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Annika Elisabeth von Hausswolff

Alternativ sekretess / Alternative Secrecy

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Thoughts on Honour

The Victim, the Perpetrator, and the Viewer

Pixels. Wandering through … how many? Millions, billions? Reflecting on the numbers: 365 days, 7,960 rapes, 12,000 applications for restraining orders. Reluctantly searching on a porn site: *gangbang* – 82,025 hits. *Hits*. Browsing through online chat forums about a female cabinet member: *looks like a whore*, and, *looks sluttish even when sober*. Women earn sixty-three thousand kronor less in wages every year. That's over a thousand kronor less a week. An attorney asks a plaintiff exactly how much she had to drink that night when she went home with a man to his apartment. Friday night: thinking that somehow all of this might be connected? Texting my teenage daughter to offer her a lift home through the streets of the city.

Contrast. At the same time, in the same society. Sex offenders are secluded in prisons for their own protection. Paedophiles and rapists are the most despised and stigmatised. The percentage of female professors has doubled in the last ten years. Admittedly only to twenty-seven percent, but still. Everyone loathes honour crimes. Pride, and, of course, #MeToo. There is something strikingly contradictory there, two such different pictures of society. On the one hand: patriarchy, deafening abuse of women, and structural oppression. On the other hand: increasing equality, sexual consent laws, and the

emergence of new, more symmetrical masculinities. How do these pictures fit together? What happens when we overlay them?

Vile. Looking at the men standing in the forest glade. A place for extraction and collection. The image is utterly silent. One of the men is bent over a scantily clad or undressed woman while the others watch. A lone woman – what is she doing there all on her own? Forensics. That must be it. These men cannot be oppressors – right? They are watching because they are on the woman's side. It is the beginning of the hunt. The woman is the victim. Perhaps even the "ideal victim", a concept coined by the friendly yet biting criminologist Nils Christie. His defining criteria are met: she is weak (we see this because she is a woman). Check. She is respectable (unless her skirt was too short). Yup. She cannot be blamed for being at the scene of the crime (unless she did not willingly accompany the perpetrator). Roger that. She is at a disadvantage in relation to a physically more powerful perpetrator (I am assuming the culprit is a man, knowing the statistics). We love the ideal victim. Because of her, we can be self-righteously indignant. That is, indeed, a good feeling. And one linked to the fact that we love to hate the polar opposite that belongs to the ideal victim – the perpetrator, the stranger, the predator. That man is not at all like the rest of us men. Completely different. He has nothing to do with us! Taking a closer look at the scene, can we observe any traces of him?

Honourable. Wondering whether the woman is alive? Reminded of something that came up in a conversation with a woman who had been raped. A completely normal woman. Statistically normal: working, married, mother, purely Swedish. Apart from her sex, no visible vulnerability. It could be her resting on the soft forest floor in our photograph. She is reluctant to report it to the police, but also fearing that her husband might not believe her should she refrain. The husband, devastated when learning about what happened. It is easy to sympathize. But what is the object of his despair? His first reaction: desolation about the violation against him, them as a couple, their family. As if the perpetrator had acted against the husband: "Ha ha, see what I did to your woman. You're not man enough to do anything about it." A toxic mix of not being strong enough to defend his woman and at the same time creeping doubt that she perhaps wanted it after all? Another man has violated *his* woman. Double emasculation. Not even hours of showering can remove the stains from her. Not only that, they splash onto others. The husband feels the same stains upon himself. Degraded, dishonoured. There is something about honour here. The unnerving logic when women are raped in times of war. The stains transcend the woman. They also defile her husband, her family, and the whole community. *We* dishonoured *all of you*.

This is only possible under one condition – that rape is the worst of all. The worst thing a woman can imagine. The worst thing a parent can imagine. The worst thing a husband can imagine. A forbidden thought lingers within me. Bracing myself I proceed: imagine if rape was considered to be just another crime. Similar to many others. As something that causes suffering. Abhorrent, absolutely. Consider a distasteful relativization, a naïve list in no particular order: assault, intimidation, rape, mugging, burglary. All of them include a blend of violation, relation, guilt, terror, and, not least, power. But only one of these crimes defiles its victims. What they have in common is that all the perpetrators are dishonourable. But it is only the victim of rape who is deprived of her honour. It is a crime that has to be kept away from the children at all costs. Can we get away from that way of thinking? Is language enough?

Innocence. Few victims qualify as *ideal*. Naturally, it is easier for the perpetrator to see things that way. Nobody wants to be a predator. When the victim can be undermined, the actions of the attacker appear more legitimate. It seems obvious that she wanted it, the way she behaved, right? But not only the perpetrator is undermining

the ideal. A number of other people participate in it. There is always something that does not sit right with others. Unnerving *whys* that linger*:* Was it really necessary that you …? Didn't you consider …? I remember that last year you also …? Research has proven that such doubt even churns through the victim herself: couldn't I have …? The phenomenon of rape is both abhorrent and commonplace. Within this juxtaposition a need to find the right perspective arises, to estimate the appropriate angle to understand and explain.

