

Porn addiction

I don't know where I first learned to feel shame about masturbating. Maybe it was jokes in movies and TV shows making fun of men who masturbate. Maybe it was my friends and peers in school pantomiming masturbation to taunt and insult me. Maybe it was my dad, who was terribly uncomfortable while giving me that "talk" despite his best efforts he couldn't help but pass some of that discomfort down to me. Maybe it was the fact that Bill Clinton fired his Surgeon General for daring to tell people that masturbation is okay, a fact that despite being born after his administration somehow lodged itself in my psyche around the same time I hit puberty. Maybe it's the fact that "jack-off" and "circle jerk" are terms of insult and disparagement.

I think I decided sex in general was evil sometime around fifth or sixth grade and I wanted no part of it. I remember how the boys I went to school with used sex and sexuality as a weapon to bully and harass others. They would talk about girls' bodies in

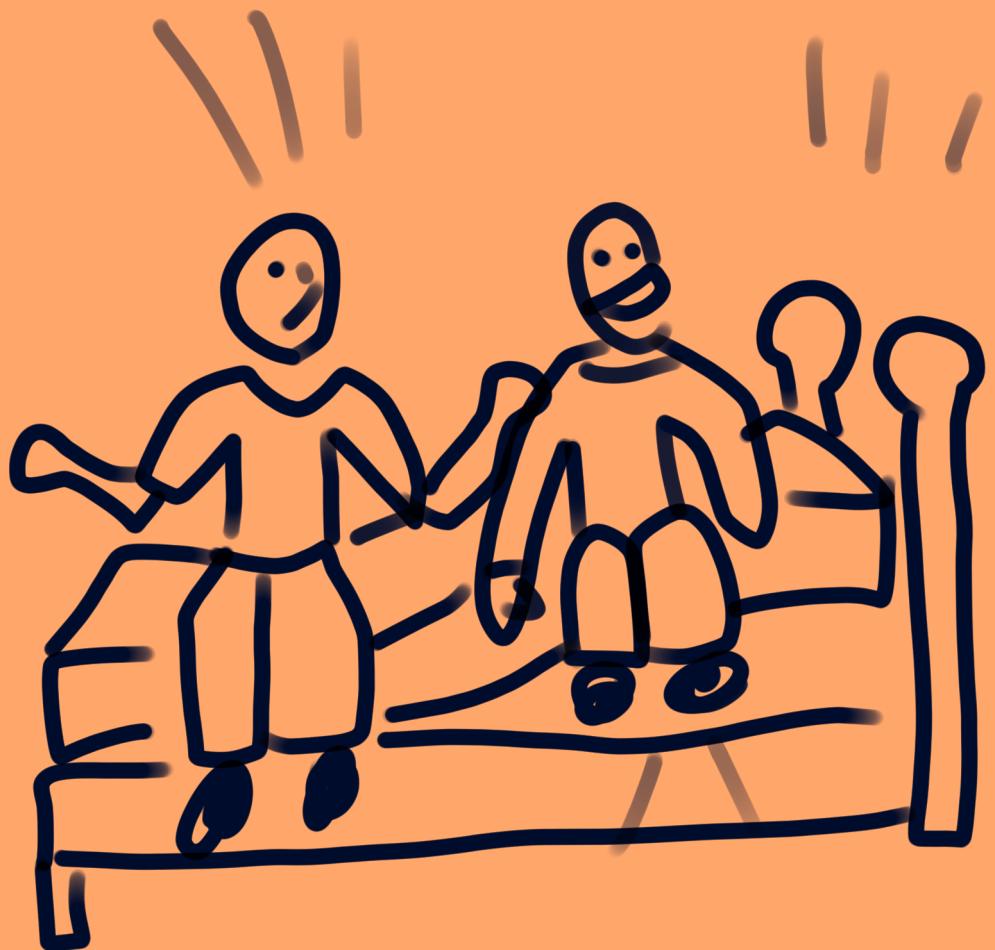


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front of them, telling them they have nice tits, a nice ass, describing how they would like to perform all manner of sex acts. They would rope me into it.

I was once in a bedroom during a party with two people who were the kinds of friends you have because their parents agreed to drive you home from school not because you have a lot in common, and they started shaking up and down on the bed to make it squeak and moaning and saying all sorts of sexual things to make it sound like they were having sex and they both started shouting my name because I was in the room too and I never signed up for this game.

And once during biology Isaiah Mayfield asked me in front of Isabel Rosales if I thought she was hot and if I wanted to fuck her and how exactly am I supposed to answer that? Because if I say "no" then I'm saying I don't think she's hot which is a bit insulting to her but if I say "yes" then I'm participating in her



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harassment, so I just tried to explain that I was uninterested in having sex with her because we were in the middle of biology class and also I don't know if she'd be into it, but he didn't really like that answer because he then asked if I would have sex with her if she was begging me to and also I wanted to have sex with her and also it could be guaranteed that no one would see or interrupt us and I conceded that under those circumstances I would probably say yes to sex, but I didn't love the fact that I was being goaded into sexually harassing a girl I barely knew.

