

# How (not) to live in a goldfish bowl

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This is not a story with a happy ending.

It is not a tragic, heroic story either, about legendary, out-of-the-ordinary deeds. This is my story, your story, the story of someone who, at one point, stopped, looked and realized that something wasn't right. Or rather, could no longer be right.

The first time I realized I had a body I was 9 years old. I was queuing with my family to visit an aquarium, when a man, like any other, came up to me, touched me, and left. I knew then that I had a body, and that the fact that I lived in it somehow had consequences. But what kind of consequences? And why? I didn't really know, I didn't even understand the relevance at the time. Still, there were signs I could see, that I could sense: the fact that, as I grew older, people began to expect very specific things from me that they didn't ask my male peers for. The way my mother would come home from work frustrated, almost crying, because for the umpteenth time, the merit had gone to one of her colleagues or superiors - guess their gender - rather than to her. When I was sexually assaulted at the age of 12, I stopped trying to understand: I simply decided that I didn't want that body anymore. That body was no longer me, but something else, a foreign, unfamiliar shape that didn't fit the idea I had of myself at all: I could look at it from the outside, reach out my hands to touch and feel it without ever managing to, scream at it with tears in my eyes, because it was so wrong, because it was doing this to me. The first time I told this story, I was asked if I hadn't provoked it, or had an attitude that gave the other person the idea that he could do whatever he wanted. That taking over my space was right. The first time, two years ago, that someone told me that I could call what had

happened to me 'an act of violence' without feeling ashamed or thinking that there was no need to, that I was exaggerating, that part of the responsibility was mine - I cried all the tears I had inside: for the first time, the fact that my body existed was not a mortal sin I had to expiate. It wasn't my fault.

Some time ago I was in Canada with a girlfriend, thousands of miles from home, and we met a girl. It was late in the evening and very cold, and we were all going home. She was a few metres ahead of us, walking briskly despite her heels and the snow. It was like a bit of an obstacle course for her, avoiding come-hither looks, comments and unwelcome proposals. We followed her cautiously and somewhat protectively, careful to catch any words or movements that could be considered over the top - which now makes me smile: what on earth could we have done if something had happened? But we thought that, in her shoes, we would feel more comfortable knowing that we had someone with us. At one point we caught up with her: she turned round, saw us, and asked if we could walk together. We walked for a few blocks, talking about everything and nothing. We didn't even introduce ourselves, but I know she had worked in Venice and loved it. She said she always went home late on her own after work, that she was used to it, but it was nice sometimes to be accompanied by someone kind. If you had seen us, we would have looked totally natural: we joked, we laughed. Street corners seemed a little less dark. Yet the whole time, and after saying goodbye to her, all I could think about was how sad the circumstances were that had led to us walking together that night, and all the other times she had met no

one and had taken every step with anguish in her heart.

Violence begins as soon as I step outside my house and someone feels entitled to insult me and make sexual advances, even if I wear trousers and not one of those outrageous miniskirts. For me, it began when I was waiting to go into that aquarium, and it continued when, in middle school, I heard my friends call a girl a ‘slut’ because her boyfriend had decided, out of spite - on whatever grounds - to circulate intimate photos of her at school. Every woman I know has experienced some form of violence at least once in her life – it’s something that brings us closer together, that we cry about together, something that you would never want to have in common. It can be found in the Mediterranean and on migration routes to Europe, in Nigeria, in South Africa, in Thailand, in Brazil, in the flat next to yours, in your college classmate’s family - violence against women knows no geographical boundaries or limits. Its systemic, structural presence ensures that anyone born and identified as a woman becomes a product, made available to the outside world. At first I would get angry when people didn’t understand: I would hear them commenting, ‘at a certain point it’s your fault if you don’t react. At a certain point, if you play along, it means you like it’, and I would get really, really mad. I thought it was a kind of provocation, a way of making fun of us. And then, over time, I realized something else: they probably really believe that we actually like it. But I understand them: it is easier that way. It’s easier to believe that there really is no problem, that we just need attention, to be flirted with. It’s easier to say that we made it all up, instead of going with us to report it, it’s easier to try to make us downsize it: come on, maybe you got the wrong idea. Maybe he didn’t want to hurt you. Maybe you’re exaggerating.

Instead I would have liked to say that maybe I was just tired. Tired of reading in the newspapers about the ‘gentle giant’ who killed his family because the woman wanted to leave home. What a good neighbour he was, though. Always polite, no one would have guessed that he could do such a thing. It must have been an uncontrollable fit; it happens to the best of us. Tired of having to explain why it is not normal to receive threats from your boss because you don’t want to go out to dinner with him, to be forced to have sex with your lecturer otherwise you can forget about graduating. Tired of having to prove to them that a woman does not gain anything from all the suffering during and afterwards, from all your mistrust, infamy, gossip, and denials. From winning a meaningless and unrewarding competition between victims because, you know - we women like to wage war against each other. From feeling alone, constantly on trial, and having the world against us because we have been trampled on and no one believes us. Instead I was tired of always having to remind people, even the people closest to me, that all this cannot go on, it’s unbearable, and getting questioning looks in return, or advice that I should calm down and not get so angry.

Over time, I’ve had to find a remedy for all this anger I carry around with me. Baggage like this can drag you down to the bottom, like an anchor. For many years I felt stuck - just think of the irony - in an aquarium, or rather a goldfish bowl: I banged on the glass to get attention, to ask for help, but as you know, there’s no sound underwater. And one day I found out that I didn’t need to get out of here, or rather: that there is no goldfish bowl. I will always remember the incident that happened in Canada, because it describes the duality of our condition perfectly: the human warmth of a beautiful gesture of sisterhood, and the sadness of feeling compelled to resort to it. When I

started talking about what happened to me, I found that warmth in the people who decided to listen to me. Someone cried with me; someone else, who had resisted before, realized that my pain was not made up. Many, many girls like me have told me their stories. They told me that, no, it is not normal, that my pain is their pain. That we are not alone.

What really makes us human is the ability to talk to each other in order to understand one another and our feelings, make mistakes and then figure out how to fix them: anger and accusations do not allow us to build anything.

Outside the goldfish bowl, what keeps coming to mind more and more often is you, the violence I experienced. I don't really know how it happened, a series of circumstances, encounters, things that just happen and I can't control. And now that I have you so clearly in my mind I try to talk about you, and I still can't: I've been trying to for years and you always escape me. How ironic, and yet you're here, you're always here, all over me, in every nook and cranny of my body, in every mole and every stretch mark,

on my skin. And I see you in other people, any other person, in the way they touch me, the way they look at me, talk to me, examine me. Since you've been here I always feel under observation. There was a time when I wanted to wipe you out - not anymore: you are part of me and I must accept you as if you had always been there. It will never stop hurting, but I notice that every day I look in the mirror and I hate myself a little less; and little by little I accept that I have, that I inhabit, that I am, a body. Every year I try to tell my story about you, the words I use to describe you are stuck in my head, they have been there for so long that I can't remember the first time I thought of them, and I can never find them. But every year, I find so many other women that can talk about you on my behalf. I can't complain: they do it so well that I always feel like crying, and my pain and theirs seem inseparable.

This is not a story with a happy ending, not yet. But it is my story, and the story of one woman is the story of all women.

And I know the glass of that goldfish bowl can be broken, if we do it together.