

Modesty and Other Provocations

by Amy Roost

Frustrated, yet disciplined, I throw back the covers and rise from the warmth of my bed. I make coffee, feed my confused cats their treats, open my laptop at the dining room table and begin taking dictation on the intrusive thoughts that have kept me tossing and turning all night. Although I'm a night owl by nature, early morning is my favorite time of day to write. The apartment is peaceful, interruptions are few, and there's the reward of the soft light at dawn that makes anything seem possible.

I chose writing as my second career because I wanted to 'be the change' by shining a light on social injustice. The hours are long and the pay sucks, but it feels like I'm finally making a difference in the world instead of merely collecting a paycheck.

I spend three hours getting good work done before reluctantly heeding the "time to stand" notification my iWatch keeps sending me. Thinking of Einstein's advice on the importance of doing nothing as a way to generate creative ideas, I go out for a walk. It's a crisp October day and I head toward the harbor. A gentle onshore breeze combs my skin and I feel the burden of multiple deadlines begin to lift. At the two-mile mark I stand before the rippling sails of The Star of India, an old clipper ship that graces San Diego's bayfront. I take in several deep breaths of briny air before turning around and heading for home, and more work.

To avoid the construction scaffolding on the west side of Columbia Street, I walk on the east side on this still-early Sunday morning. The only other pedestrians in sight are three young women, sisters, wearing black hijabs walking shoulder to shoulder beneath the scaffolding. Their conversation is animated. They are smiling.

Presently, a white middle-aged man enters my peripheral view. As he approaches the women, I notice the upturned collar of his white polo shirt, his leather flip flops, and his gait, which seems unsteady. One of the three women falls behind her two fellow travelers in order to make room for the man to pass. As she does, the man suddenly swings at the tallest of the women who is wearing chunky-framed glasses. He misses her but lands a glancing blow on the woman who had dropped behind. The taller woman screams “What the fuck?!” at the man, and a cartoon-like scuffle ensues with eight arms and legs shoving, swinging and kicking. The man yanks the hijab off the head of the third woman, and begins hurling racist expletives. I cross the trafficless street yelling, “STOP! Or I’ll call the police.” Others appear, seemingly out of nowhere—a young couple runs to the scene as does a burly man, a woman walking her beagle, and a fireman who works at the station in the next block.

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On November 8, 2016, a white man who brags about grabbing pussy is elected the 45th president of the United States. The next morning, my 24-year-old son, Stuart, texts me photos taken by a former classmate inside a Reed College library bathroom. Overnight, someone has spray-painted swastikas and the words “niggas gonna die” on the wall above the urinals.

In the ten days following Trump’s election, there are almost 900 reports of harassment and intimidation across the nation, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Targets include people at work, on the street, shopping in grocery stores, worshipping in temples, riding public transportation, and children harassed on the playground.

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When I was seventeen, I ran everywhere. I ran laps around the track after school; I ran to the beach for sunset; and, one afternoon, I ran to a salon to get my hair cut. I apologized to the salon owner—a pock-faced white man in his mid-50s—for being a little sweaty, a condition society had taught me was only acceptable on men. “No problem,” he said. “It suits you.” The owner led me to the wash bowls in the back room

of the otherwise empty salon. There he tucked a towel into the back of my tank top, letting his fingers linger on the nape of my neck just a milli-second too long—not worth mentioning even if I'd possessed the temerity to do so, which I didn't.

I leaned back on the black pleather lounge to allow my long blonde curls to cascade into the basin. "Is the temperature okay?" the owner asked as he began to wet my hair. "Fine," I said absent-mindedly, immersed as I was in thoughts of an older boy who had asked me to go with him to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* Friday night.

"Ow!" I screamed. The owner had grabbed a fist full of my hair and was pulling my head down hard toward the base of the bowl. "Be still," his changed voice whispered. While the owner clamped my hair with his right hand, he thrust his left hand down my shorts and grabbed my crotch. Reflexively, my knee shot up and landed a blow to his shoulder, solid enough to startle him backwards. I jumped up and windmilled my arms every which way to keep him at a distance then dashed out the door, hitting the sidewalk in a full sprint that didn't let up until a mile later when I arrived home.

There was no keeping the incident from my mother, who was preparing dinner when I burst through the front door wet-headed and out of breath, the towel still barely hanging on to the back of my shirt, like some tattered cape of a defeated superhero. I spilled what happened to me in heaving sobs. Mom called the police.

"Can you tell me about your encounter with the man at the beauty salon?" asked the white male officer sitting across from me and mom in the living room. I told him every excruciating detail.

"What were you wearing?"

"Powder blue Dolphin jogging shorts, a pink Faded Glory tank top, white Nikes." I paused. "Bra. My bra."

“Were you wearing panties?” he inquired. I looked over at my mom, who gave me a “answer-the-question” nod. “No. My shorts have a built-in panty liner.”

