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Your Masculinity Does Not Make You My Judge and Jury

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Your Masculinity Does Not Make You My Judge and Jury

Abstract

For me, Springfest 2016 began with the purchasing of a pack of cigarettes. A bad decision, surely, but not surprising for a weekend that is usually filled with them.

Before walking over to a party with my friends that weekend, I tucked the cigarettes securely in the back pocket of my shorts. The scene that unfolded as I walked into my friend's apartment was a typical one: a rush of people, dim lighting, and loud, pulsing music. I tried to walk through the crowd quickly, waving and shouting a quick "hey" to friends here and there as I passed by. Suddenly, I felt someone take something out of my back pocket. I panicked at first, fearing it was my phone, and then felt a flash of shame as I realized it was actually my pack of cigarettes.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

cigarettes, Gender, Gettysburg College, Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Center for Public Service, party, sexism, smoking, Social Justice

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

YOUR MASCULINITY DOES NOT MAKE YOU MY JUDGE AND JURY

September 19, 2016



For me, Springfest 2016 began with the purchasing of a pack of cigarettes. A bad decision, surely, but not surprising for a weekend that is usually filled with them.

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there as I passed by. Suddenly, I felt someone take something out of my back pocket. I panicked at first, fearing it was my phone, and then felt a flash of shame as I realized it was actually my pack of cigarettes.

I whipped around and saw an unfamiliar male stomping on it repeatedly with his foot.

I burned with embarrassment and quickly dashed to the next room. I looked at my friend, who was still smiling and swaying from side to side to the music. "Did you see that?" I hissed, and she tilted her head in confusion. Before we could talk any further, a girl appeared in front of me. "He didn't mean to do that!" She exclaimed and gestured toward the room I had just escaped from. "That's my boyfriend. He's just against smoking." The guy she was speaking about – the person I had just run from – materialized in that moment, looking fervent and intense.

"Hello," he said, and stuck out his hand. I shook it weakly. He explained that he was an alum of Gettysburg College. What followed was a long-winded, passionate lecture in which he eloquently admonished me for buying cigarettes in this day and age and explained how he'd smoke *other* things but *never* cigarettes, that he knew people who had lung cancer, and that I was endangering not only myself but also everyone around me. He admitted that he probably should not have stomped on my cigarettes, but insinuated that it was an act of unquenchable passion, one which was actually for my own good. It seemed that if you asked him, he had

essentially saved my life and the lives of everyone at the party. He didn't offer to pay me back for the pack, which would have been an acceptable, if still insincere, apology.

I had mixed feelings of shame and confusion; I felt that the whole interaction was somewhat wrong or off, but I couldn't exactly explain it. I did feel guilty in a way, because it's common knowledge that cigarettes are dangerous to the point of stupidity to smoke. The alum was correct about that much. But...are cigarettes illegal? Are they banned on Gettysburg's campus? Was I flashing them around like a badge of honor, let alone even smoking one? The alum was certainly entitled to disagree, or even hate, my choice. Regardless of how he felt, it was my right to choose to buy, carry around, and even smoke a pack of cigarettes.

The incident made me feel like a child who was being reprimanded for playing with matches. Worst of all, to my own bewilderment and regret, I engaged in the conversation as if I were equally to blame for the situation, as if I had invited him, because of my decision to buy cigarettes, to violate my personal space. I had assured him that I understood where he was coming from. I had exclaimed, "no worries!" and tried to relax the mood with a shrug. I had shaken his hand and made out as if we were friends. I hadn't wanted to be the cause of trouble at a friend's party and I hadn't wanted to bring further attention to us, even though that guy was the one who had caused the problem. I had done nothing but walk into the party with something that offended this stranger.

I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if I were a man. Would he have reacted in the same way? Would he have felt entitled to touch my body and destroy my property? As a woman, I was not a physical threat, and as women are often expected to respond, I did not get mad. I did not become physical or violent. I immediately accepted his apology and shook the whole experience off as no big deal. I acted much like his girlfriend, who frantically tried to assuage me so that I would let her boyfriend off the hook. She must have known something was wrong as well, or could empathize with how I felt; yet she still enabled her boyfriend's behavior by asking me to blow it off.

I couldn't blame her. I did exactly what she did. I blew it off and enabled him.

Both of our actions reinforced the idea that men are adjudicators and punishers of women's actions, that if men find a woman's choice to be distasteful or wrong, they have the right to respond in any way they want. Here is the simple truth: It is not respectful or appropriate for a male stranger to find a woman and admonish her or her lifestyle choices. It was not this alum's place to publicly fine me for my actions, and I shouldn't have felt like I needed to repent for my sins by assuring him that all was well.

At the same time, I need to be honest with my own behavior. My immediate reflex in that moment was to empathize with the point the alum was trying to make about smoking, to quickly forgive him to avoid any further interaction, and to take the ultimate blame for what had transpired. The truth is, both men and women keep the legacy of sexism alive through their actions and beliefs, whether they mean to or not, whether they want to or not. No one had explicitly told me to be submissive to this guy. No one had needed to. My experiences thus far in life had taught me to act this way and I'm sure this alum's experiences told him it was acceptable to essentially put a woman "in her place."

Sexism, like all other behaviors, is learned. In this society, we are assigned genders at birth and carefully taught (by interacting with our families, teachers, and peers, watching TV, going on the internet, and absorbing messages the media sells us) to follow the behaviors and attitudes that are assigned along with those genders. To stray from them has a social cost. [Internalized sexism](#) (or any other internalized *-ism*) is the result of years and years of this socialization, and it manifested itself in my behavior when I engaged with the alum. This kind of internalized thinking lives in all of us and often goes undetected; if it is noticed, as it was in my case upon self-

reflection, people can feel the need to ignore it or shrug it off. This reaction is typical because other people often reinforce the idea that it's no big deal, perhaps because everyone is so used to living in the shadow of sexism (among many other -isms). Thus, since it is ingrained in our thinking and behavior, it is something we must fight against every day, and it is not an easy fight.

I don't wish to demonize the alum or his girlfriend, or make myself out as a helpless victim. In this small instance, all three of us perpetuated sexism – and there have been plenty of times since then that I've done it again. But to stop it, we need to recognize what is happening and not blow these experiences off as isolated incidents.

We all participate in acts that perpetuate various -isms; no one is exempt. Recognize. Reflect. Maybe next time, or the time after, the gendered script I feel forced to follow will be rewritten- by me. Or by you.

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