

# The Ratchet

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Tuesday, March 17, 2026

*Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested.* —Kafka

**I**N 1996 a twenty-five-year-old musician received a letter from an eighteen-year-old girl in Japan. She had chosen the stationery at a shop near the train station, the way you choose what to wear when you are sending a version of yourself across an ocean to someone whose voice you have heard but whose hands you have never touched. He opened the letter. He held the paper. He noticed that the paper was fine—so fragile, so refined—and that they did not make paper like this where he came from. He wrote a song about what it felt like to hold the paper and sniff the envelope and

imagine the girl who had chosen it. The song contained one sentence about imagining her body, followed immediately, in the same line, in the same bar, in the same breath, by a curse directed at himself for having imagined it, and another line in which he said he could never touch her and thought it would be wrong to try. The chorus of the song was not about her body. The chorus of the song was “I need help and you’re way across the sea.” The culture did not hear the chorus. The culture heard the one sentence about the body and ignored the curse and the restraint and the distance and the conscience and the help, and the culture destroyed him for a decade, and the girl in Japan was not consulted about any of it, because the culture that claimed to be protecting her had never once considered asking her what she thought.



Friedrich Hayek drew a distinction between legislation and law. Legislation is the rule on the paper, the number that was debated and voted on, the standard that can be stated and argued with because it has a shape. Law in the Hayekian sense is the emergent norm—the unwritten thing, the actual standard that

governs behavior regardless of what the legislation says. The distinction matters because it names a gap, and the gap is where people get destroyed.

The age of consent is legislation. It says eighteen, or sixteen, or fifteen, depending on the jurisdiction, and the number means: above this line, a person is an adult who can make their own decisions about their own body, their own desires, their own relationships. Below this line, they cannot, and the law will protect them. The number is a compromise. Reasonable people have disagreed about where exactly it should fall since the concept was invented. But wherever it is, it is stated, and it is a line, and a line has two sides, and both sides mean something. The side below the line means: not yet. The side above the line means: yes. The yes is as important as the not yet. The yes is the entire point of having drawn the line in the first place. Without the yes, the line protects nothing, because protection that never expires is not protection. It is captivity.

The emergent norm does not have two sides. The emergent norm is a ratchet. A ratchet is a mechanism that moves in one direction only. In 1970 a twenty-five-year-old expressing attraction to an eighteen-year-old was unremarkable. In 1996 it was the subject of a song that was reviewed as raw but honest. By 2000 the same

song was being called a disaster. By 2010 it was an embarrassment. By 2025 it would be called predatory, or creepy, or problematic, or any of the other words the culture uses when it has no articulable principle but has a strong feeling and has decided that the feeling is sufficient. The legislation did not move. The number stayed where it was. What moved was the norm, and the norm only moved in one direction, and nobody voted on the movement, and nobody can state the principle that drives it, and nobody can tell you where it stops, because a ratchet without a stopping condition does not stop. It keeps clicking.



The reason nobody can state the principle is that there is no principle. Ask someone who is uncomfortable with the song to explain what makes it wrong and listen to what happens. They will not say “the age of consent should be twenty-five,” because that is a legislative claim and they would have to defend it and they know they cannot, because a world in which twenty-four-year-olds cannot consent to being desired is a world in which twenty-four-year-olds also cannot consent to marriage, military service, debt, parenthood,

or any of the other things the civilization lets them do at eighteen. They will say instead that it is “just weird,” or that there is “a power imbalance,” or that “brains aren’t fully developed until twenty-five.” Each of these sounds like a reason. None of them is a reason, because none of them comes with a number, and a moral standard without a number is not a standard. It is a vibe. And a vibe can destroy a person, and a vibe can destroy an album, and a vibe can destroy a decade of an artist’s creative life, but a vibe cannot be argued with, because a vibe does not make claims. A vibe just sits there, in the room, displacing the air, and everyone adjusts to it, and nobody asks where it came from or when it plans to leave.

The power imbalance argument is the most popular and the least coherent. If the principle is that power imbalances invalidate consent, then every axis of human difference is a disqualification. Wealth is power. Fame is power. Education is power. Height is power, if you consult the social psychology literature. Being funnier is power. Speaking the local language fluently when your partner does not is power. Having a car when your partner takes the bus is power. Every relationship between non-identical people contains a power differential on some axis, and the number of axes is infinite,

and the argument has no internal mechanism for deciding which axes matter and which do not. It decides ad hoc, case by case, vibes all the way down. A thirty-year-old venture capitalist pursuing a twenty-two-year-old barista has a power imbalance on every measurable axis—money, status, age, professional leverage—and nobody writes a think piece about it, because the twenty-two-year-old is above the vibe line, and the vibe line is not the legislation line, and the vibe line moves, and it moved again while you were reading this sentence.



