

# HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

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## Nobody Knows

By Rebecca Solnit

**W**hen I was eighteen, I spent several months working as a bus girl at a diner. It was a cheerful-looking place, facing San Francisco Bay. The kitchen was L-shaped: the owner stood in the short end of the L with the coffee makers and the cash register, and I was often at the other end, by the dishwashing machine, out of sight. In between were the prep counters and an eight-burner stove, where the cook was stationed. He was a middle-aged drinker with bloodshot eyes who would unexpectedly grab me from behind. No one seemed to notice, and in that decade before Anita Hill brought “sexual harassment” into the popular lexicon, I couldn’t articulate that this was something that violated my rights instead of just something that repulsed and rattled me.

After a few weeks of these unwelcome surprises, I made sure that the next time the cook came for me, I was holding a tray of clean glasses. He grabbed me; I yelped and let go of the tray. The shattering glass made a cacophony. The owner, another middle-aged man, rushed over and chewed out the cook — the glasses were audible and valuable in a way I was not.

Underlings get a reputation for being duplicitous because they sometimes fall back on indirect means when straightforward ones are not available. When I was an underling, the only way I knew to make a man stop grabbing me was to trick a more powerful man into laying down the law. I had no authority, or had reason to believe I had none. “When you’re a star, they let you do it” has its corollary in “When you’re nobody, it’s hard to stop them from doing it.”

The assumption that I was nobody didn’t always fit, even in my youth. A decade after I dropped that tray, I was interviewing a man for one of my books. He was married, near my parents’ age, but when we were alone for the interview, he got excited and amorous. I could tell that he regarded our interaction as off the record, perhaps because young women were categorically inaudible. I wanted to shout at him, *I am making the public record right now*. And yet, had he regarded me with respect, I would have known less of who he was — and thought more of him.

It is an old truism that knowledge is power. The inverse — that power is often ignorance — is rarely discussed. The powerful swathe themselves in obliviousness in order to avoid the pain of others and their own relationship to that pain. There's a large category of acts hidden from people with standing: the more you are, the less you know. In my neighborhood in San Francisco, for example, white women like me don't need to know that blue is a gang color, but if a young man of color does not know this, he may be in danger. Similarly, knowing the strategies that women use to be safe around men is, for men, optional, if they ever think about the issue in the first place. Every subordinate has a strategy for survival, which relies, in part, on secrecy; every unequal system preserves that secrecy and protects the powerful: better the sergeant not know how the privates tolerate him, the master not know that the staff have lives beyond servitude.

All the world is not a stage: backstage and beyond the theater are important territories, too. There, people at all levels of power act outside the limelight, out of reach of the official rules. For underlings, this can mean a measure of freedom from a system that represses them; for those who wield power, it allows rank hypocrisy. Often they act in the confidence that the people who see them do not matter or cannot affect their reputation among those who do. Because it's not just the knowledge itself that matters, of course — it's also important *who* knows, whose knowledge it is. You could say that when the powerful insist that nobody knows, what they mean is that their acts are witnessed by nobodies. *Nobody* knows.

In the mid-Seventies, when she was sixteen, my friend Pam Farmer was a page in the House of Representatives, not long after female pages were first appointed. Over dinner recently, Farmer told me that one day, in the Republican cloakroom, she was standing nearby when Sam Steiger from Arizona made a sneeringly sexual remark to Millicent Fenwick from New Jersey, a genteel woman in her sixties. Another congressman, Barry Goldwater Jr., happened to be within earshot. He rebuked his colleague: "Would you say this in front of your granddaughter?" Steiger was flustered. He apologized — to Goldwater: it mattered that there was another man with power who had witnessed the event. Neither woman was of consequence. *Somebody* knew.

A more recent example: last December, female clerks came forth to accuse Alex Kozinski, a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, of forcing them to view pornography with him. These women described how they navigated around the man; they felt obliged to treat him and his despicable behavior as an obstacle that could not be budged, like a mountain range. Alexandra Brodsky, a civil rights attorney, wrote on Twitter, "Glad to see another open secret in print. In law school, everyone knew." But everybody who knew was nobody, at least compared to a federal judge. When an investigative journalist compiled the voices of several of these nobodies into something with clout, the judge resigned as a result.

Perhaps it's not that knowledge *is* power, but that some knowledge has power and some is stripped of the power it deserves. The powerful lack the knowledge; the knowledge lacks the power. In a just society, if you say, truthfully, that someone assaulted you, that remark should have

consequences. An open secret among subordinates is knowledge that is, quite literally, inconsequential. On other occasions, knowledge is received, but only reluctantly, as a result of lawsuits and settlement payments. Once the powerful know that the public knows — as when the Murdoch family was faced with exposure of Fox News CEO Roger Ailes's long history of sexual abuse of employees — they finally feel pressure to act.

**T**he allegations about the movie producer Harvey Weinstein paint the picture of a man who went to extraordinary lengths to make somebodies into nobodies. He treated women as people without rights, people who did not have jurisdiction over their own bodies. He threatened to ruin the career of anyone who acted in her own interests instead of his. The revelations of the elaborate machinery designed to turn these women into nobodies were almost as stunning as the accounts of those alleged intimidation campaigns, assaults, and rapes. More than a hundred women, some of them very famous, had been kept silent beyond their personal circles. Millions of dollars had been spent and many people employed, including former Mossad spies and one of the country's most prominent lawyers.