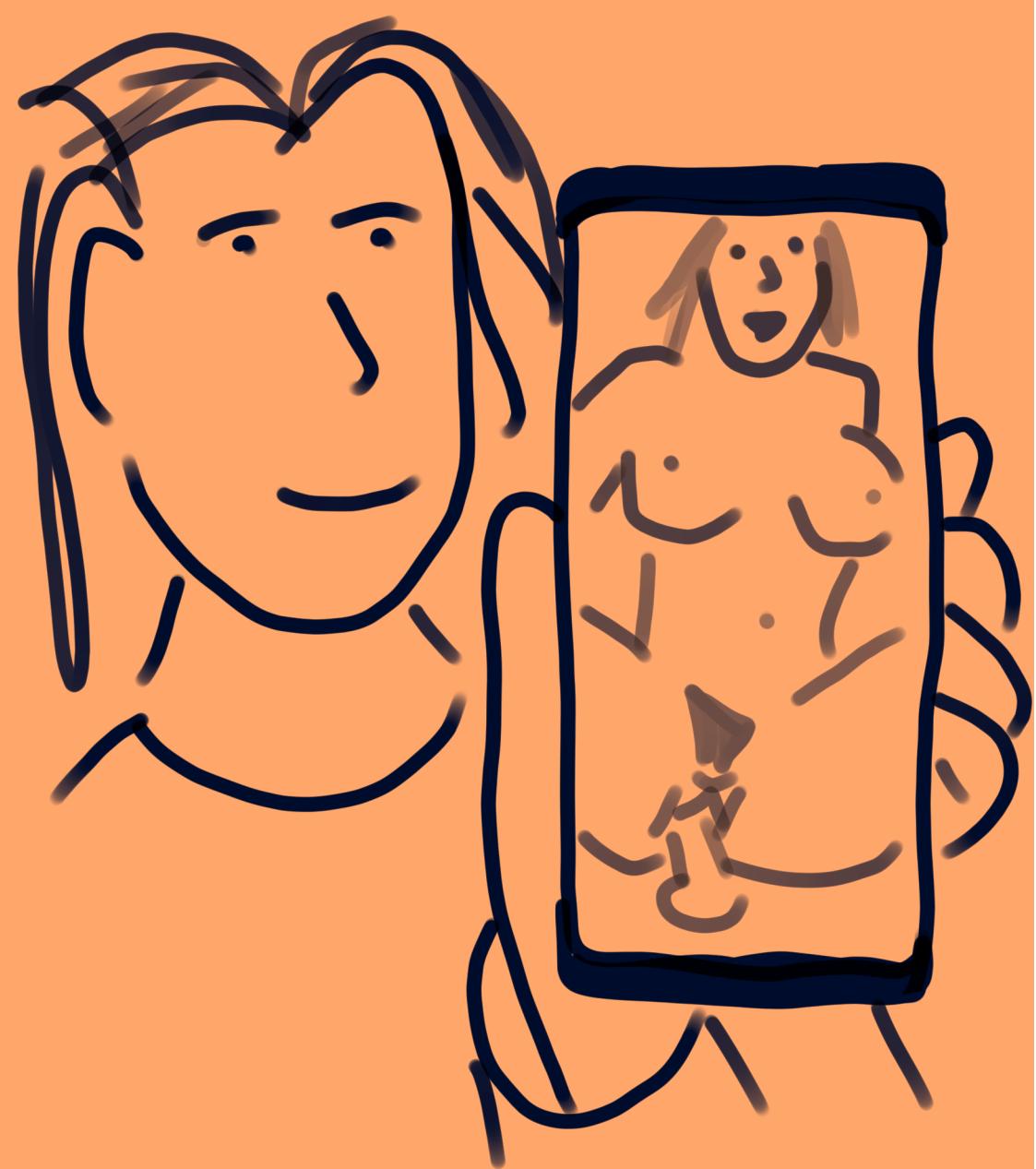
They didn't just rope me into sexually harassing girls, they sexually harassed me too. And sometimes they would use pornography as a tool to harass and bully me. A fun joke in middle school was to tell people to visit the website "pen island dot com" which of course was actually "penis land" and at one point in time that site would show you porn without asking you to verify your age or anything so it was a way of tricking



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people into involuntarily seeing pornographic imagery and I remember also in ninth grade two kids asked me if I had ever watched porn and the answer was yes but I wasn't comfortable having that conversation with them so I gave some kind of non-answer and one of them showed me porn on their phone.

And to be honest with you it was so constant, the sexual harassment that I experienced and everyone experienced that it's difficult for me to even remember specific anecdotes. Girls said hyper-sexual things and sexually harassed me too, which maybe didn't feel quite as threatening, but I still wasn't crazy about it. One of the people who showed me porn on their phone was a girl and she did it twice. And I remember a girl named Savannah asking me if I wanted to suck her tits and then telling me I wanted to suck her tits during P.E. in middle school and also Heather Foreman always talked about sex and one time she interrupted me while I was playing the piano to



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grab onto her breasts and ask me if I "wanted some of this merchandise."

Middle school is a tough and weird time for people and in retrospect I think people needed to make jokes about sex and masturbation because they were going through puberty and they were starting to have new and confusing sexual urges and everyone needs to talk about it but it's too scary to talk about directly so people make jokes, and they show each other porn on their phones.

But at the time it just seemed like a new way for everyone to bully and harass each other and middle school is still to this day one of the most difficult and traumatizing periods of my life. And I didn't want anything to do with any of it. It felt like everyone was getting along fine and then people started developing sexual desire and overnight all hell broke loose.

Starting to feel horny disturbed me, because I felt like if I was horny and



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if I masturbated then I must be okay with this terrible development and I very much was not, so it would have been preferable to not have sexual urges at all.