Meanwhile the organism goes on being an organism. An eighteen-year-old human is at or near the peak of physical maturity. This is not a controversial claim. This is what puberty was for. The entire apparatus of sexual selection—the apparatus that has been running, with minor modifications, for several hundred thousand years—did not receive the memo about the vibe. The apparatus does what it does. The attraction exists. It has always existed. It existed when the age of consent was twelve, which was most of recorded history. It existed when the age of consent moved to sixteen and then

to eighteen, and it will exist if the age of consent moves to twenty-five, because the apparatus does not consult the legislation and does not consult the vibe. The apparatus consults the body, and the body at eighteen is what it is, and what it is is an adult body, and the law agrees that it is an adult body, and the law was right to draw the line where it drew it, and the line means something, or it should.

The age of consent does not exist because the attraction is wrong. This misunderstanding is at the root of everything. The law does not say: it is immoral to find an eighteen-year-old attractive. The law says: below a certain age, a person is not ready to navigate the consequences of the attraction, and the law will protect them until they are. The law is a protection for the young person, not a prohibition on desire. Above the line, the protection is no longer needed, because the person is ready. That is the entire purpose of having a line. And if the culture then turns around and punishes people who are above the line—not for acting badly, not for coercing, not for exploiting, but simply for being honest about the fact that the attraction exists—then the culture has converted the line from a protection into a trap. The line no longer says “above here, you are free.” The line says “above here, you are free, but we will punish you any-

way, using a different, uncodified, unstated standard that we will not tell you in advance, and the punishment will be social rather than legal, which means there is no appeal, no defense, no due process, and no acquittal.”



The pornography industry makes the incoherence explicit in a way that should end every conversation but never does. The most popular category on every major pornography website in the world is some variation of “eighteen-year-old” or “teen,” the latter meaning eighteen and nineteen. The industry films eighteen-year-olds having sex. It distributes the footage globally. It profits enormously. This is legal. This is not controversial. Nobody is dragged through the cultural mud for consuming it. The industry’s entire business model is built on the commodification of the sexuality of young adults, and the commodity form is permitted, and the market is vast, and the culture says nothing.

But a musician who wrote a song about finding an eighteen-year-old attractive—a song in which he explicitly states that he will not touch her and believes it would be wrong to try, a song whose chorus is a plea for help, a song in which the total physical contact between

the two people across the entire history of their relationship is that she mailed paper and he held paper—that musician was destroyed. The culture could not tolerate the artistic description of an attraction that it tolerates, every day, in its commercial exploitation. You can film it. You cannot sing about it. You can sell it. You cannot write a poem about it. The commodity form is sanctioned. The aesthetic form is prosecuted. The honest form—the form that includes the self-curse, the conscience, the restraint, the distance, the “I think it would be wrong”—is the most prosecuted of all, because the honest form is the one that makes the audience confront the fact that the attraction is real and human and universal, and the audience does not want to confront that, because confronting it would mean acknowledging that the vibe is not ethics. The vibe is the audience’s discomfort with its own interior, projected onto the artist who had the temerity to describe his.



And the girl. Always the girl. The girl who chose the paper. The girl who wrote the questions—what is your favorite food, when is your birthday, the most honest questions in the world because they have not yet learned

to be embarrassed by their own directness. The girl who sealed the envelope and walked to the post office and sent her care across an ocean to a man she had never met. She is the agent. She is the subject of every verb. She chose. She wrote. She sealed. She sent. Every action in the first half of this story belongs to her, and every action is initiated by her, and the man on the other side of the ocean is the patient, the receiver, the one to whom the letter arrives. He did not seek her out. He did not find her. He did not contact her. He opened his mail. The letter was there. The paper was fine. He fell to pieces.

The culture decided she was the victim. Not because anything happened to her. Not because she was harmed, or frightened, or exploited, or contacted, or pursued. Not because she complained, or objected, or asked for protection. The culture decided she was a victim because the framework requires a victim, and the framework assigns victimhood based on categories rather than events. She is young. She is female. She is a fan. The matrix of demographic checkboxes produces its output before anyone looks at the facts. The output says: vulnerable. And the facts—her agency, her initiative, her choice, her paper, her walk to the post office, her direct and unashamed questions—are irrelevant to

the matrix, because the matrix does not process facts. The matrix processes categories. And the man who processed facts—who looked at a specific girl’s specific paper and specific questions and described what he actually felt—was convicted by a framework that refused to look at what he looked at.

