

Please Touch

Bring me closer to the world; I want my fingers to explore, I want my skin to feast. I crave a moment where something wondrous and terrible and deeply, horribly human stirs inside me. That feeling—that lust, of sorts—it somehow compels me. It somehow nags and entices, teases and nourishes.

I need to touch. I need to feel. I need to—I do. Every cell in my body cries to be connected to the outside world. I expose myself. And why wouldn't I? Touching is human, yeah?

We know that to thrive, babies must be handled. They can't grow in orphanages where caregivers physically withdraw, where caregivers confine their young to prisons of isolation, spaces where no one can reach or be reached. The infant mortality rate in orphanages is 30-40%. Why? The desire for personal contact, no, the need for contact is not met. Babies get sick if they can't wrap their tiny fingers around yours. They die.

Touch is the first sense we develop in our mother's womb. Before we are born, we can sense information over all parts of our body: our little mouths, feet, and hands are especially sensitive. We poke the inner skin of Mom's belly. We kick and tumble and bounce to get to know her. The pressure of a touch is taken in by receptors beneath our skin called Pacinian corpuscles. Chemical signals go to our brain and then branch out to our heart. And our blood slows down. We relax.

I wonder why we reach out? Why we explore?

As children, we play together in the floor. You reach into my plastic bowl and clubber my hand to get my Cheetos. We lie down together on soft sheets to nap. Dad tickles us; Mom cleans up our squishy, sticky playdough; Grandma tells us it's time to get out of the ball pit at McDonald's. We learn to play Spoons and Slap Jack and Marco Polo and Freeze Tag. I pet my Golden Retriever and the sensation of her long, soft hairs between my fingers embeds into my memory. I loved her.

They say there are five love languages: quality time, receiving gifts, words of affirmation, acts of service, and physical touch. Mom always used to tell me my language had to be touch because we snuggled on the couch too many afternoons to count. I begged for Dad's moustache kisses, and I snapped the flimsy air pockets in bubble wrap and twirled my hair until my fingers turned purple and thanked God for glossy buttercups. I loved to brush against things then. I needed to brush.

Perhaps I still do. But—

Somehow I've found that time has a way of changing things. Maybe long ago, contact connected me to the world. Maybe touch taught me to feel and empathize and explore and discover. But when we get older, something happens; and suddenly touch is not so much a connection—it's more of a collision.

It was in middle school that my guy friends started inviting me to go to their birthday parties. Mom absolutely forbade it, telling me stories about innocent girls my age who were *ruined* with unexpected physical contact. She told me the world didn't want to be explored, that it was dangerous to touch it, like trying to touch a coiled snake. I sat down with a friend once who told me strange, upsetting things. He told me his mom touched him when he didn't make good enough grades. His skin would turn purple, like my fingers when I twirled my hair. Only his skin stayed purple.

There were whispers in the bathroom stalls in eighth grade: whispers about odd family members, something about uncles and being too young to stop things. Kids in class didn't share toy dinosaurs with me anymore. We didn't hug. We didn't high five. We didn't wrestle over rubber kickballs on the playground. Instead, I watched two guys from the gifted class pound into one another; the new kid came off the track with blue and crimson eyes; old friends scratched and bit until the hallway was smeared red with hair and blood. Someone I knew from church camp shot himself.

I had always thought people touched when they were happy. Like the couples on YouTube when they find out they are pregnant: I've watched them jump and kiss and connect. Couples who've loved one another and doted and held hands. I guess even people who've been

through severe trauma connect. No words, just touching. Isn't that how Jesus healed people? Isn't that why the bleeding lady brushed her skin against his?

But physical contact tears us apart. A guy touches a girl to jump-start romance, and before anyone knows what's happened, lives are shattered. He locks himself away in a dark room to stare at a screen and grope himself: he tries to cure a deep, painful sickness inside. She dreams of latching onto a lover's chest. Bitter fantasy colors her life black. They both touch themselves with cold razors. Others tell them they are too "touchy." They only wish they were.

I've heard stories of men who've gone off to war and collided with other humans in terrible ways. Imagine ripped-open intestines, spilled guts in the grass, pulled fingernails—each one removed bit by bit—it's all stuck in my head. I first learned about genocide in sixth grade. Sometimes I still have nightmares about the Holocaust.

I know now that contact kills just as easily as isolation.

Perhaps we are afraid. We know we need to touch, but it costs us. Maybe we turn to things that are artificial to compromise. We pick substitutes, whatever can replace the dangerous stuff. Things like smartphones and touchscreens. We need them. We need them so we can connect to something outside ourselves. I've attached to my iPhone—though it fails to satisfy. I struggle to let it go. It's physical in the palm of my hand; it's solid in the gentle grasp of my fingers. I swipe and slide and tap the screen. Because—I need to.

Are we alright? Are we okay?

If we are hurt by contact long enough, eventually we form calluses. Where we were once innocent and tender, we become suspicious and rigid. It only takes time. It only takes pain. It only takes story after story, experience after experience to detach ourselves and become like Marvel's Rogue in a world of Wolverines. We know others will hurt us. And we know we will hurt them.

Is there anything more? What about calluses? Could there be something good about them, maybe? About a wound? About an incision? At least a callus means something has grown back. It means protection. I write; they tell me to have thick skin, thick skin or else I'll never make it. You play the guitar. Everyone knows you've got

to suffer before you become any good, before you can have any real comfort playing. Let the critics' words sink deep into me; let the strings cut your fingertips. Perhaps we will both become strong.

Eh. Then again, who cares about strength? If we are strong what happens to our humanity? A bleeding heart liberal cares because he bleeds. He hurts when a child is shot; he might ache even when a terrorist blows up. Does a callused heart still pump blood? Does it function? Does it work? I want to feel. I *have* to feel.

Maybe we need both: calluses and flesh. Pain damages us and perhaps we become stronger. Maybe we even become—wiser. I never would have learned to cry with people who've gone through depression unless I had gone through it myself. How can we mourn with those who mourn unless we walk through the suffering ourselves? We learn to recognize pain in others. Maybe it's not that we learn to feel less, but that we learn to feel *more*.

Maybe we need calluses as protection against collision. We learn to let certain pain slide off our backs—as much as possible. Still, we need to feel. We need the wondrous, the terrible, the deeply, horribly human. We need to touch, to reach out. Isolation will kill us. Connection sustains. Only, shouldn't we be prepared for the purple fingers? Shouldn't we be prepared to feel more than we've ever understood? Perhaps it's too much to put into words. It's something I can't quite grasp.