I shoved the puberty book my grandmother gave me into the back of my sock drawer and sometimes I would wear underwear two sizes too small for me so there would be so little room that even if I was very turned on it would be impossible to get an erection. And also it probably messed with circulation to my legs.

I felt like if I acted horny I was no better than the boys who were tormenting me and sexually harassing girls at my school. And masturbating is one of the horniest things you can do.

So maybe it was movies or TV or Bill Clinton or my dad that gave me the idea that masturbation was shameful but I planted that idea into the ground and watered it every time I got sexually harassed at school and on



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most days that was several times before I got home, and soon enough my shame took root and grew so big and tall and strong that it blotted out the sun.

The idea that masturbating was a shameful thing to do felt so natural to me it was like the idea that electricity could power a light bulb. Or that cars could kill you if they hit you too hard. I wouldn't even stop to ask myself if it was a true idea; it was just a fact of life that needed to be accounted for.

But I still needed to masturbate because I was horny and if I didn't masturbate my horniness would come out in weird and uncontrollable ways and that was worse than masturbating on purpose. But I really didn't want to think about masturbating while I did it.

If I tried to masturbate to my own imagination my mind would inevitably wander and I would end up thinking about how ugly and gross I was as a



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person for masturbating. That self-awareness was painful, but it also felt pointless. I didn't believe the shame was something I could unlearn, so feeling it just felt like a way to punish myself for no reason.

And so I started watching porn.

When it comes to things to masturbate to pornography has some major advantages. Thinking about sexy things in my head required me to think, and when I was thinking I would often think about how gross I was, so I didn't like thinking. And erotic literature or even sexy photos are a good jumping off place, but still require you to fill in the gaps with your imagination.

But porn leaves nothing to the imagination and so you can really just watch it in a thoughtless kind of way. In the age of smartphones and the internet it's also widely available. So if I ever started to feel a bit horny I could find a private place and moment and pull up some porn on my



Thinking about sexy
things in my head

computer or phone and masturbate until I orgasmed and quickly close out of the browser window and all evidence of my sexuality would be destroyed.

Louis C.K. once in a stand-up special compared the moment right after an orgasm to the moment the Incredible Hulk turns back into a normal guy. A great feeling of disconnect between who you were a second ago and who you are now, and I've never heard someone describe it so perfectly.

Porn was a great tool I could use to compartmentalize my sexuality. Outside of the times I was watching porn I was functionally asexual, and I could choose when and where to watch porn, which meant I had control over the times I was sexual, and it was a perfect system.

There are actually a couple flaws with exclusively using porn every time I wanted to masturbate. Some of them are more obvious in retrospect, but one



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that became apparent basically from the beginning is just how low quality the vast majority of porn you can find for free on the internet is.

Porn is, at the end of the day, a form of film-making, and generally speaking it would be hard to make worse films on purpose than the vast majority of porn.

The cinematography is on par with police body-cam footage, and it's lit like a Home Depot, the sound is so terrible it's often more enjoyable muted, the acting is worse than a middle school play, and the storylines are so profoundly stupid that even in my horniest of moments I still found myself questioning what is even supposed to be going on.

There's a porno film where a woman is standing buck-naked on the side of the road with a sign that reads "fuck food, need dick." Two men in a car see her while driving and stop so they can have sex with her. I like this premise fine, the idea that a woman could be



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so horny for sex that she's begging for it on the side of the road is hot to me.

But in the film one of the men from the car repeatedly says out-loud "will fuck for food" while looking at the sign as if he's reading it.

Now, maybe this is kind of obvious, but "fuck food, need dick" and "will fuck for food" are two very different signs that communicate two radically different ideas. If the sign had said "will fuck for food" then this woman is doing an extreme version of something relatively common: she is begging for food on the side of the road. In this story the woman is so desperately hungry that she is willing to sell her body for a hamburger, which is not only a tragedy, but would also make the men in the car horrible, vile, and despicable people who are taking advantage of a vulnerable woman.

