



“The handyman”

“I had contact with a young father of a Syrian refugee family. We met through a mutual friend. I asked him for help with some construction work in a communal space of the local community house. He told me that he was a professional of this type of work in his country.

Then we met and walked to the communal space to have a look at the work that needed to be done. After looking at the space he said it would be no problem and that he would like to help out in a couple of weeks, when he would have more time. A couple of weeks later I talked to him on the phone to set a date for the works. He was curious if I was at home, if I was home alone and if he could come over. I said that I was working, and I didn't have time to meet him that evening. I asked why he wanted to meet. He said he wanted to ask me something. I said he was always welcome to ask things, but that I couldn't meet him this evening. That was the last time I spoke to him. I was a little in shock about his questions, comments and thought back of the conversation we had a couple of weeks before when we walked to the communal space. I had mentioned that I broke up with my boyfriend.

I felt disappointed and disillusioned about the way the conversation went. I asked some colleagues and friends from the neighborhood to take over the communication with him. That was the last I spoke to him.

Amsterdam, December 2018/January 2019

IDENTITIES OF THE NARRATOR AND THE PERSON(S) TRIGGERING THE SHOCK

THE NARRATOR

A Dutch woman of Turkish origin. She works as a community builder; she needs an artisan for the community. She belongs to the middle class.

THE OTHER PERSON(S)

Ahmed is a Kurdish Syrian artisan. He is married and is the father of 5 children. He has refugee status and is currently unemployed.

SIMILARITIES / DIFFERENCES

Their origin brings them closer. Although they both belong to minority groups, their status keeps them apart. They are both Muslims (the narrator isn't practicing). They are heterosexual but they have divergent views on gender and marriage. The narrator is a single woman, while Ahmed is married.

CONTEXT

PHYSICAL CONTEXT

The narrator was at home alone. It was her private space but she was calling him (with a work related issue) from there. It was early evening. This fact with the previous encounter as it had happened could be factors that made him think to approach her in a personal way to invite himself in her house.

The phone itself is a contextual element: it is easier to make misunderstandings, especially with second language speakers, even more if not so fluent.

OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT

There were no other people present. The incident happened on the phone.

Although there was else present nobody at that moment they have friends, acquaintances in common.

LARGER SOCIAL CONTEXT

If the narrator was in a communal space she would have encouraged/ even invited him to ask the question.

The other person as a refugee as well as his family receives a lot of help from the neighbors, from the neighborhood. Everybody knows that he is married and that he has a family.

The (invisible) presence of their local community could have an effect on the narrator's feeling of safety also on the other person's social position. Since everybody knows that he is married and as a refugee receives a lot of help from the community he is a bit dependent on a 'good reputation'. A possible 'affair' or a gossip about it would change both of their reputation/situation in the neighborhood.

PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIP, ANTECEDENTS

Weeks before the phone call they had an appointment to have a look together in the communal space at the work that needed to be done. They walked together to the place when the narrator mentioned that she broke up with her boyfriend.

FRAME OF REFERENCES OF THE NARRATOR

DIRTY - 'I give my heart and he wants my body.'

SHOCKED

**DISILLUSIONED,
DISRESPECTED**

DISAPPOINTED

During a phone conversation with a Syrian man about whether or not he would carry out specific construction works, he asked whether the narrator was home alone and if so whether he could visit her.

Professional culture of community building. Professional vs private roles: The narrator works in a more informal way as a professional community builder (also in conversations more open) and that can be misleading for others who are not used to this. Professional/personal boundaries are sometimes not that obvious. In the community the narrator sometimes is present as a community builder (paid or volunteer professional) sometimes as a neighbor herself. Even for herself there are overlaps in her private and professional roles in the community but for sure for others those boundaries in between of her roles are even more invisible. Therefore in concrete situations it might be confusing what is appropriate and what is not. In community building intimacy, opening up with more personal topics, behaving more openly etc. in order to build trust and mutual acceptance is a part of the process. At the same time it can be misleading or confusing about boundaries. The narrator, for example mentions that she broke up with her boyfriend. For her it might be a part of a small talk but he might take it as a hint; sharing such an intimate detail about her private life is meant to be an invitation.

Respecting the value of the community: The narrator wants to protect the reputation of both of them in the eyes of the community: herself as a professional community builder and neighbor and the Syrian man as a respected Muslim refugee in the neighborhood. Indirectly she protects the safety and undisturbed state of the local community.

