a cake on your birthday just so you can have a candle to blow out. My friend seemed genuinely touched, which made me happier than what is probably healthy. We went down to his basement and put a candle in a cupcake and that cupcake on a napkin. His roommate lit the candle with a BIC lighter that undoubtedly had never been used to light anything but joints before this moment. Then we waited.

My friend softly closed his eyes and dragged his thumb back and forth on his chin. We waited in this silence for a profoundly long time. We were waiting for him to make a wish. It took

a long time because he was intentional about finding the perfect wish. He had to go through all the options, consider all the alternatives, and choose a wish that was deservedly precious.

I do not know why this moment was so dear to me. Maybe it was because I had spent all day trying to do something thoughtful for him without appearing excessively thoughtful. And now I was in his presence, watching him unapologetically wish. Maybe it was because I have also internalized notions that equate masculinity to stoicism. And my brain was struggling to reconcile the image of my friend sweetly considering his birthday wish with the knowledge that he does not own a bed frame sheerly out of principle.

Then, as gently as they closed, my friend's eyes opened. His lips curled, his chest lifted, and he blew out his candle.

I wonder what he wished for.