But if the sign says "fuck food, need dick" then the woman in this film is

WILL

FUCK FOR

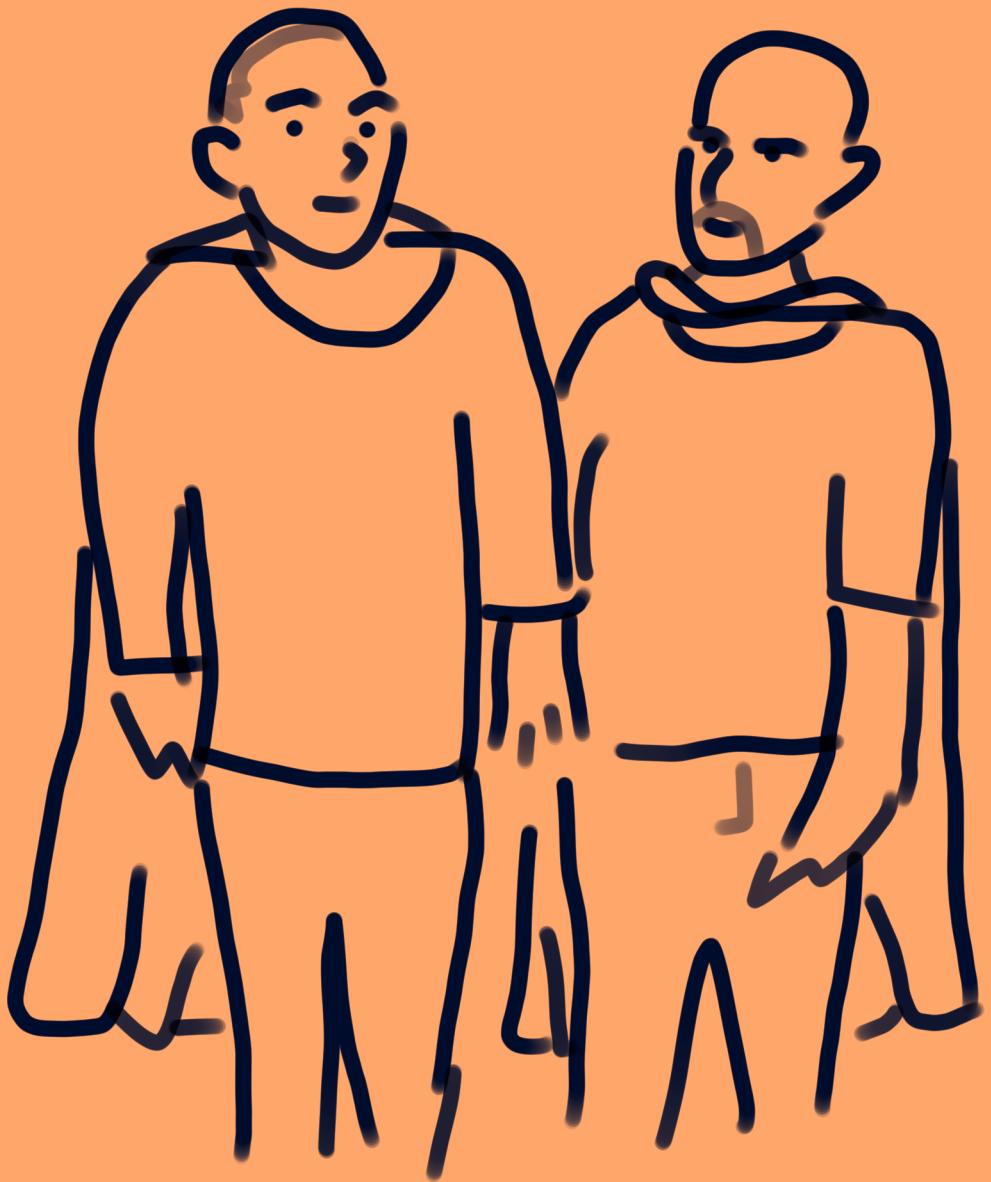
FOOD

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subverting our expectations. Instead of begging for money or food, as would be expected, she is begging for sex. In this version of the story the two men who stop on the side of the road to have sex with her are heroes.

I am trying to watch a porno film here, and I'm doing my best to be as horny and stupid as possible. I'm not asking myself how this girl got here or where her clothes went. I'm not wondering what would happen if her brother or aunt or a cop happened to drive by, I'm not thinking about STDs or wondering if she's on birth control. I understand my assignment is to be horny and to focus on the horny and to not ask questions.

But part of why I'm horny is because her sign says "fuck food, need dick." The idea that she's horny and soliciting sex is hot to me. I'm horny because she's horny, and this guy saying "will fuck for food" is not only contradicting the very basic reality of which four words are written on her cardboard sign, he's