Object. The woman's role in the image. It is unsatisfying. Object implies the role of a passive victim, and who wants to be a victim? Who wants to be *with* a victim? We tend to believe that it is necessary to reclaim oneself as subject in order to heal. That she has to take responsibility to move on. The same goes for the rest of us: we can only help by treating objects like subjects. But there is a problem here. What happens when we look at the subject in retrospect? The perspective of responsibility might shift into that of blame. In the healing process honour is restored. It seems like we need both perspectives. At the same time but for different purposes.

Vulnerability. Clearly, there is something eerie and unpleasant about the scene. The woman lying on her stomach – unconscious, lifeless? Exposed to something horrid, but also vulnerable to ending up there due to being a woman. Exposed to the probing gazes of the men. Gazes that are unavoidable in the context – they are simply doing their job. Concentrated, professional, forensically neutral gazes. Perhaps even paternal or brotherly gazes of empathy. Is there more? Gazes of lust at the body lying face-down with rounded buttocks and bare legs exposed. Not all that unfamiliar.

Onlookers. I approach, joining the others. Faceless, anonymous men, dressed in uniform. Some are prepared with handcuffs. One has his camera ready. I am struck by the similarity between this picture and some of those that came out of my gangbang search. Now I notice how something seems to have splattered over the image. The men look commonplace and unsexy. Identification. This could happen to any man, being there with the scantily clad woman. Imagining that she wants to, that there is agency and consent. All gazes are directed at the woman; there is no contact between the men. In the context, each one as an individual is unimportant. Are they acting together? Do the onlookers have a responsibility of their own? Do I, looking at this, have some sort of responsibility? Pornographic, and at the same time devoid of lust.

Arranged. That is also what this is about. Because it has to be fake, right? The image is staged, someone has placed the people there – they are artificially arranged. A pornographic tableau, a fabrication. Well, it does not take away our unease. The vulnerability is not real, we are not witnessing an imprint of reality. But how did it come about? How did they come about? How did they choose? Did they have a choice? Did *she* have a choice?

The other woman. The same pose, face-down, legs and thighs exposed. Resting on sand. A soft bed, like the moss in the forest also a little moist. But this picture is not primarily about her either. Like the previous one, it captures an observer. This time a dog, a German shepherd, a police dog. It could just as well have been sniffing around amongst the men with handcuffs. But here, it is alone with the lifeless body. A cadaver dog on assignment. A watchdog, friendly yet biting. If so, unsuccessful. Dishonoured, even. In another picture the dog is called *eye witness*. Has he seen the assault? Whom is he looking at? (I barely notice how I automatically assume that it is a "he".) The approaching helper or the fleeing perpetrator? Or, is he glancing at the photographer, our artist? Is she the one who is the witness? Documenting, not really …? Observer and manipulator at the same time.

It is a classic image – romantically composed with a dramatically blurred landscape in the background. The dog, used by centuries of portrait painters to connect the female subject to values such as fidelity. *Buster* – the faithful family dog. Is this about infidelity?

What do you know about desire? Does he understand what he has witnessed? Whose desire is this about? The woman's? The man's? I cannot bear to do a Google search for dogs. There is also a tradition of portraying dogs alongside hunters. Hence also a wolf. *Buster* – the one who destroys and tears apart. A perpetrator and predator. Tracking down and enabling the actions of another. A bloodthirsty supporter? Or just an ordinary henchman who has silently observed and allowed the events to unfold – boys will be boys. Not really a defiled doggie: however, not necessarily one without responsibility.

Unpleasant. This motif appears mundane. I have taken hundreds of similar photographs myself. Loved ones on the beach. You can hear, feel, and smell the occasion. One of those holiday snapshots that induce pleasant, cosy feelings. There is something about the colours that takes you back in time. It reminds me of a similar picture in an old photo album at my parents' – a five-year-old me, smudged by sand, draped in a canary yellow bathrobe. Ghastly pale skin after long exposure to the cold northern water. I remember Tallholmen (Pine Island). A stereotypical, ideal Swedish summer day. Now, suddenly I realize! That place is also the origin of my first memory related to rape. My fourteen-year-old sister and her best friend had to hide for hours under an overturned dinghy after two boys had driven past in a motorboat, joking: "We're coming to rape you!" I remember irate discussions in the kitchen when she told the grown-ups. Everyone knew who the teenage boys were. Not predators. Boys will be boys. End of story. Another memory pops up. I do not own this one either. It also belongs to a woman, or rather, a girl. The road leading to the lake where Tallholmen lies. The girl, my mother, was attacked there a long time ago. On her way to school, by someone she knew. It went well. She got away, I was assured. The first time she ever told anyone about it, years later, it was to her then-teenage son. Now, as even more years have passed, I wonder if she left something out, to protect me from a potential stain. My honour remains untainted.

Two ordinary memories from a reality that is not mine, but one that I am nevertheless part of. Another recollection intrudes, a disturbing one. Ten years old and furious at my big sister. Flattened by her physical strength and superior verbal skills. Twenty-eight kilos behind the words: "Stop that or I'll rape you!" She did not get scared, but asked angrily if I understood what I was saying. Did not have a clue, really. Or, rather: not in concrete terms, not enough to be able to visualize it. But what I had picked up somehow was that this was something a man could use against a woman. Something at the disposal of men.

Saturday evening: Might just text my teenage son to offer him a lift home through the streets of the city.

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