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The Way I Walk

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Description (Optional)

This essay explores the idiosyncratic nature of my personal walk. From horseback riding lessons to not-so-modest bikinis, the influences on my walk are many and varied. What's more interesting, though, is how deeply the comments and critiques from my friends impact me. I'm still realizing just how sensitive I am about the way I walk.

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About the Contributor (Optional)

I recently realized that I could truly enjoy writing. I've always planned to be a high school English teacher who encourages her students to love reading and discussing literature. Now I'll attempt to instill a love of writing as well. Home for me started in Freeland, Michigan. I love spending time with my family, my cat, my horses, and my close friends. I also can rarely turn down any theatrical opportunity that comes my way. Whether it's in a play, a movie, a book, or a side conversation, I love exploring humanity and the complexity of human experiences.

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The Way I Walk

Abby Cline

I have no technical explanation for the way I walk. No procedures, injuries, deformities, or sheer happenstances triggered my apparently idiosyncratic saunter. As far as I know, my bones, joints, tendons, ligaments, muscles, nerves all function quite similarly to the rest of the 5'6" females of the world. Perhaps it's my height. Maybe the specific proportions of my torso to my legs results in this fluid, sultry, swaying motion.

Horseback riding undoubtedly influences the way I walk. So many years of Sit Tall, Shoulders Back, Head Up. Feel the horse's movement beneath you. Now that we've taken the saddle off, put your hands on his shoulders. There. Allow the movement of his walk to cycle your hips up and down, left and right, left and right. Better. Rotate your pelvis so that you tuck your butt under you like a bunny tail, contract your upper abs to maintain that straight line from your ear to your shoulder to your elbow to your hip to your heel, and for goodness sakes relax. He can feel when you're tense.

I hold on to the shoulders back, the fluid hip movement, the confidence that riding taught me. Well, I think the confidence waned when my walk started drawing attention. It didn't fully disappear, but it wavered. I didn't want that kind of attention.

It started the summer after my senior year. We were swimming at my house after the majority of the guests from my graduation party had left. Feigning relief after the masses retreated, I joined my friends in my not-too-freezing, Michigan-summer pool. Then Dan climbed his awkward, adolescent boy body out of the pool and posed the deceptively innocent question, "Hey guys, who am I?"

He proceeded to meander his way down the “catwalk” of cement beside the pool, throwing his shoulders back, and throwing his hips back and forth with an almost violent power.

“Abby Cline!”

I can still recall my emotional reaction. I searched my friends’ faces, looking for the “gotcha,” the “just kidding.” Seeing no such reassurance, I took it upon myself to remedy the mix-up. My painfully, ironically confident contradiction: “That’s not how I walk.” Followed by my immediate, desperate need their understanding: “See.” Then I made the rookie mistake of hoisting my own awkward, adolescent female form out of the pool, in my recently-bought bikini, and demonstrating my actual walk, indistinct and boring, nothing special or showy or fancy or suggestive about it.

“Exactly what Dan just did.”

I realize that I both crave and fear attention. In some ways, I loved that my friends noticed the way that I walk. They paid enough attention to me through my three years at Heritage High School to know that I have a distinct way of walking. They could mimic it. I liked that.

I know that I struggle with pride. I can call it hubris to make it sound more literary, but what’s the point? I like myself more than is healthy. What’s worse, I try to disguise my pride, veiling it in a thin layer of false humility. I “nervously” fidgeted my way through my graduation party, I examined my shoes when friends and family congratulated me on my “amazing” ACT score, and I half-heartedly insisted that “it’s really an ensemble cast” when I received the role of Shrew for the *Taming*. It’s pride, and it’s revolting. Is this obsession with my walk another manifestation of my unhealthy self-obsession? Perhaps I’m simply perversely soaking in the looks and imitations of my friends, enjoying the “admiration.”

Maybe, but it goes deeper than that.

I don't want my body to be the most dominant, the most memorable part of who I am. I'm not sure why, but it is very important to me that my fellow humans—my friends especially—understand that the way I walk is unintentional. And I've tried. I have tried to cure myself. As if hip-swinging were a disease and pigeon-toed-walking were the cure.

Take smaller steps.

Don't swing arms so much.

Point toes in more when walking.

Sprint everywhere so no one has time to look at the way my walk accentuates my hips.