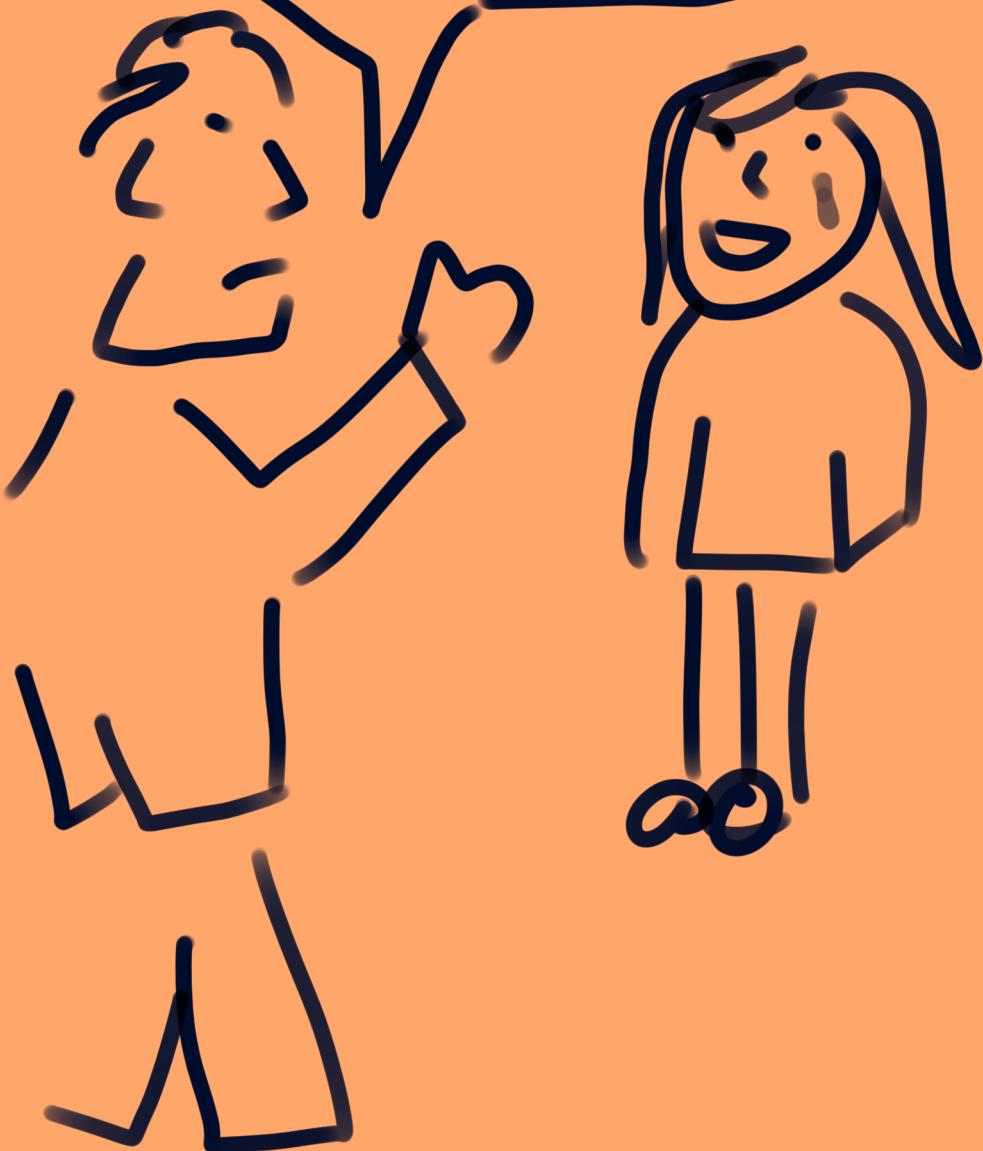
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also denying me one of my reasons for being horny. I've already gotten myself all riled up thinking about how horny this woman is, and now this guy is telling me I'm wrong about why I'm turned on. It's jarring. He might as well be saying out loud "this woman isn't naked right now" about the naked woman.

It is in some ways astonishing that this is the take they went with. I'm not asking for good acting or thoughtful character development or a complicated and engaging plot. I just don't want the fact that I'm literate and have very basic memory retention to be a huge obstacle to my horniness.

Of course people who are familiar with porn as a genre will not be surprised by this at all. This is very much the rule and not an exception. Porn is often one of the most bizarre and incoherent genres of media. It's not just illogical, it possesses a kind of anti-logic. It demands that you are unthinking in your appreciation of it.

(WRONG)

