

Walk Like A Man

... cool in the Fifties

I learned a lot at the movies. As a teenager, I saw that when someone spoke an insult, you hauled off and punched him in the chest, then the forehead, knocking him down and earning yourself his heartfelt apology. When I tried the technique on a young tough down at the town swimming pool, he caught my wrist and threw me to the ground, hard enough to knock the wind out of me. Thank goodness I couldn't breathe for a few moments. I might have embarrassed myself by babbling out a whimpering apology.

The first time I tried to kiss a girl, I had only Hollywood as a teacher. I didn't know how Mom and Dad kissed. I'd run out of the room when they hugged each other. How embarrassing! But I carefully studied the lovers up on the screen. Bending Mary Louise Callabrese way over backwards on her front porch that night, she toppled backward and slammed into the front door, startling her parents as they watched The Jackie Gleason Show. I had not known how excitable an Italian father could be. Mary Louise's head hurt for days.

Hollywood provided lessons large and small, and all about a slice of American culture my parents either didn't care for, or didn't care about. It was not surprising for a sixteen year old boy from a family of limited means to see in the movies a thrilling lifestyle, compared to my dull existence in upstate New York. What I saw on film WAS life, or at least the life I longed for, driving a Corvette with a pretty girl by my side, plenty of money and the latest clothes. I reasoned I'd never live those dreams without having the personal attributes a later generation would come to call "Cool." It never occurred to me that I had learned everything of real value in life from my parents by age 10. I just wanted to get to that point where I would be Cool. It would be a rather tiresome trip.

Films weren't the only place I looked for guidance and inspiration. After watching a local production of the stage play, "Blue Denim," where the young teen girl and boy make it in the basement (fade the lights to black in those days), I sought every imaginable opportunity to get Mary Louise downstairs into her cellar. Her father was suspicious. Yes, I admitted to him, it was indeed unusual for a 16 year old to be studying furnace repair. But some of us geniuses started early.

While up on stage for the rehearsal of the junior class play, I threw on a jacket as I made ready to desert poor Mathilde and join the Confederate Army. I swung the coat around behind me and punched one arm up a sleeve and then the other, just as most of the world does.

"Cut!" yelled Sister Thespeia. "A man puts his coat on one arm at a time," she said. That was news to me. It would take too long to do it that way...

But following her directions, I slid a sleeve up one arm, then reached around behind me with the other and slid the coat up on to my shoulders. Then I began to walk toward center stage to join Mathilde for our parting scene.

Along the way, I smiled at Sister Thespeia with that special grin we all learned as toddlers. The one where Mom was unsure if it meant happy-happy or plippity-plop.

"Stop!" shrieked the nun. "Don't sashay across the stage like an circus elephant! Walk like a man!" Sashay indeed! That did it! Humiliated, I stormed off the stage, no doubt forsaking a career of fame and fortune.

I should not have felt so bad. I learned later I was in stellar company. John Wayne walked like a sissy until he invented his famous saunter. "The Walk" sort of started in his hips, and with his arms just slightly akimbo, elbows out, he moved out like a ship from the dock. For over half a century, he steamed across thousands of movie sets, beginning with silent films in the 1920's. He told an interviewer he thought himself such a poor actor that he needed to employ gimmicks, and he practiced them daily in front of a full length mirror.

I began to imitate the great man's walk, moving across the floor like a listing oil tanker. In school, in department stores and anywhere you'd find a teenager in the 1950's, I'd walk The Walk. Often, old ladies would ask what was wrong with my feet. Sailing up the sidewalk to a street corner one morning, I glanced

down to see a Boy Scout looking up at me helpfully. I stared him down, before he could offer assistance crossing the street.

Eventually, I gave up *The Walk*. Mary Louise insisted on it, after we were offered special seating at “Pillow Talk,” starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day. But I sometimes tried to put my coat on one sleeve at a time. Sadly, my arms don’t go back far enough. Most often I’d drop the coat behind me on the floor and have to scoop it up and swing it over my head, knocking a vase off the mantel or a lamp from an end table. I swept my mother-in-law’s clock off the wall the first time I met her. Luckily, I was just leaving.

Gregory Peck was another cinematic male mentor. The first time I shaved, I used a half can of shaving cream. The lather needed to be an inch thick, as was Peck’s in that scene from “*The Big Country*.” When I finished cutting up my face with the razor, I wiped the remaining soap off with a towel, just like in the movies. Any sensible guy would have washed it off with water. When my face began to harden in ten minutes, I finally rinsed the soap scum away.

I’d also seen Cary Grant artfully stuff his shirt into his pants without unzipping them or opening the top of his trousers. I’m sure he wanted to be modest while getting dressed in front of a million movie viewers, but I can’t say why I was motivated to try it in private. I guess I wanted to appear classy, even at home. Most of us guys open the fly, spread the knees a little so the pants don’t drop to our ankles, and then sort of hold this and pull that and ...zip! ... it’s done. If you can visualize that procedure, you can guess why it isn’t recommended for a male romantic lead.

What Grant accomplished so well was a film device that looked natural on the screen, but was silly in real life. He must have practiced it for hours to get it right and not look like he was playing with himself. The trousers had to have extra room in the waist and the shirt would be more fitted and shorter than usual. His hands needed to move blindly with just the right motions while he spoke to his movie sidekick and the plot moved along. He couldn’t look down to gauge his progress, or he’d appear to be checking his pants for a dribble spot, always the bane of khakis.

Of course, I knew enough not to believe everything I saw in the movies or on television. I knew most married couples didn’t sleep in separate beds like Desi and Luci. Nor did most American homes appear as they did on television. A favorite sitcom device was the sunken living room, built so that both the cameras

and the studio audience could see the actors. Europeans watching re-runs may have believed Danny Thomas and every American had a pit in their living room.

As I grew to adulthood, I discovered that walking like a man wasn’t about walking at all. It was about maturity. And it wasn’t a trick I could quickly accomplish or practice in front of a mirror. But I tried my damndest to grow up for over half a century ... most of the time. I’ve wondered if women learn to “walk like a man,” and have decided they do. I’ll bet they call it “walking like a woman,” through a life of ups and downs, joys and heartaches, from youth to maturity.

On a visit back home a few years ago, I looked up the aisle in a chain store and saw Mary Louise looking back at me. She had aged, but I saw in her bright blue eyes evidence of a contented life and the glow of an enjoyable walk. I don’t know how else to describe it. I immediately picked up my elbows and launched toward her with *The Walk*. Laughing, she almost fell over into a rack of shaving cream. We brought each other up to date like two teenagers, while her husband smiled wryly and gathered up their grandchildren. We remembered school dances, friends and favorite films. We discovered that neither of us had been to the movies in ages. And thankfully, we had found other mentors.

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