The Weinstein revelations spurred a reexamination of who was audible and who mattered. The persistent harassment in many industries was finally acknowledged: abuse, denigration, and assault had long been regarded as officially unacceptable but permissible as long as the public didn't know that those in charge had been aware. When management knew, they generally did nothing until the fact that they had known was exposed. It is too soon to say what has changed, but this moment seems to mark a change in who is audible, which is to say, who is somebody.

Lots of people knew what nobody knew, for decades, before the isolated dots were connected into a picture that the powerful could no longer look away from. Willed ignorance had been a dam holding back consequences. These torrents of information come about as women's status shifts back and forth between somebody and nobody, as people who've been silenced are heard.

In 2013, a Colorado radio personality named David Mueller put his hand under Taylor Swift's skirt and grabbed her ass during a meet and greet. This was a way of saying that he had power and she did not. Neither her money nor her fame negated her being a woman subject to manhandling. Swift's team reported the incident, and Mueller was fired. Mueller then sued Swift, denying that he had grabbed her and insisting that women who were not silent should not be believed. The singer countersued — for one dollar in damages — and won. The status of women remains in flux: sometimes, some of us are somebodies, people who can be heard; at other times, we are nobodies, silent and invisible. Perhaps all women are still categorically nobodies in some men's minds.

So often a man who believes that women have no voice is indignant when he discovers that someone is listening to them. It's a struggle to own the narrative. In 2011, when Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then the head of the International Monetary Fund, allegedly — a word I have to use because the prosecutor dropped the criminal case — assaulted a New York City hotel worker named Nafissatou Diallo, his friend Bernard-Henri Lévy defended him. "The Strauss-Kahn I

know, who has been my friend for twenty years and who will remain my friend, bears no resemblance to this monster," he wrote in an essay.

Lévy claimed an authority based on the premise that his friend had only one face — the one he showed to powerful men. It was willful inanity, perhaps gleaned from a lifetime of obliviousness about the lives of nobodies; or perhaps it was an insistence that truth, like women, can be bullied into behaving. Soon after, several more women emerged with accusations of sexual assault against Strauss-Kahn, and he settled a civil suit with Diallo. He had been considered a plausible candidate for the presidency of France before these women exposed his other face.

**T**wenty years ago, I knew that I was moving on from the backstage world. I was no longer young, and I was gaining the power that writers have: to put events on the record. This meant that things would be concealed from me. It was as if I had immigrated to another country, or been deported from my home. With the transition came an invitation to shift my loyalties and forget where I had long resided.

And then I was on the other side. I had been the confidante of many women, and then, some years ago, I found that I was too often banished to the company of the powerful and the deceived. I spent several days with a group of people, and on the last day, one young woman opened up to me about a powerful old man among us who had pressured and harassed her during our time together. He had hidden his pursuit from those in the group whom he considered to be somebodies, which now included me. I was furious on behalf of his target, and to a lesser extent on behalf of his wife, but I was also disgusted to have been so deceived. I had been ushered into an unwilling audience to witness a lie. Some of the younger women in our group had known what was going on but had remained silent beyond their circle. I had always been part of that circle. Like the law students and clerks warning one another about Kozinski, we had whispered among ourselves about avoiding certain men and rolled our eyes as another duplicitous performance was staged. Now I was on the outside.

As a writer, I am someone whose job it is to hear and to tell the stories of the powerless. That status also means that my knowledge has power, so there is much that will be hidden from me.

**W**e talk about empathy and compassion as virtues, but they are also practices of valuing and paying attention to other people. In this way, we understand others and the world beyond our own experience. I pay attention to you because you matter, and if you ignore me, it's because I don't. The psychologist Dacher Keltner, who has studied the relationship between empathy and power, has written that

while people usually gain power through traits and actions that advance the interests of others, such as empathy, collaboration, openness, fairness, and sharing; when they start to feel powerful or enjoy a position of privilege, those qualities begin to fade. The powerful are more likely than other people to engage in rude, selfish, and unethical behavior.

Keltner's work demonstrates that the powerful are antisocial or are afflicted with "self-focused social-cognitive tendencies" that may "facilitate unethical behavior." In 2011, Keltner and his colleagues analyzed previous studies of elites and found evidence of "unethical decision-making tendencies," lying, cheating, and lower rates of altruism and charitable giving. It turns out that drivers of luxury cars are more likely to cut off other drivers than wait their turn, and yes, the powerful are more likely to take candy from children.

Sometimes being immune to the influence of others is a foundation for integrity, but it can also breed indifference and license cruelty. Studies show how much less influenced — that is, how much less aware — the powerful are, how much less their brains engage in mirroring activity. Mirroring is how we replay the actions of others in our minds to connect to what they are doing and feeling. Or we don't, and fail to make a connection; this is a cerebral process as well as an emotional one. It may be instinctive, but it can also be practiced. Or abandoned.

Inequality makes liars of all of us, and only a democracy of power leads to a democracy of information. But underlings know both versions of the two-sided; the powerful seem to know only one, or refuse to know the other. They can conjure an act of erasure: these things have not happened if no one of high status knows.

If power generates a cushion of obliviousness around it, those of us with power — and most of us are powerful in some way — need to counter this. That means, first, treating people with respect regardless of their status: not taking the invitation to disdain or ignore. It means being aware of how your status may cut you off from what others know and may share among themselves; it means knowing that you do not know. It also means questioning the insulating tendencies of power.

A more radical response is to try to undo the inequality. It means being critical of the forces that create inequality and remembering that they create an asymmetry between who listens and who is heard. The unexamined life is not worth living, as the aphorism goes, but perhaps an honorable and informed life requires examining others' lives, not just one's own. Perhaps we do not know ourselves unless we know others. And if we do, we know that nobody is nobody.

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