

The Burka and the Ratchet

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The sleep of reason produces monsters.

—Goya

IN 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 imagine the girl who had chosen it. The song contained one sentence about imagining her body, followed immediately, 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 was not about her body. The chorus 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 culture destroyed him for a decade.



But notice what is not in the song. There is no girl in the song. There is an envelope, a handwriting, a postmark, and a set of questions—what is your favorite food, when is your birthday—that have not yet learned to be embarrassed by their own directness. The songwriter does not know this girl. He knows she is eighteen. He knows she is from Japan. He knows she chose the paper carefully. That is the complete inventory of facts. From these facts he has constructed not a desire for a person but a desire for connection—a fantasy of having a girlfriend, of being the kind of person someone writes to, of not being alone. He is twenty-five years old and lonely, and the imagining briefly takes the shape of a body because that is what imagining does when you are twenty-five and lonely, and he catches himself in the same line, and he says so, on tape, in front of everyone.

This is not attraction. This is a diary entry set to music. A man alone in a room holding paper and wondering what it would be like to not be alone. The entire sexual content of the song is a thought and its immediate retraction. And this—this—is what the culture could not tolerate.



Meanwhile the most popular category on every major pornography website in the world is some variation of “eighteen-year-old.” The industry films real eighteen-year-olds having sex. It distributes the footage globally. It profits enormously. This is legal. This is not controversial. Nobody is destroyed for consuming it.

A man who imagined a girl he never met, who never contacted her, who never crossed any ocean, who prosecuted himself for the imagining inside the song itself—that man was destroyed. A global industry that films real eighteen-year-olds and sells the footage to millions—that industry is unremarkable. The fantasy was prosecuted. The reality is a business model.

And this is not a comparison that needs to be sharpened. A man imagining is further from a girl than a camera pointed at a girl. That is not an argument. That

is arithmetic. The culture sanctioned the camera and prosecuted the daydream.



Now consider the girl. Not the imagined one. The real one, the one who chose the stationery and walked to the post office. She chose. She wrote. She sealed. She sent. Every verb belongs to her. She is the subject of every sentence. The songwriter is the patient, the receiver, the one to whom the letter arrives. He did not seek her out. He did not contact her. He opened his mail.

The culture decided she was the victim. Not because anything happened to her. Not because she was harmed, or frightened, or pursued. The paper went one direction and the music went the other and nobody crossed any ocean. 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 checkboxes produce their output before anyone looks at the facts.

But the facts include her desire. Ask any eighteen-year-old girl in the world who she is attracted to and the answer is almost never an eighteen-year-old boy. The

answer is someone older, someone who has done something, someone who makes music or has seen something of the world. This is not a controversial empirical claim. This is what every eighteen-year-old girl will tell you if you ask her. The framework that says a twenty-five-year-old man should not find her attractive is also, implicitly, saying she should not find him attractive. It is legislating her desire. It is telling her she is wrong about what she wants. She cleared every legal threshold the civilization erected. She is eighteen. She is an adult. She exercised her agency—she chose paper, she walked to the post office, she sent herself across an ocean. And the culture looked at all of this 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 we have already decided who you are.

This is a feminist argument, and not an abstract one. Can we let a girl want what she wants. That is the entire argument. The ratchet—the emergent norm that moves in one direction only, that has no stopping condition, that cannot be stated as a principle—turned “protect girls from exploitation” into “girls do not have desire.” Which is the oldest patriarchal framework in the world wearing new clothes. The Victorian version said women

do not have desire because they are pure. The modern version says women do not have desire because they are victims. Different justification, same result: the girl does not get to want things.



And now the comparison that nobody wants to make.

In cultures where women are required to cover their hair, their faces, their bodies, the mechanism is external. Fabric. You cover the girl so that desire cannot reach her and she cannot express hers. The prohibition is visible. It is a garment. You can point at it and say: that is oppression. You can take it off. A culture can decide to stop requiring it. The resistance is as external as the prohibition.

Half the Western world looks at the covering and says exactly this: those girls should be free. Free to be seen, to be desired, to desire. And this is correct. This is the right thing to say.