Acculturation to western models: The narrator has double cultural identity but when it comes to the domain of gender she associated herself more to the Dutch model than the Turkish. 'A woman communicates openly, she takes public roles, she can be independent.' - this is socially and culturally accepted and guaranteed by the laws. Also, from her Dutch model there is a degree of judgement on the middle-Eastern models and representations of men; they are more traditional, outdated, and sexist.

Gender equality in professional communication: For the narrator professional communication is not gendered: in professional settings the narrator speaks the same way to men or women, without differentiation. We should also tackle the fact that she did share with him that she "just broke up with the boyfriend" not very typical content in professional communication. It implies a level of already existing intimacy in between them.

Gender equality: The narrator believes that a woman also has the right for a private space, time, to her physical integrity, sexual and social autonomy. If she is home alone does not necessarily mean that she needs a company of a man.

Gender/sexuality and profession: In the eye of the narrator that would deteriorate her value as a professional if she would be seen as a woman/sexually appealing person in a work relation. Even worse if she agreed to go into a more engendered intimacy through a work relation.

Respect of relationship / marriage: For the narrator relationship/marriage has a value; an extramarital affair would not be fair in her eyes towards the partner/wife of the man.

FRAME OF REFERENCES OF THE PERSON AT THE ORIGIN OF THE INCIDENT 'AHMED'

During a phone conversation with a Syrian man about whether or not he would carry out specific construction works, he asked whether the narrator was home alone and if so whether he could visit her.

Sexuality: In sexual dynamics transgression can play an important role. Here seems to be multiple transgression in question (extramarital/within the local community/work relation/gender roles). In the question of "status": engaging in relations with a woman considered having higher status may be a means to develop his own status. The narrator could carry extra social therefore sexual value in the eye of the person triggering the shock all with her characteristics: her Turkish identity is close to his identity (?) but her Dutch identity represents power and higher social status as well as her professional status or the fact that she is an autonomous single woman. We can also tackle the representation of "transgression" but in this case it might be relevant to bring up the fact that the narrator talked about the break-up with her boyfriend so she may have done the first "transgression" opening the way / inviting for the following? He may have picked this up as a cue that she's open for intimacy. These dynamic and criss-crossing gender and power relations, the social distance and social closeness may have been in a background of a special sexual interest for Ahmed.

Gender roles: He might have thought that if a woman happens to be alone she should be looking for a partner since she (from her nature) needs protection or at least a company. In his eyes men have freedom/right to initiate extramarital affairs/to cheat. He might believe in double standards regarding gender rights in relationship/sexuality – it is okay for men to cheat but not for women. Here seem to be two issues: 1) a single woman needs company 2) men in relationships have the right to pursue women outside of the relationship. Another possible interpretation that they both have the same values regarding gender roles and he just thought that as the narrator shared her status with him, it was a subtle invitation to be approached.

Representation of a 'single' person in a collectivist society: He does not know anything how it works in an individualist society; that a single person can be actually happy alone.

Intimacy as means to integration: We can go further in this interpretation assuming that going more intimate with a single, professional woman (who has higher social status) would strengthen the status of the Syrian man. Intimacy may provide easier/safer/more effective connection with the host society. Intimate relations can vary in their shades from friendship through sexual/engendered intimate or love relations till a 'mother-son' family-like relations.

Values of professional culture: In his eyes a professional (work-related) relationship is much more formal regarding the space (office), clothing (uniform), timing (in office hours) the content (no personal topics) and way of communication (keeping more distance, more official tone). If you cannot see this very obvious and clear boundaries that means that we are already in a more personal/private domain of life.

The representation of a family for him is a close living together model. He might even believe that the relationship/family is the meaning of life. A woman or man living alone is a desperate, sad thing, she or he needs a company to feel happy. If his question is interpreted not towards a sexual encounter but simply to give a company to someone who is alone.

Communication / gender: If a woman communicate openly and kindly that can be a sign that she is looking for a man. She mentioned that she was alone that may be interpreted that she was giving implicit signs that she was looking for a partner. Sharing of "just broke up with my boyfriend" may have been interpreted as an intimate self-disclosure.

Conflicting / overlapping value systems regarding family/gender: He might belong to a more traditional family/marriage structure but in the meanwhile he might be interested in a more 21. Century Western like open relationship model of marriage. He might think that in the Netherlands there are many sexually open minded, single women with whom a man easily can initiate a sexual relationship.

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