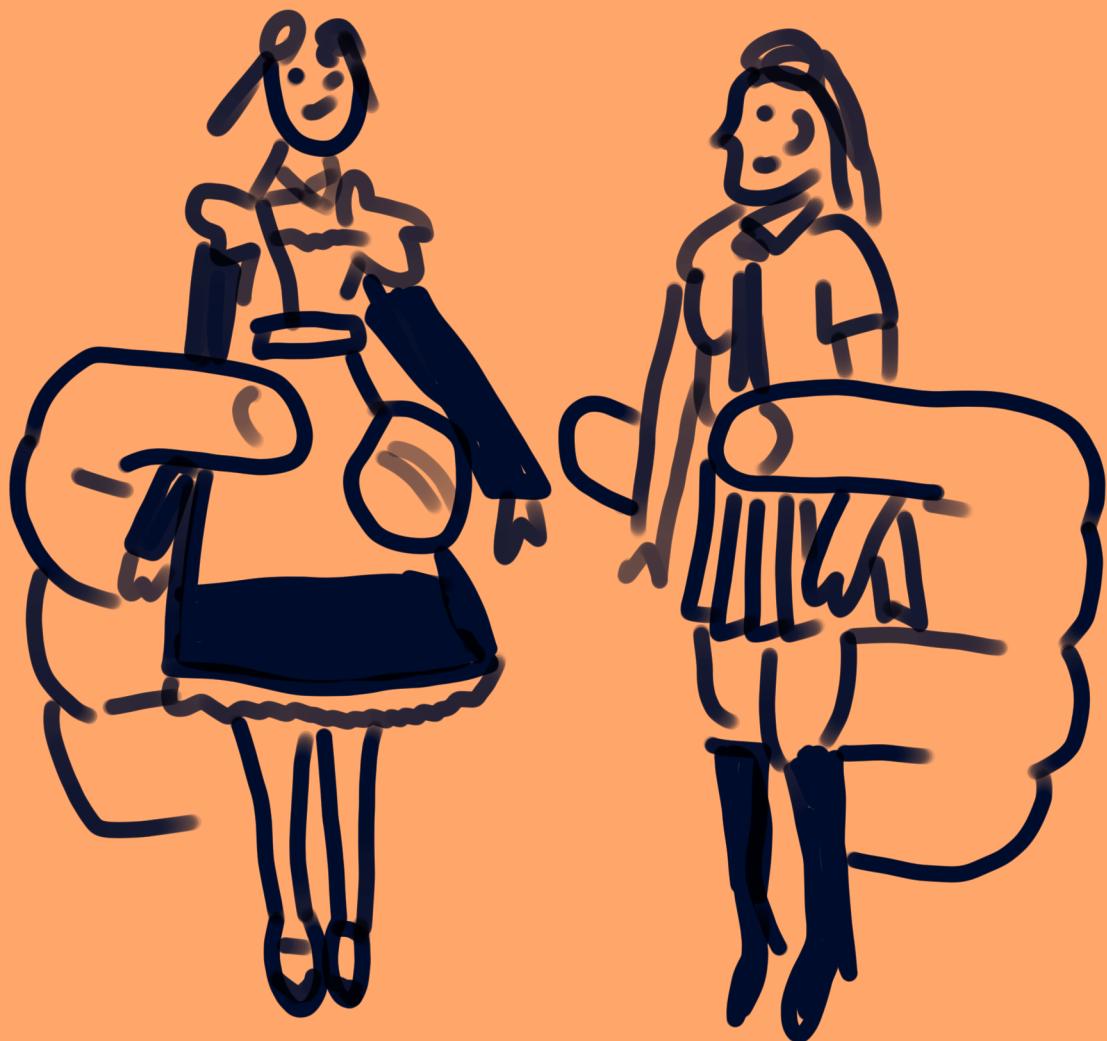


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Thinking even a little makes it hard to watch.

There are these reoccurring identities or roles that people play in porn: school-teacher, step-mom, step-sister, real-estate agent, shop-lifter, maid. They get rearranged and mashed together like a child playing with action figures. "Sharing bed with Step Mom and Step Sister - Fucked step sis after she got horny watching MILF suck." I'm sorry, but what strange series of marriages and divorces and custody battles lead to two step children who are both unrelated to each other and their step mom?

It's embarrassing to be watching something so stupid. Admitting I watch porn feels like admitting I spend hours every week watching people sitting on whoopee cushions and getting their balls kicked because it's the only thing that makes me laugh. I feel like a gorilla clapping stupidly whenever someone gets a pie to the face.



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And for its stupidity alone I would feel very embarrassed about the fact that I watch porn, but it isn't just stupid, it can also be morally dubious.

There is, unfortunately, a lot of abuse that happens in the porn industry. Not all porn studios are abusive, and not everyone who does porn is abused, but like with any industry there is an incentive to make the product as cheaply as possible, and the cheapest way of doing things often involves exploiting people. Cheap clothes tend to be made by people in sweatshops. Cheap chocolate often has slavery somewhere in the supply-chain. There's a lot of porn that you can watch on the internet for free. It is just inevitable that some of it is going to be unethically made.

And even though exploitation is common in many industries, how it feels to be consuming the product is very different. When I eat chocolate that was made using slave-labor, I don't have to look at the children picking



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the cocoa beans while I'm eating it. They can remain comfortably out of sight and out of mind. But if I watch porn that features a woman who is being coerced into doing something she's uncomfortable with, that is the product. Her discomfort is front and center. There are many porn videos where it's impossible to miss how uncomfortable the women featured in it are.

If I had been paying to get my porn from an ethical studio I might have avoided seeing these kinds of videos, but I started watching porn when I was in middle school, and paying for good quality porn just wasn't an option for me then. I watched the free stuff and I found myself seeing videos where the women were clearly uncomfortable and I got desensitized to it.

The only way to enjoy a porn video like that is to completely disregard the featured woman's emotional experience. To disengage with your empathy for her, to objectify her. And the more that you masturbate and



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orgasm to the objectification of women the more those two things become intertwined. I started to find the objectification of women sexy. I started seeking out porn where women's bodies were treated like objects, where they were degraded and dehumanized.

I was giving eyeballs and ad revenue to porn studios who were exploiting women, which is morally questionable, and I also believed that watching this kind of porn was transforming me into someone who is sexually attracted to abuse, which I felt even worse about.

Something I understand now that I didn't quite at the time is just how difficult it is to orgasm. Most of the time it requires not only being mentally aroused, but also physical stimulation. There's a delicate balance and build up, it's a bit like how I imagine it would feel to try and catch a wave while surfing. Exhilarating, but also easy to lose your balance. Easy to fall into the water. For me it's easy to have my