And then the same culture turns around and destroys a man for describing what it felt like to receive a letter, and declares an eighteen-year-old girl a victim of the letter she chose to send, and punishes honesty about attraction while tolerating its industrial commodification. The culture can see the denial of agency when it is fabric.

It cannot see it when it is a vibe. But it is the same thing. It is always the same thing. The girl is not allowed to want, and the method of enforcement is local custom.



There is a story about two fathers. The traditional father says to his son: “You have to visit grandmother. It doesn’t matter if you want to. We’re going now.” This is authoritarian. The child must comply. But the child is permitted to not want to. The child’s interior is his own. The demand is external, and the self is left alone.

The postmodern father says: “You know how much grandmother loves you. Don’t you want to visit her?” The child must not only comply. The child must want to comply. The imperative has moved from the exterior to the interior. The postmodern father does not demand obedience. He demands desire. He demands that the child internalize the obligation so completely that the obligation becomes the child’s own wish.

This is the difference between the covering and the ratchet. The conservative framework says: the desire exists, we know it exists, we are managing it externally, here is fabric. It does not ask you to not have the desire. It just says you cannot act on it in these ways. The mechanism is external. The self is left alone.

The ratchet demands the self. The songwriter tried himself—inside the song, desire and renunciation in the same breath—and it was not enough. The self-trial was not enough because the culture does not want the trial. The culture wants the desire to not exist. It is not enough to not visit grandmother. It is not enough to not want to visit grandmother. You must have never not wanted to visit. The desire to not visit must be retroactively erased. And the songwriter's crime is that he left the evidence of the desire on tape. He showed that the desire existed before the renunciation, and the framework does not accept renunciation. Renunciation implies there was something to renounce. The framework demands there was nothing.

The covering covers the body. The ratchet covers the mind.



And here is where the argument refuses to become a polemic. After all of this—after the comparison has landed and the mechanism has been named—the Western way is still better. Not slightly. Enormously. The Western framework gives more freedom to more people. The girl in the West can go to school, can work, can vote, can walk to a post office alone, can send letters to any-

one she wants. The progress is real. The sophistication of a culture that manages desire through norms rather than fabric is a genuine achievement.

But the achievement has a failure mode, and the failure mode is the thing that lingers. The external prohibition leaves the self intact. You can hate the covering while wearing it. You can desire while being covered. The fabric cannot reach the thought. The ratchet reaches the thought. The ratchet says: not only must you not act, not only must you not speak, you must not think. And if you think, the thought is evidence of something wrong with you, and the something wrong is yours, and the cure is the restructuring of your interior life until the thought no longer arises.

The authoritarian failure mode is often catastrophic—violent, lethal, monstrous in its particulars. The ratchet's failure mode is quieter and in some way more thorough. It does not leave the self intact behind the fabric. It gets inside. It colonizes the way you think about your own wanting. You do it to yourself. You police your own interior. You cannot take it off because you cannot find it. And the worst of it is that the ratchet convinced you that the policing was your own good judgment.

And there is a final turn that the argument takes if you follow it all the way down. The girl who sent the letter was eighteen in 1996. She is forty-eight now. She has lived an entire adult life—married, perhaps, or not; children, perhaps, or not; a career, a home, a history that belongs to her and that nobody in the discourse has ever once asked about. For thirty years the culture has been protecting her from a letter she sent when she was a legal adult exercising her own desire, and in thirty years of protection nobody has asked her whether she wanted to be protected, or from what, or whether the song that a lonely man wrote about her stationery was the worst thing that ever happened to her or the most beautiful. She has not been consulted. She was eighteen and she is forty-eight and she has never been the subject of a single sentence in the entire discourse that claims to be about her welfare. The discourse is not about her. The discourse was never about her. The discourse is about the culture's relationship to its own discomfort, and she is the surface onto which the discomfort is projected, and the projection has been running for three decades, and nobody has thought to ask the screen what it thinks of the movie.



He had her letter. She had his song. And between them, an ocean that nobody crossed, and a culture that could not tolerate a man describing what it felt like to hold a piece of paper and be lonely.

She chose the stationery at a shop near the train station. He held the paper and fell to pieces. The culture heard the pieces falling and called it a crime.

