She is never allowed out of her house alone. Never. Eyes – multiple sets of eyes – always watch her, carefully checking out whom she talks to, what those people say and do in her presence. The people who prep, counsel, guide, monitor her know that they have to permit her to speak, of course, but whenever possible, her words are written for her and vetted throughout the chain of command. Should she say that? What are the implications if she uses this word versus that one? When she strays from her script, fingers in rooms all over fly over keyboards and cell phones begin ringing everywhere: Did you hear what she just did? Is it ok? Will we have to do something to mitigate her words, help her take back whatever she has let slip from her mouth? Sometimes they are even angry with her for the words she’s let loose. Sometimes they even tell her they are angry.

Clothing, food, the items she uses to wash her body and groom her hair -- all are chosen by others and left for her. She may not select her own, for that would mean she had to enter a store frequented by others, possibly unknown others, and that cannot be permitted. When she is given gifts – and she is given gifts, people view her as important and want to please her – they are carefully examined and catalogued. Some she may keep; others are taken from her, declared the belongings of someone else.

Avid eyes follow her constantly, recording nearly every move. Even – perhaps especially – the scripted ones. Did she tell that man what they had agreed she would say? Did the tilt of her body lean away from her words? Did her gaze hold steady as that crucial phrase left her mouth?

The thing is, they tell her constantly, it’s no longer just about you and your family. Hundreds, thousands, millions, maybe, of lives hang in the balance. It is up to you to do the right thing, to keep them from disaster. If she ever wonders what the “right thing” is, she rarely wonders out loud. The right thing has already been determined; her job is only to do as she is directed: say this here, sign this there, smile this direction.

They tell her it will end; she even knows the date. But she knows also: they will always be watching, listening, evaluating, passing judgment, pressuring her – openly or subtly -- to go this way or that.

She will never be her own woman again.

It is stated as truth worldwide: the President of the United States is the most powerful person on earth. His face is known to billions, and millions track his every move. He is the Leader of the Free World, and holds sway over much of the rest through armies, spies, probably even assassins. Yet every single person reading these words has more power than he does in some ways. Not one of us would choose to live in the conditions described above.
The most prevalent current view of power is insane. People who are followed everywhere, who can make no human slip, no matter how small, without it being discussed in hundreds of thousands of grocery store aisles, are envied. People who are given others’ words to mouth, who may not go anywhere unaccompanied, who cannot make the most basic daily choices most of us take for granted, are viewed as living lives much better than the ones we live. Oftentimes we even believe these highly-controlled people are actually controlling us, people they have never even laid eyes upon.

It is true that a single military decision can mean death to thousands of humans. It is true that a single person’s pen stroke can doom billions of people to almost certain flooding and storms and catastrophic environmental change. It is true that a literal handful of people can determine whether billions of dollars go to the few or the many, whether some may buy another jet and others buy bread. It is true. That is power.

But power is also deciding whether or not to read the next paragraph. It is choosing to apologize to someone or call her a name. It is selecting one stranger to talk to and not another. It is telling someone what you want when they are in a position to give it. It is making sure you act in the way your heart and mind tells you is good instead of what someone else has told you you should do. It is deciding where and how and with whom you will spend the next hour, and whether you try to make them feel good or try to make them feel bad. As the bumper sticker says, it is choosing whether to respond to someone else by adding more barking to the world, or more wagging.

We have power, in short, every moment of every day. Yet for many of us, the idea that we hold power is anathema. Power and control is what other people have (even though they maybe shouldn’t). The problem, of course, with admitting we have power is that it comes inextricably linked with responsibility. If what we say and do has the power to affect ourselves and other people, we have a responsibility to make good choices. That is the piece we don’t want, and so we claim we have no power at all; only others have it.

Who those “others” are varies, of course. Undocumented workers have the power to take American jobs. Government officials have the power to take our hard-earned money. Rich people have power. White people. Able-bodied people. Architects. Teachers. Retirees. Those who vote. Those who don’t. The list of who has power is literally endless. Everywhere we look, someone else has power. Everyone else, in fact, except people like us.