Her autonomy was the first casualty. The culture that claimed to be protecting her was denying her the one thing the legislation was designed to guarantee: the right, upon reaching the age of majority, to be treated as an adult whose choices are her own. She chose to write the letter. The culture said her choice did not count. She chose the paper carefully, with attention and intention and care. The culture said the care did not count. She was an adult, by the standard the civilization agreed on, exercising the agency the civilization said she had earned. And the civilization looked at her agency and said: no. You are not the subject. You are the object. You are the one being acted upon, regardless of the fact that you acted first, because the framework has already decided who you are, and who you are is a victim, and a victim does not have agency, and your agency is therefore inadmissible, and the man who received your letter is guilty, and we do not need to ask you whether you agree.



And while the culture was running this trial—while the ratchet was clicking, while the vibe was thickening, while an artist was learning to produce sealed containers with nothing inside—the actual powerful, the actual elites, the people who run the systems that produce the norms, were doing something else. Not writing songs. Not imagining. Not staying on their side of any ocean and cursing themselves for imagining. They were doing the thing. The actual thing, to actual children, for decades, on islands and in private jets and in mansions with flight logs and guest lists, documented and witnessed and covered up by the same institutional apparatus that was simultaneously prosecuting a man for sniffing an envelope.

The Epstein files did not reveal a secret. They revealed a structure. The structure is: the culture's moral energy flows toward the prosecution of honesty and away from the prosecution of power. The musician who described his feelings in public was destroyed. The financier who abused children in private was protected for decades. The vibe caught the man with the envelope. The vibe did not catch the man with the island. Because the vibe is not a moral framework. The vibe is a social

mechanism for managing discomfort, and the honest artist creates more discomfort than the discreet predator, because the honest artist forces you to see yourself, and the discreet predator operates behind a screen, and the culture prefers the screen, and the screen is the vibe, and the vibe is the ratchet, and the ratchet caught the wrong man.



The man in the song tried himself. This is the part that nobody mentions and the part that matters most. He did not wait for the culture to judge him. He judged himself, inside the song, inside the lyric, inside the same line. “I could never touch you—I think it would be wrong.” The desire, the renunciation, and the moral reasoning are simultaneous. They occupy the same breath. There is no gap between the impulse and the conscience. He wanted, and he decided not to act, and he explained why, and he did all three in a single grammatical unit, on tape, in front of everyone. The trial was conducted and the verdict was delivered and the sentence was the distance: I will stay on my side of the ocean. The letter and the song are the whole relationship. The paper and the music are the medium and the medium will not be

exchanged for flesh. He made the decision. He stated it. He meant it.

And the culture heard the verdict and said: not enough. The culture reopened the case. The culture retried the man for the crime of having conducted his own trial in public. The crime was not the desire. There was no touching, no contact, no communication, no pursuit. The crime was not even the imagining, because everyone imagines, and the culture knows everyone imagines, and the culture's standard is not that you do not imagine but that you do not say so. The crime was the saying. The crime was the honesty. The crime was Pinkerton. And the sentence was the Green Album—five million copies of sealed containers with nothing inside, pleasant and safe and optimized for not making anyone feel anything, which is what the culture wanted, which is what the ratchet produces, which is silence, which is not safety and not protection and not morality. It is the elimination of the one thing the culture cannot metabolize, which is a man describing what it feels like to be a human being who has received a letter from another human being and is not going to do anything about it except tell you the truth.



The line should mean something. That is all this amounts to. Not an argument for moving the line down. Not an argument for eliminating the line. Not an argument for anything other than the simplest, most conservative claim imaginable: the line the civilization drew should mean what it says. Eighteen means eighteen. An adult is an adult. A girl who sends a letter is a girl who chose to send a letter, and her choice is her choice, and the man who received it and described what it felt like to receive it has done nothing wrong—not by the legislation, not by any articulable principle, not by any standard that can be stated and defended in daylight. He has done something wrong only by the vibe, and the vibe is not a law, and the vibe is not an ethics, and the vibe is a ratchet that has no stopping condition, and the ratchet will keep clicking until there is no permissible way for any human being to describe what it feels like to be attracted to any other human being who is an adult, and the silence that the ratchet produces will be called progress, and the progress will be called protection, and the protection will protect nobody, because the girl in Japan did not need protecting, and the children on the island needed protecting, and the ratchet caught the songwriter and missed the predator, and that is the moral framework, and the moral framework is broken,

and the brokenness is the ratchet, and the ratchet will not stop on its own.

He had her letter. She had his song.

