

The worst part

Hannah Schild

The worst part is not the moment itself but that moment when the paralysis sets in – when you stand there in the dark, behind the window shutters you just slammed closed, and part of your body or brain – the part that is starting to overflow with anger, the part that wants to throw punches, kick, scream at the top of your voice – that part of you that wants to run to the door, outside into the alleyway, seek confrontation, grab a hold of him and call for others to help. The other part of your body, however, is filled with fear, with what ifs – what if I do run outside – what if he –

That other part of you reaches for the door too – but to check whether it is locked.

The tears will come to you eventually in this state of paralysis, maybe out of sheer helplessness, maybe because of the utter humiliation, maybe out of anger (you do tend to cry when you are angry – one of those things that you hate about yourself) – probably because of all those things.

Why, you wonder, would he think that he can just do that to you?

It is not the fact of being confronted with a half-erect penis in and of itself. You have seen penises in various states of erectness. You have, in fact, at times enjoyed bringing them from one state to the other, bringing pleasure –

Rather, it is the fact of being confronted with a half-erect penis with the objective of demeaning you – a few centimeters away from your face – granted, with a mosquito wire frame in between, but still –

It is the fact that this is his punishment for the audacity you showed by ignoring him, telling him that no, you don't want to talk right now – the fact that now he got your attention – the worst part is the fact that in that little instance he can wield power over you. He wields the power to keep you paralyzed behind your window shutters. He wields the power over the emotions flooding your mind and body. Even beyond that moment, he wields the power over the way you feel when you walk down the alleyway – checking passersby's faces for his likeness (although the memory of it gets more and more blurry with each day) – feeling the knot in your stomach tighten when a man walks towards you in the dusky hours of the day, fiddling with his pants –

It's a little thing, so very little in comparison to what happens to others on a day-to-day basis – it is a little thing but still – the reassurances of the men you tell right after, that surely he was drunk – that surely he was not right in the head – surely they were well-meant – and even though at some point you will find yourself in the right headspace to laugh it all off, it will sit with you. That will always be your first week of fieldwork. And maybe that's the worst part.

About the author

Hannah Schild holds an MA in African Studies at Leiden University. She is currently a PhD candidate at Bayreuth University and the Winner of the LOVA Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award 2021.