

Some time ago I was in another city on business. In the evening, on the way from my hotel to dinner, I heard a strange scuffling in the darkness ahead. The street was empty and badly lit, but peering into the shadows diagonally across an approaching intersection, I saw what appeared to be a man dragging a struggling, flailing woman by her collar along the street. Above the drone of distant traffic, her angry yelps and whimpers were unmistakable. And I responded with sudden, paralytic indignation. Long before I could bring myself to act, she broke away on her own and scrambled into the open door of an electronic arcade on the corner. Her assailant began to follow her inside, but thought better of it and backed quickly away into the intersection as half-a-dozen young men poured out of the arcade to threaten him off.

Grateful for reinforcement, I crossed to the corner where the woman had reemerged. She was beside herself, insisting loudly that someone call the police. The proprietor of the arcade, a short, comfortable man in a cardigan sweater, was trying to talk her out of this. Nothing serious had happened, and we would all see to it that the "scum" did not bother her again. Why make a big thing out of it? The police were more trouble than they were worth. But the woman was adamant. She went in herself to call. And when, minutes later, she hadn't reemerged, I stepped inside where I found her interrogating her young protectors in a high, demanding whine. What, she wanted to know, was a decent woman to do. How was she to protect herself when at any moment this person, this animal, might slip out of some doorway and grab her; when, wherever she went, he followed her, embarrassed her, demanded things of her, inflicted outrages upon her? How was she to live, how step outside her door, or draw a normal breath, when he wouldn't take no for an answer, wouldn't listen to the authorities, wouldn't let her alone? After all she was a respectable woman, wasn't she, a woman with rights like anyone else?

At first the young men listened seriously, but then, as she went on and on, back and forth at an

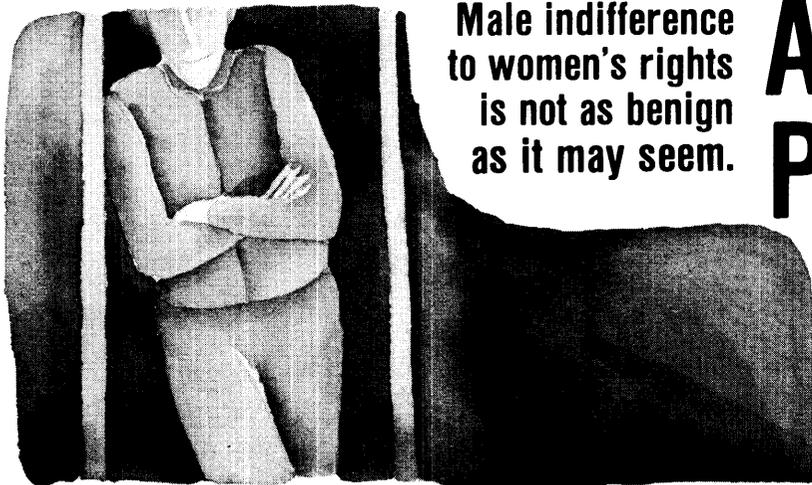
ever higher pitch through the same inexhaustible complaints, they became restless, and finally, were unable to resist trading furtive, awkward smiles whenever she looked the other way.

And I smiled as well, as self-consciously and as involuntarily. Her fire-red hair was flying. Her pale skin was bright with the persistent flush of anger. Her collar was torn and awry, and there was something irresistibly clownish, immoderate, laughable about her humorless, arm-waving extremity.

When the policeman arrived, I reported to him what I'd seen as promptly and conscientiously as a school monitor. He took notes. He spoke with the others and then to the assailant himself who, for some reason, still lurked sullenly in the intersection. The officer was definitive with the man but brief. He reserved his lengthier attentions for the victim who insisted in her high, agitated voice that an arrest be made. The officer declined. These things were not that simple. A formal complaint would have to be made, witnesses deposed, an official report filed. It was all very complicated. Perhaps she should try to calm herself. Perhaps there was some more amicable solution to the matter. The woman, red nail marks still visible on her pale, arching neck, would not be calmed, however. Her rage soared anew, and soon the policeman became curt and official. In minutes they were arguing shrilly, trading pitched insult for steely, procedural warning until, quite suddenly, his patience exhausted, the officer packed the protesting redhead into his patrol car, and they disappeared noisily into the night.