It's that hip thing that freaks me out. I feel like people are watching me, objectifying me, judging me. If Jean Piaget could observe me, he wouldn't comment on my walk. He would quickly diagnose my prolonged attachment to an imaginary audience, to the belief that everyone else is observing, evaluating, scrutinizing my every move. Of course, Piaget identified this trait primarily in teenagers. I'm 22. Yet I still carry an exhausting ever-awareness that someone, that some man, is potentially staring at my ass as I walk by.

There's a deeper, more integral fear, though: That woman is judging me right now. She sees me walk and she knows, in her core, that I'm deliberately walking in a manner that will, if my scheming succeeds, consume a man's thoughts. That's what she thinks. I try to release my fear that the man or the woman staring is blaming me, assuming that I'm intentionally being a tease, flaunting what I do (or do not) have in a feeble attempt at luring attention and ensnaring minds. I have set no snare. Please, Imaginary Audience—please believe me. In this accusation, my pride can honestly plead innocent, along with my hips. They do not conspire. Then I remember that there is no imaginary audience.

My life is consumed with fears about what other

people think. You might presume that I come from a shame-based culture, perhaps from an Eastern, group-oriented, don't-offend-the-community culture. You're close. I come from a conservative Christian culture. We call shame "guilt." And sometimes, we wallow in it. Other times, we—well, I—spend so many moments of my life obsessing over the opinions of others that I'm controlled by my subconscious as it absorbs, adopts, empowers another person's thoughts.

About that bikini. As an almost-high-school graduate I exercised my independence by attempting to eradicate the "prude" label that I had earned. I courageously and naively ventured a solo trip to Old Navy where I self-consciously deliberated way too long over color, style, and size. (Would the increased coverage of the large bottoms compensate for the increased potential of their slipping off underwater? Which style of bikini top would most faithfully cover my boobs without making me look as flat as a pre-Columbus map?) I finally purchased my first ever bikini: aqua blue two-triangle-style halter-top that tied at the base of my neck and the middle of my back with green and blue Hawaiian-patterned bottoms. It even had little tassels at the sides that tied in precarious bows (double knotted, ALWAYS) with wooden beads at the end.

Even in the dressing room, I felt a little too naked. Allowing the mirror to see that much of me felt wrong and liberating. Once I got home, though, I immediately reverted to approval-seeking, people-pleasing, I-need-support-for-this-life-altering-decision mode. So I tried on my brand spanking new bikini for my older, wiser, honest sister.

I descended the stairs, tentative, timid. "Sarah, is this modest?"

The answer I wanted: "Wow, Abby. Yeah. Way to go choosing a bikini that's actually modest. Your friends will still totally respect you as a person when you wear that. They

won't focus on your body, your physical form, your flaws, your pasty white skin. They'll still care about you and look up to you for who you are. Good choice. Also, you look good, Sister."

Her actual response: "No," stated through an exhale of gentle disbelief. "Abby, it's a *bikini*. Of course it's not modest."

The thing is, when I have a non-imaginary audience, I'm usually not walking like myself. In rehearsal for *Taming of the Shrew*, I realized that I was watering down Kate. My director, Professor Moore, used the stage movement techniques of Jacques Lecoq to reteach the elements: earth, air, water, fire. He informed me that "You, like many other tall females, move more like water." And he's right. Finally I had a label for my saunter. I move fluidly, both horizontally and vertically. I feel more comfortable with some combination of my limbs twisted: my legs crossed, even when standing; my arms clasped behind my back or wrapped around my stomach; one arm bent with that hand holding my opposite elbow; my hand on my chin as I listen to a friend from across the café table. It's noticeable when I'm stationary.

It's painfully obvious when I'm moving. The swinging hips, the slow turns, willful pacing. In my pursuit of creating a new character, I discovered this about myself: I walk like water.

My walk is a self-developed, unhindered, unperfected, highly-critiqued, idiosyncratic expression of myself. It's a few parts showy, a few parts functional, a few parts sensual. But hey—it's the best I've got. Or at least, it's the best I'm going to give. Go ahead and critique me, because I thrive on it. Because critique tells me that you're paying attention, which feeds my pride, while also checking that pride, reminding me that I fall short, oh so short, of so many standards. Maybe I need the critique more than I think. I'll accept the critique, but the walk won't change.