

Let's Talk About Sexual Harassment, Baby (Sing It)

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WRITER'S COMMENT: The prompt was how a lifestyle change was implemented after a significant experience, and I knew I had to write about some of my experiences with sexual harassment. Notice that I wrote "some," not "all." Too many have had to deal with this, especially young girls and women, and I was tired of being just another number in a statistic. As I watching season 2 of Sex Education, Aimee's character arc made me revisit traumatic memories that were locked away. But this time I was able to put them to use. It's all too easy to forget the massive toll that sexual harassment and assault can have on someone. I wrote about what it was like for me during and after my worst experiences (so far) for two reasons: to educate those who haven't experienced sexual harassment and/or assault and to let other victims know that they're not alone. If you get angry or disgusted while reading this, good. Me too.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I've read my share of heartbreaking student essays. I would call it a hazard of the job if it weren't such a privilege to be entrusted with students' precious and private selves. Still, I wasn't quite prepared for the emotional charge of Enhsaruul's lyric-meets-slam essay on how sexual harassment led a 14 year-old to symbolically cram her kick-ass young self into a drawer and to cloak herself in layers of shapeless, colorless clothing. The emotional charge is not just because such things happen. It's that Enhsaruul's gift for specific detail makes each incident ping for the reader off their own experiences. I won't give away how she realized that she should be angry and not ashamed. But the fact that she did realize is clear in every line. From the title to the final sentence, this is supercharged, confident, audacious writing. Pure kick ass. Sing it.

—Amy Clarke, University Writing Program

No combination of words thrown on an indifferent page can accurately describe the tenebrous mixture of emotions that consumes your body when you're sexually harassed, but I can sure try. The fear that threatens to paralyze you like a deer in headlights strangles your heart until the beats are frenzied, the wave of rage at being objectified crashes over you at a breakneck speed, and the hot, prickly feeling of shame creeps up the nape of your neck. The worst part? I was fourteen when I was first catcalled (and mere weeks later, groped).

June 2014, a muggy dog day of summer, one where you could see wavy lines in the distance. I was walking along the sunlit Ohlone Greenway underneath the BART tracks, heading to my high school's gym to sing at graduation. Bubbling over with excitement because I was one of two freshmen to have gotten into the a cappella group earlier that year, I was itching to perform, so much so that I couldn't keep down the wide, goofy grin forming. On top of that giddy superiority high was the confidence boost from wearing my favorite semi-formal dress: a black, white, and teal mid-thigh-length bodycon with lace accents, paired with black lace sneaker wedges. Basically, I thought I was hot shit.

But then I could feel someone staring at me from inside their parked car and immediately went into no-direct-eye-contact, walk-quicker-but-don't-make-it-obvious-you-want-to-run mode.

"You want a ride?" I heard on my right, ten feet away from me.

"No," I forcefully replied, putting up a cold façade to combat the tears already welling up and threatening to overflow, to show weakness in front of that vile creature. I only saw his face for two seconds, and yet I still can't forget it six years later while he probably forgot me after five minutes. You want a mental image? Think Al, the toy collector from *Toy Story 2*: rotund, dark balding hair, and glasses. I can't forget that horrid upward curl of his lips, the wandering beady eyes, and the greasy lascivious tone of his proposition, the double meaning of which I was too young to comprehend. All flight and no fight, I barreled on to school while tugging my dress down every few steps, only stopping to process what had happened once I reached the safe haven of the choir room. I put on a brave face and didn't break down before the performance.

The minute I got home I peeled off my dress and cried in the shower as I scrubbed myself raw, trying to rid myself of the filth of the world and preserve what pure remnants of childhood innocence were left. *It was the dress' fault that happened to me*, I remember thinking. *The dress was too*

form-fitting, too short, it made me look too mature for my age. Said dress was washed and hung up, to be unworn for years, and I made up my mind to dress more conservatively. Maybe then I wouldn't solicit unwanted attention.

Okay, so let me backtrack for a moment. For those of you not really in the know about sexual harassment, in which case lucky you, “[s]exual harassment is generally defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature[.] . . . It may consist of words, gestures, touching, or the presence of sexual material” (Gutek 13987). I was catcalled, and “[c]atcalling is a form of sexual harassment . . . [and] may be accompanied by whistles, winks, or grabs. It involves brief, one-sided interactions in public places . . . [and] has no clear purpose other than to call attention to a woman's body or sexuality” (Fisher et al. 1495).

