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That Could Be Me, Olivia

I read a lot of posts on Weibo about a piece of news. When a girl was having dinner with her friends, several men at the table behind sexually harassed her verbally and physically. She had rejected them. And she was then beaten in public by six men. Her female friends trying to help her were also beaten terribly. The surveillance video of the situation went viral on the internet. (In recent years there have been countless outbursts, countless buildups and re-bursts of such gendered terror. News of various cases of rape, of a beautiful rural female tiktoker being killed by her ex husband in front of the live camera, of women giving birth to eight children after being trafficked and beaten into mental disability.....)

Anyway, today my mother also saw the news I reposted. She sent me a heartbreaking message. The one sentence in the beginning ruined me. 'I experienced almost the same thing when i was young' she said.

She has never told it to anyone because it is a shameful scar inside her. She said she would always forget about bad things in her life. She did not want to mention them anymore. But when she saw the news she felt the aches - her heart was pierced again.

That was when she worked in Guangdong as a migrant worker with my older aunt. She was at the same age back then as I am now. She was beautiful, lively and young, but she was also poor, uneducated and so new to that big city. She was shopping and someone sexually harassed her. After her verbal rejection she was dragged out of the store and then beaten up. My aunt was beside but she got completely frozen with shock. They had no one else to rely on in Guangdong, feeling nothing more than helpless. She bought a ticket back to Sichuan the next day. She didn't dare to tell her family when she arrived home, but just said that she had a bad fall.

She was in her early twenties, back home with wounds all over her body.

My mother told me that this was why she was always worried about me being here, afraid that I would encounter dangers and difficulties, that I would be bullied and that I would be just as helpless as that. I reassured to her I had been doing ok over here. Then I started to talk to her about feminism (sometimes I hate myself for being this patronizing to her subconsciously just because I think I am educated) and I said, "Mum, you know, you should really be a feminist after all these things in you life. You should have recognized sexual violence and gender inequalities, rather than hoping I have a traditional heterosexual marriage with a man."

The following dialogues embroiled me and brought tears to my eyes. 'Of course I know about those gender issues, I've experienced a lot', she said, 'I've seen so much darkness through my life that I know it's not just about men and women, it's more about money.'

'Poor people are humiliated, bullied, hurt and even killed. No matter men or women. People like you talk a lot about gender or sexuality but don't bother to mention economic factors beneath so many wounds and deaths. However, class issue is actually the most serious one, continuously being unspoken, ignored and taken for other things. A boy in my childhood village, just one year or two older than me, also went south to work that year. He was killed and he never went back home. Only the long silence was left to his family. A poor person could be killed because they have no name. I know young people who have financial security are readily talking more about gender and sexuality these days. But i know how fucked-up the real world is. I want you to build a family like that because I dont want you to be like me, being beaten in public, helplessly crying, and having to work so hard to just be safe and secure. I don't want you to live that life again, especially when i am gone and you are alone in this world.'

I wanted to say something, something quick and proud like before, that points out her arguments are flawed and biased. But my brain was buzzing and all my dynamic smart words were immediately paralyzed.

I was and now I'm still amazed by the fact that we started to lament each other this early. When she is gone... how can she be gone. That's an impossible certainty to me.

I didn't know who I could tell my feelings to. I needed to write.

(I am not delicately molded in sentiment. I should be built up by real life misfortunes and great resilience that withstands them.)

I wanted to cry by her side just like when I was young, by her side forever. Almost at the same time, I wanted to be that Olivia who had been abandoned by the bridge, who was luckily raised by a pair of loving and middle class British parents in a nice

who was luckily raised by a pair of loving and middle-class British parents in a nice place. I had no idea which I want more. I recognized my shame and despised myself. There are always thorns in the sense of introspection. I should not have wanted to be Olivia - That's like a bloody betrayal of my mother for stupid reasons of a better social-economic status and a better passport. A self colonization. Also a ruthless negation of the fate of another distressed soul and all the abandoned children with the most untenable survivorship bias. It's not a simple choice between haves and have-nots. That was when I felt each part of my wanting overwhelmed me. Like a clockwise storm confronts an anti-clockwise storm from miles away. Like a glaring light ray erodes and infuses another glaring one from the opposite side. Like the folly and wisdom in my endless rhetorics.

Very naturally, I thought about the notion of intersectionality I had learnt here, about all those books I had read. I burst into tears. My mama knew that I was a female, and that I was a queer, and she understood what these meant (the existent and potential predicaments and sufferings). However, she knows where lies the biggest abyss, she knows where the greatest and the most invisible oppression come from. She faced the unspoken truth of poverty when she was at my age. Even if after so many years, she is doing good now, she knows something like this still happening to others. I hate the world so much and I don't know why people have to be rich and established - only to 'not be bullied'. Is respect exclusively merited with money? Fuck that. FUCK THAT.

I went to walk Minna later. When the sun poured over the flowers and trees around me, feeling warm and bright and comfortable, I cried even more badly. It is, genuinely, the same one world. In this very same one world, who am I to be this way, here, now? I have struggled all my life to be free from pains on the one hand, yet have to return to pains on the other - I belong to it. Sometimes happiness scares people because they're afraid of losing it, but for me it's different - happiness scares me because it disturbs conscience with comfort. Happiness brings me a deep sense of guilt. Why do I have it? And how can I deserve it? 'I am in my twenties, Minna is fourteen, we may have experienced some doom and gloom, but now we are basking in the sun.' I murmured like a newer Nabokov. Minna eats chicken thighs every day. That volume could be literally what my mother might be able to have only twice a week when she was twenty. And it is exactly because she could only spare such a bit of meat for half a month back then, that she was the chosen girl - who would be molested, and even beaten, by others in a foreign land at that time. I know this is already a different time and a different place. But still, it's the same one world. Some mornings I wake up to find blood all over my fingernails in that I have been scratching myself in my sleep. I wake up like that from time to time. It would happen to my back. But more often my labia --I know it is awful and shameful. It is one of my saddest secrets. Is that all because of sexual abuse? Yes. But is that all on the gender agenda? Mum was right.

I thought of my past self again, as the thirteen-year-old after the abortion alone in the hospital. If only I was better protected and cared for, all those things would not have happened. But better parental care demands time. She was not a member of 'the leisure class' because she needed to feed me. (But thankfully, on schooling I never let her spend much money other than this master's because I was all along good enough to earn my fundings)

Yes. That was why bad things happened. And I figured out, she was right, like a first-person protagonist always living on the hardest page - the problems of 'no money'. The nameless deaths of the underclass in Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

Later, when I posted a Weibo of my anger and grief, a net friend told me not to hurt myself, 'please turn off the phone screen and stop reading the news for a while.' I know that's good advice. But there are so many people (some even are deeply connected to me) whose pain cannot be relieved, suspended, just by turning off their phone screens like me. They can't take a break from the horrible world by leaving Weibo for some time as the way I can. Again, I know that different miseries cannot be compared. But what exactly is this mental pain of mine, why does it allow me to break down? Why can I be allowed, if my mother wasn't, if any other she has never been?

I asked not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

There was nothing else I could have devoted. An absolute doubt is the prayer.

---Olivia, my intimate stranger. This is a letter to you.
Because you never reply, I cannot write to you anymore. I thereby reserve it here.

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London

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