Abandoned, the six or seven of us left standing on the corner broke up with silent, bemused headshaking. The incident preoccupied me all through dinner. Strange that a thing so clear-cut should leave me ambivalent and defensive. Perhaps it was my initial hesitation. Perhaps there remained something decisive I might or should have said. After all, I didn't know these people, nor the underlying circumstances. I could hardly make judgments.

Yet the unconscious smiles of this woman's protectors stayed with me. It was as if that reac-



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Assault and Preemptive Neutrality

tion had revealed an ironic truth, somehow known all along, that the great battle of the sexes is not a proper war at all but a nasty and more-or-less private mutiny. For as it develops, the struggle over the role of women seems only remotely a struggle with men. At the front, down in the trenches, it is generally a conflict within and between women, carried on with all the venom and familial anguish of a civil insurrection. From acrimonious national debates over the Equal Rights Amendment through the moralizing pogroms of the institutionally religious to the private and painful ambivalence of our wives over career and family, everywhere it is women for and against women. Most men, on the other hand, have been at best observers, war correspondents or, if uncommonly partisan, foreign advisors to insurgent irregulars or the government troops.

Since this encounter, I have watched and questioned certain male friends whose reforming crusade for civil rights burned brightly during the sixties. I can report that, to a man, they are "interested in," "concerned about," and "supportive of" women's rights. Impassioned, however, they are not. Of course, they are older now, more sober, worn thinner by a time in which liberal passions tend chiefly to embarrass. And probably the number of men of any age still young in that particular way has dwindled far below statistical significance. But whatever the reason, the major social struggle of our time has entered male consciousness, not as a cause, but as a sort of dubious entertainment, a phenomenon, I suspect, not unlike the roughly contemporaneous emergence of women's professional mud wrestling. As with this purely commercial form of exhibitionist mayhem, the broader ideological clash of quagmire and cleavage fascinates, titillates, amuses, and appalls us all at once.

For most men there is enigma in this ragtaggle, catch-as-catch-can blood-letting, something that refuses to square itself with what we had thought we knew of wives, mothers, sisters. Like the sardonic Yugoslavian observation that Germans would certainly never wage revolution because

to do so they would have to "walk on the grass," our appraisals have been perceptive, mortally clever, and wrong. The stakes in the confrontation, whatever their altitude, simply have not been our own, neither naturally nor, as it appears, by adoption. And since the atrocities on both sides of this foreign conflict are deplorable, we look on with the cool interest and clucking disdain or puzzlement of evening newspaper readers. And well, I suppose, we might if our disengagement were as benign or as real as it seems. Unfortunately, it is not.

On the way back to my hotel, I passed through the same intersection. To my astonishment the woman's assailant, the same small, darkish man, was still there; only instead of standing warily in the street, he now leaned comfortably back against the arcade, his hands in his pockets, smoking a cigarette. He seemed to be waiting.

Instinctively I hesitated. After all, I had accused this violent man to the police within his hearing. Yet as quickly I struck out again and stoutly kept up my pace. I would not, I resolved, be intimidated by someone who attacked defenseless women. My concern, however, and the sudden rush of adrenaline in my system were unnecessary. As I passed on the other side of the street, the man merely looked up from his idleness and nodded to me in recognition. Involuntarily, I found myself nodding back and then having quite consciously to restrain a smile. The person was actually smiling at me, shyly, but as naturally as if he knew me, were connected to me in some way, as if he and I were comrades in some unspoken conspiracy.

I did not respond, of course, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I did not break cover. I went straight on to my hotel without once looking back. But for all the concerted indignation I could muster, the bare familiarity of that momentary encounter went with me like the dropping away of some strenuously contrived pose, and I thought grudgingly as I went, and suspect still, that probably he was right.

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