Letter to an unborn daughter

On freedom, sex and sisterhood

By Anne Bitsch

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Dear Emma,

I am writing to you as the daughter I never had. My unborn daughter. I have thought about it more these past years than I used to, how it might have been to be a mother. Maybe because it will be too late soon. Standing here, on the threshold of my 40s, my fertility is on the wane. Something happens inside of you when the decision to become a parent or not is no longer something you can simply put off. You start to look around you, at other mothers and fathers. How are they handling the task? What is it that delights them? What is it that worries them? You look at children, both those who have only just arrived in the world, teetering around with enormous diapers and mouths in wide smiles because they finally managed to walk all by themselves, and those who are a bit older: the five-year-old who steals her sister’s cake and punches her when the parents aren’t looking. The seven-year-olds walking alone on the road with their backpacks on, headed to school where anything might happen. The teenie boppers snapping selfies on the beach and blowing their bubble gum on the bus, seemingly without a care in the world. Young girls with pony tales walking around in their Converse shoes with slender, brown thighs in summer shorts, eating ice cream and looking around with light, darting glances. *Does anyone see me now? How do they see me?* they might be asking.

And then I observe girls and young women, they don’t look quite like children or adults, but rather like old people. It is as though some sorrow has been chiseled into them, the manner in which they carry their bodies testifies to broken illusions. I have encountered them at work while I wrote my doctoral thesis on the justice system’s handling of rape cases. They are scattered all around Norwegian courtrooms. They sit with heads bent and speak in low voices when they tell their stories in the hopes that others will listen and understand. They are most often dressed in white, with their hair up and discrete makeup. Their lawyers have advised them to go all out.

The women tell about losing control. About feeling dirty. About ruined romances, friends who have turned their backs. The spread of rumors. Eating disorders that rear up because they have started to hate the bodies that betrayed them. About the lamp on the nightstand that is always turned on and the bedroom door that is always cracked open. About sleeplessness and sheets soaked in anxious sweat. And about the medications they take to ward off their nerves but that cannot quite keep the nightmares at bay. In their sleep, the subconscious takes on a life of its own. These girls and young women wake up with a scream, in a body wracked in their beds epileptically, a body unrecognizable as their own. They say: “I try every day, but it’s hard to believe I’ll ever feel better again.”

Sometimes I sit staring down at the oak parquet instead of looking at the person seated in the witness stand. You learn quickly to develop various strategies for keeping your own feelings in check. A sob in the throat can be suppressed with a cough. A stray tear is concealed by bending down to tie your shoelace. Rage is the most difficult, but it can be dampened by seeking refuge in the bathroom. I often go there and splash my face with cold water.

Over time, more and more of the young women from the courtrooms have started to occupy space in my mind. I cannot let them go. Sometimes I ask myself: What would I say to them if they had been my daughters? Although I don’t have any children or want to have any, it has become a question of conscience to search for an answer. I have felt the need to approach a young person and to tell them in earnest what life has taught me about sex and love, about what it means to grow up in a female body and to become an adult woman. How it is possible to win your life back following an attack. This is why I need to invent you, Emma, so I have someone to talk to. When I talk to you, I am addressing you as an unborn daughter, but I am also speaking indirectly to women of your generation.

Dear Emma, the world that your and my generation of women have inherited from our mothers and grandmothers, is in many ways a freer world. A different world. And yet it is not. In the midst of all the great social revolutions, certain constants remain, persistent structures of suppression that continue to fundamentally encroach upon our very being, upon our freedom. Suppression expresses itself more subtly today than before and is thus harder to catch. Harriet Holter, a pioneer in Norwegian women’s studies, has written that the suppression of women has transformed from something direct and visible to something that has become more indirect and invisible. Somewhere along the way, the psychological techniques of domination have overtaken the physical. This does not mean, of course, that violence no longer occurs to the same extent that it did before, but that violence now takes place in a time and a location in history where it is often claimed that the causes of powerlessness lie with individuals. Once formal equality has been achieved, the individual assumes full responsibility and blame for his or her inability to live freely. And responsibility and shame, these are close bedfellows. Back in 1986, one of Norway’s great criminologists, Nils Christie, predicted that the increased economic freedom of women would lead to new forms of blame and shame. As he wrote in his article “The ideal victim”, equality is paradoxical in the sense that it allows women to better be able to claim victim status while at the same time making it more difficult to believably present themselves as weak and worthy of help.(3)

This is one of the most precise statements I have seen formulated in the literature about violence against women and the brand of suppression under which we live today. It is also the concept that corresponds most accurately to the reality I meet in Norwegian courtrooms today. Here, young women in your generation are often countered with arguments that their experiences of powerlessness and psychological inferiority in sexual situations appear absurd in a society where women have never been as equal. I watch how subdued the expressions of the girls and women become whenever this argument is placed on the table, and it makes me feel so furious and heartbroken for them. I want to gather them into my lap and whisper that they shouldn’t believe those words. That their voices mean something. That what they are experiencing is true. That adults, particularly those who seem to speak with absolute certainty, are often wrong. I want to say: “This too shall pass.” This affects me personally and directly, perhaps because these girls could, in theory, have been you or the daughters of several of my friends. I am appalled that we have not succeeded in creating a better world for all of you, that this is the culture you must grow up in.

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote that the body is a *situation*. Body and culture are filtered together. The human is hurled into the world, handed over to freedom, but subjected to structures that are tightly bound to the way our gender is coded by the culture and interpreted by others. And: a woman’s reproductive and sexual history is political. This is just as true today as when *The Second Sex* was published almost 70 years ago. What happens in our intimate lives is political. Beauvoir’s most significant legacy is that woman have taken this insight to heart and started to speak out about their lives. Together, to each other, in public and to new generations growing up. Many of us do this not only to profess, but also because we desire clarity about our own existence and what it is that has shaped us. By sharing these experiences with one another, we are building up knowledge and a community across generations, and in this lies the seed of all political change. Dear Emma, this letter is born from a wish for change and hope. A wish that we who gave life to you all will be able to leave behind a world that is better than the one you were born into. A hope that people will be freer and stronger, together.