I don’t remember if it was that night or later—after the white male judge gave the salon owner a slap on the wrist—that I learned he was a registered sex offender. What I do remember is what the police officer said to my mother as he was leaving. “Maybe have your daughter dress more modestly when she jogs.”

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Stuart lost his innocence at the same age I did. His high school biology lab partner, Chelsea King, was brutally raped and murdered one afternoon when she went for a quick run around the lake near her house before heading to her violin lesson. She was wearing jogging shorts and a tank top. Entering her memorial service at the high school’s football stadium, every person in attendance was handed a sunflower, Chelsea’s favorite. The gathering of more than 2,000 mourners stood waving our sunflowers back and forth as the loudspeakers played Chelsea’s favorite song, “Owl City” by Vanilla Sky and white doves were released from a box on stage. *This could have been me*, only with Dahlias and “Hey Jude.”

A few years later, the vampire of innocence called on Stuart, again.

When he phoned me from work, I knew something was wrong. “Remember my friend Taliesin, the one I worked with a couple of summers back?” he asked.

“Of course. Why?”

“He was stabbed and killed yesterday.”

I let Stuart talk. Mostly he recounted his fond memories of the summer he and Taliesin spent working side by side repainting dorm rooms. Then, he shared the gruesome details of Taliesin’s death—how he came to the defense of two women being harassed

for wearing hijabs by a middle-aged white man on a Portland MAX train. When Taliesin intervened and told the man to stop, the man pulled a knife and stabbed him. Taliesin's dying words were, "Tell everyone on this train I love them."

Over the next few months, Stuart and I texted almost daily. We compared notes about work, discussed the news, and shared silly photos of our pets. Shortly after Heather Heyer was killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville, and a day after a middle-aged white man in Las Vegas killed fifty-nine souls and injured 869, the comparatively insignificant news of Tom Petty's death broke this camel's back. I called rather than texted to check up on Stuart, and, truth be told, because I too needed some ballast.

"Howya doin'?" I asked. His one sentence reply imprinted me: "Nothing is sad anymore."

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A hijab is a veil or a headscarf worn by Muslim women in the presence of any male outside of their immediate family. It usually covers the head and chest. Traditionally, it is worn by women to conform to Islamic standards of modesty. A hijab also denotes a metaphysical dimension symbolizing our separation from God. The Qur'an instructs Muslim women to dress modestly, but scholars disagree about whether it actually mandates that women wear hijabs. Some contend that the mandate of the Qur'an to wear hijab applied only to the wives of Muhammad and not women generally. Nevertheless, most modern Muslim legal systems require women's modesty, which is commonly thought to include covering everything except the face, hands and feet. Even where it's not legally required—for instance, in the United States—a significant portion of Muslim women choose to wear headscarves. Ilhan Omar is one such woman. On January 3, 2019, after a rule change reversing a 181-year ban on headwear in the House of Representatives chamber, she wore a hijab when sworn in as a member of the 116th United States Congress.

Three months later, a middle-aged white man from South Florida was charged with threatening to kill Omar and another freshman Congresswoman, Rashida Tlaib, also

Muslim. During his arraignment, he specifically cited his support for President Donald Trump.

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Now less than ten feet away from the scuffle, I try dialing 911, but my hands are so shaky I have trouble unlocking my phone. Finally, I reach a dispatcher and begin talking a blue streak, describing the chaos: an enraged man taunting the three women yelling, ‘Go back to where you came from;’ another man trying to restrain him throwing a punch at the assailant and knocking him to the ground; the assailant collecting himself and his flip flops off the sidewalk and leaving the scene. Ignoring the dispatcher’s advice to stay put, I inform the dispatcher that I and the woman out walking her beagle intend to pursue the assailant. We follow from a safe distance for several blocks all the while telling the dispatcher our route until, at an intersection.

I spot a police SUV katty corner from us. Dodging an oncoming car, I run toward the police motioning the officer on the passenger side to roll down his window. I point and breathlessly blurt, “See that man in the white shirt entering that apartment building up ahead? He just assaulted three women a few blocks from here. You need to catch him!”

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Three months before the 2020 presidential election, heavily armed paramilitary forces operating without identification or badges, their faces camouflaged, begin snatching Americans off the streets of Portland, Oregon and stuffing them into unmarked vehicles.

A day later, an unidentified white-appearing woman wearing nothing but a beanie and face mask dares police to shoot her with tear gas during a stand-off in the same Portland neighborhood. She is dubbed the ‘Naked Athena.’ My white self thinks, *How great is that?!* That is until I read a Facebook post written by a Black friend who points out that had the naked woman been Black in appearance, she likely would have been shot by police. I’m reminded of what I’ve known since I was sixteen: Immodesty has its limits.

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The SUV parallel parks in front of the apartment building. The two male officers confer with one another before exiting their cruiser and sauntering into the lobby. The woman with her beagle follows them inside. By now, the White man in the white polo shirt and leather flip flops is nowhere to be seen. Fortunately, the woman with her dog has taken pictures at the scene and she shows them to the doorman. The doorman identifies the resident as Kyle Allen and provides police with his unit number.