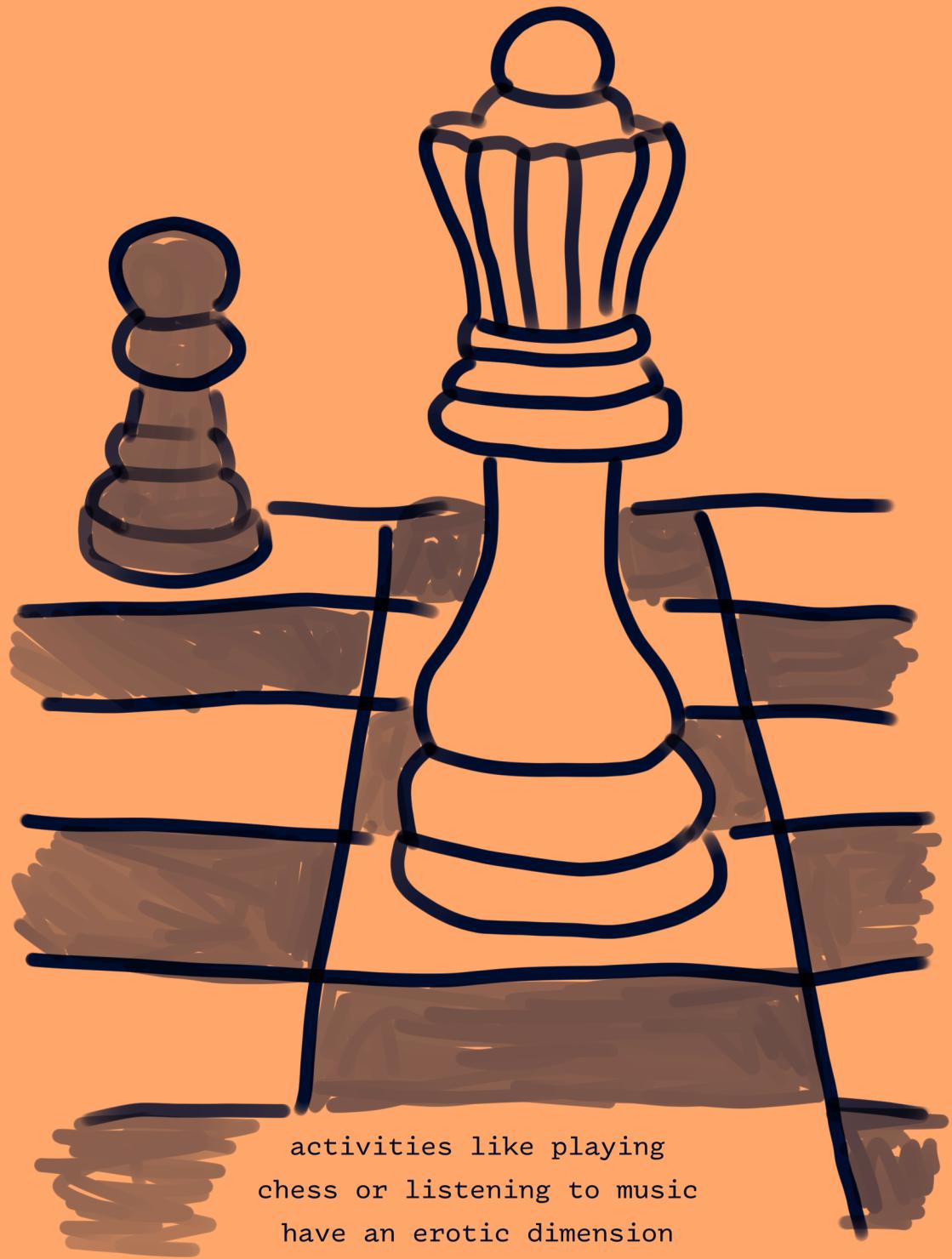


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mind wander, or have something take me out of it, and all of a sudden I'm no longer aroused, and I have to try and catch another wave.

I spent years masturbating and orgasming to porn, and I got really good at it. I got so good at it that I forgot orgasming was a difficult thing to do in the first place. But when I tried orgasming through means other than porn I found it difficult. I assumed this was because something was broken about me sexually, not that I just needed more practice. I assumed the things that were easy to orgasm to were my true desires. Porn had made me good at eroticizing the objectification of women, so I assumed that said something about my nature. I assumed porn had permanently altered my sexual desires.

In reality I think life is bursting with erotic potential. If you really pay attention activities like playing chess or listening to music have an erotic dimension to them. The only thing porn had done was given me a way



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of practicing engaging with a certain very specific kind of eroticism. If I had spent those years paying attention to the eroticism of eating a peach instead of watching porn, I imagine I would have gotten very good at finding that sexy. And the fact that I got good at finding porn erotic didn't mean I couldn't learn to find other things erotic too if I gave it enough time. Learning to play the banjo doesn't make it impossible to learn to play the flute later.

But back then I thought this was the only way I could ever find anything sexy, and so I would use how good I was at getting off to porn as a crutch. I wasn't very good at masturbating to my own imagination, so instead of being patient with myself and learning to get good at it, I would recreate porn I had seen in my head. In a way, by doing this, I was robbing myself of the kind of practice that would have made me good at these different forms of eroticism. It solidified the belief that porn was the only way I could ever get off.



Learning to
play the banjo

It would make sense that when I started having sex for the first time I would be bad at it. Sex requires skills like communication and presentness which I hadn't practiced much—I hadn't even had the opportunity to practice, but when I started having sex for the first time I thought I was bad at it because porn had rewired my brain. I felt like if I struggled to get an erection it would indicate to my partner that I didn't find her attractive or that I was broken sexually and I felt so guilty about this that I imagined porn in my head while having sex to try and hide my brokenness from my partner.