Meanwhile, outside the building, I speak to another male officer from a second unit that has arrived on the scene. I tell him about the three women, several blocks away, who are presumably still waiting for police so they can report the crime that was perpetrated upon them. The officer says he'll walk to the scene. "They've been waiting a while. Maybe you oughta drive?" I suggest. He pays me no mind and sets out on foot. Sweat pouring down my back, I jog uphill, past the officer to where the women are thankfully still waiting. Several minutes later the officer I passed arrives on the scene and begins taking statements.

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According to court testimony, Demetria Hester, a Black woman, was heading home from work on a commuter train on the night of May 25, 2017. As always, she sat directly behind the conductor, "for protection." A White man stepped into her car delivering a hate-filled rant against Blacks, Jews, Mexicans, and Japanese and telling Hester to "go back to your country ... you have no right to be here ... I will kill all of you!" Hester knocked on the conductor's door as was protocol when there was trouble on the train, but her knocks were unacknowledged. The man's ranting went on for three stops as did Hester's insistent knocking. Still no response from the conductor. Finally, Hester asked the man to lower his voice. She was met with another barrage of hate-filled epithets including, "Bitch, you're about to get it now!" At the next stop, as Hester stepped off the train, the angry man trailed her then lunged for her, hitting her in the eye with a bottle filled with fluid. Hester sprayed her assailant's face with the mace she was carrying for just such an occasion and he dropped to the ground. She then kicked him in the groin. Twenty-five bystanders and transportation security officers passively watched on as the assailant washed his face in a drinking fountain.

Police arrived, and, with a cut above her eye still bleeding, Hester pointed at to the man from the train who was still washing his face at the drinking fountain. The white police officer responded, “No, I asked him. He said he had nothing to do with it.” Police then asked Hester for *her* I.D. She asked why they were asking for her ID and not apprehending her attacker who by now was departing the station. Finally, a White conductor confirmed Hester’s account to the officers, who then pursued the assailant. He managed to elude the police.

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When the door to Kyle Allen’s apartment opens, police are greeted by Allen holding a gun with a silencer attached. It seems the man may have been expecting someone else—perhaps even the two women who followed him.

Meanwhile, the officer who is taking the statements of the three sisters pauses to answer his radio. He excuses himself saying he needs to answer an “all units” call. He turns and runs downhill to Mr. Allen’s apartment building where his brethren are staring down the barrel of a gun.

The woman with her beagle waits outside the apartment building hoping to learn the fate of the assailant she and I tracked down for the police. While loitering, she overhears an officer on the scene interviewing a middle-aged blonde white woman with a yoga mat under her arm. “It couldn’t have been my husband. He’s been with me all morning,” she lies to the officer.

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In February 2020, a sweat-drenched young man holding a bike, and wearing a canvas messenger bag across his bare torso politely stops me outside my apartment building, asks if my name is Amy Roost, then presents me with a subpoena. I am to appear as a witness on “date TBD” in the case of *The People of the State of California vs. Kyle Allen*.

I hear nothing further for six months, so I finally call the office of the Deputy District Attorney prosecuting the case to ask about its status. “The Courts are closed until mid-August due to the coronavirus outbreak,” the DDA’s paralegal informs me.

Kyle Allen who pleaded ‘not guilty’ to charges of battery of the three Muslim women and has since been released on cash bail, awaits trial, comfortably ensconced in his high-rise apartment overlooking San Diego Bay, and the Star of India.

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The treadmills at my gym face a bank of televisions. While running, I read the chyron beneath Anderson Cooper’s talking head. It reads, “Jury finds Jeremy Christian guilty of stabbing and killing Taliesin Namkai-Meche and Ricky Best and the attempted murder of Micah Fletcher on a MAX light rail train in Portland in 2017.”

At his sentencing hearing, Christian shouts, “I should’ve killed you, bitch,” at Demitria Hester, who he’d assaulted the night before the murders of Namkai-Meche and Best. Christian is subsequently sentenced to two life terms without the possibility of parole.

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I am no longer a disciplined writer. I do not rise early to write down my thoughts or attempt to meet deadlines. Mostly I sit around the house reading quiet novels, practicing my ukulele, and drinking, not a lot, but most every night. It helps to quiet my fears and quell the grief. I still go for walks, no longer to generate creative ideas—those are dormant—but for the fresh air, which is all too scarce during a pandemic. I don’t know if this essay is me hitting my stride again, or just me with time on my hands. I do know that I once thought it was safe to run in jogging shorts, and that the three women I met on Columbia Street last fall thought it was safe to walk down a city sidewalk wearing hijabs. And I once thought my writing would change the world, only to have the world change me.



Amy Roost is co-editor of *Fury: Women's Lived Experiences During the Trump Era* (Pact Press) and *(Her)otics: Women's Lived Experiences During the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Pact Press, March 2021).