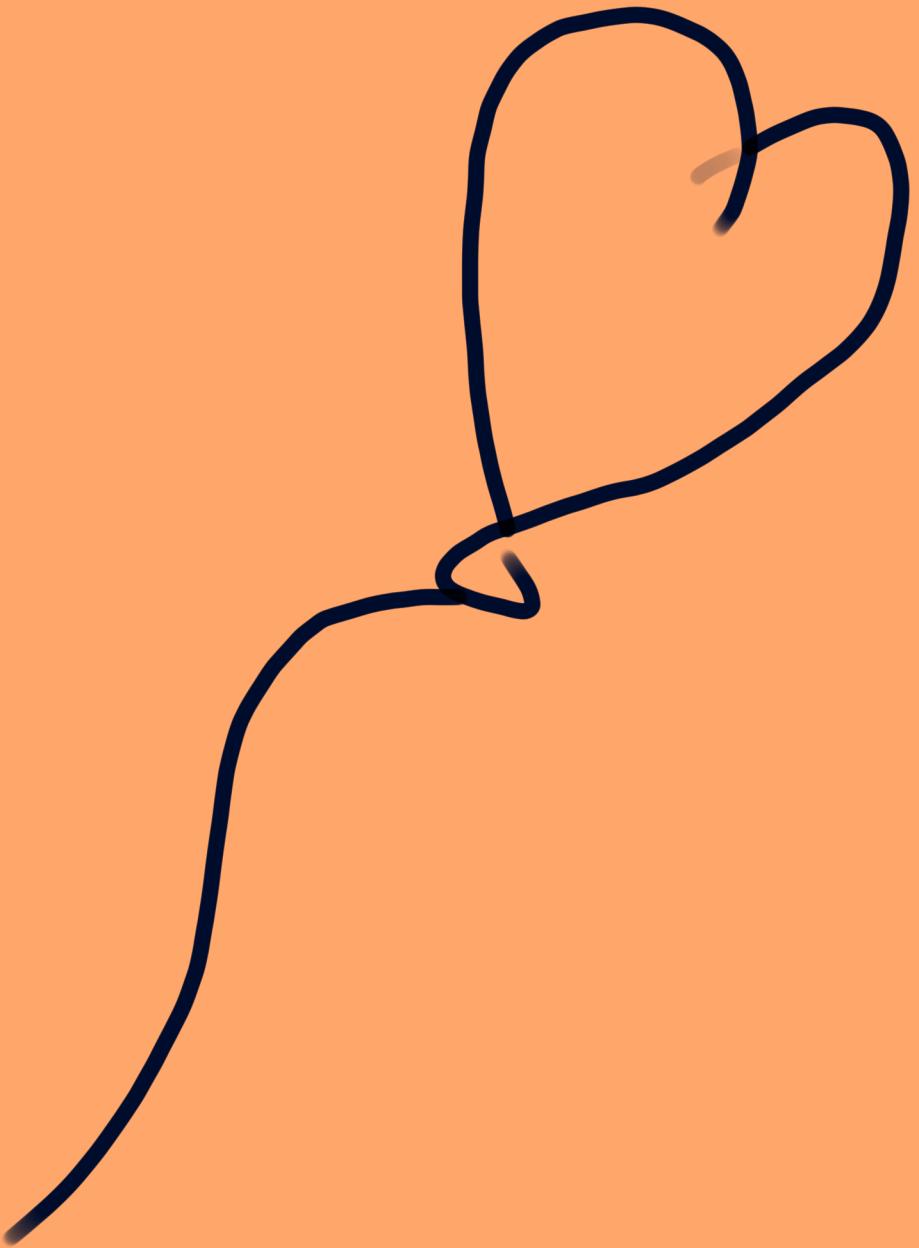
This situation really resembles an addiction. I was watching porn compulsively. I wanted to stop, I tried to stop, I couldn't stop. And now it was impacting my ability to have honest and authentic sex with a person I loved. Even if I was doing my best to hide this fact from her, I was still bringing someone else into this mess.



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I really wanted to fix my broken relationship to porn, but my initial instinct when it came to addressing it made things worse. I tried focusing in on all the reasons watching porn was a bad thing to do. I told myself that watching porn made me a disgusting and perverted person. I told myself it was morally repugnant. I told myself if my friends or family ever found out I watched porn that they would stop loving me. I tried to make the decision to watch porn feel so awful and negative that I would have to choose to stop.

But the whole reason I had started watching porn in the first place was because I felt so much shame about my sexuality. Making myself feel like a morally repugnant person for the way I had been masturbating for the past five years obviously gave me more stuff to feel ashamed of, and that shame made it harder to masturbate to my own imagination, which made porn my only option. As long as I needed to orgasm and as long as I was making that impossible through other means I



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was setting myself to fail. I was making it impossible not to watch porn.

The thing that has actually helped me is trying to feel less bad about myself. The truth is the majority of adults watch porn. I think there's something healthy about that. Sex is part of life, and it's natural and beautiful that we as people would want to see that reflected in our media.

It's also helped me to think about eroticism and sex as a skill that requires practice. The reason I'm good at watching porn is because I've spent years practicing it. Maybe that's a little embarrassing, but it's only as embarrassing as being really good at Wii bowling or Foosball or something. Maybe it's cringe to have spent so much time getting good at this one particular thing, but it's still kind of cool to be good at something.

And when I treat it like a skill that I've practiced and got good at, it's easier to feel enthusiastic about



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getting good at other forms of eroticism. I think to myself, *wow, I've gotten so good at watching porn, just imagine how good I'll be at creating fun fantasies in my head in a couple years.*

And I still watch porn, because I like it, and I'm good at it, but I'm no longer using it as a tool to escape thinking, as a way of avoiding self-awareness. Now I'm watching porn in a more purposeful and intentional and self-reflective kind of way. And I think that's a lot healthier.

Ultimately I think a big piece of this puzzle for me was the shame I felt. It kept me stuck in an unhealthy cycle. I guess I hope that by me sharing my experiences I'll make it less shameful for others as well. I don't think we should feel bad about watching porn. I know from experience that it's possible to have a deeply unhealthy relationship to it, but I also know that feeling shame only made it worse for me.



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And at the end of the day, I don't think it's the desire to watch porn that's broken, I think it's the sex culture that's broken. And being broken in a broken world isn't something to feel bad about. It's just inevitable.



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