I knew that it was sexual harassment when I was catcalled, but I didn't realize until years later that I was intentionally groped. A few weeks after The Incident, my fellow French students and I were off on our big trip to France, chaperoned by our teachers, of course. This being my first time visiting Europe, I was wide-eyed and bushy-tailed when we finally reached Charles de Gaulle Airport, despite it being early in the morning. Walking over to security while chatting with my friends, suddenly there were two hands squeezing my breasts. The perpetrator, a fast-walking, short, bald, white man wearing a blue T-shirt, had crashed into me and muttered “Sorry, sorry” with some kind of European accent as he hurriedly rejoined the rest of the passengers who had just gotten off of the people mover.

At the time, I brushed it off as being an accidental touch because he looked as if he was running late and ended up stumbling into me because he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. However, I eventually came to terms with the fact that I had been targeted and groped. It happened in a wide open space and I was in the middle of the entire group, not on the outskirts, which means he had to have aimed for me. And besides, no one really walks with their arms bent at chest level and hands angled outwards like an old-timey cartoon villain, do they? I had been viewed and treated as public property, something that anyone could use and discard at any moment in time. I was objectified.

The objectification theory is where “women are constantly sexually objectified [which] socializes [them] to internalize an observer's

perspective on their own body and, as a result, experience more body image dysfunction and mental health consequences” (Fisher et al. 1499). And objectify myself I did after those two scarring incidents.

I became more and more paranoid about how others viewed me, always feeling surrounded by unblinking eyes judging my every move and scrutinizing my outfits. I wanted to look my best so that I could be viewed as attractive in the eyes of those I was interested in and acceptable for everyone else. You know, as you do in high school. But simultaneously, I desperately wanted to hide my body so that attention wouldn't be drawn to my breasts or hips, which had developed early on during puberty. So, I came to the conclusion that if I didn't wear clothes that accentuate those features, then I wouldn't receive any unwanted attention. With my new mindset in place, I was ready for the next year of high school.

Sophomore year was a nothing year. In terms of outfits, I had creatively stifled myself. Having always taken pride in my sense of style, I had never really been afraid to wear some “out of the box” choices before that fateful summer. That year, the most skin I dared to show other than via knee-length dresses was my arms, upper back, and very rarely my thighs if it was too hot to wear anything other than shorts, but none of these options combined. Was I a little miserable with the mundane, basic choices I would repeat? Try really miserable. But for all intents and purposes, I hadn't been sexually harassed again, so the plan had worked in the end. Well, it had worked until summer came around again. Man, summer is just not my season, huh?

Walking to a doctor's appointment with my mom in the middle of July on a weekday, the last thing I was expecting was for my mom and me to both be catcalled. She was wearing jeans and a button-down shirt while I was in jeans, a t-shirt, and a jacket. The unwanted and unappreciated comment was something along the lines of “like mother, like daughter” in reference to our hips, and the fury I felt boiling inside me at that moment has been unmatched since. How dare he bring my mother into this? Why does the world tolerate this kind of uncouth, piggish behavior? I didn't feel that hot wave of shame anymore like I had that first time, not when all I could see was red.

A 2011 study conducted by the American Association of University Women found that out of the 1,965 students surveyed, 48 percent had experienced harassment but only 9 percent had actually reported the incident. They also found that women were more sexually harassed than

men: 56 percent to 40 percent (Hlavka 337-338). Sexual harassment is dishearteningly prevalent all around the world, including the United States, and being sexually harassed is terrifying, no matter what gender you identify as. Just focusing on the experience of women harassed by men, though, too often it goes unreported because of a “presumption that men’s sexual aggression is simply ‘boys being boys’” (339). We’re taught to accept that we *will* be catcalled or otherwise harassed at some point in our lives because it’s simply inevitable, and, pardon my language, that’s just all kinds of fucked up.

We can’t change the world instantaneously and my honest opinion is that objectification and sexual harassment aren’t going away anytime soon, but we can try to decrease the prevalence of these incidents, starting with better sex education in schools. Education that doesn’t just focus on the scientific aspects (although those are still topics of the utmost importance), but the emotional and psychological aspects of consent, going through puberty, et cetera. All of us benefit from having a more educated world, especially when it comes to big societal issues like these. We cannot sweep this problem under the rug—we need to discuss it and then take steps to change.

I was enraged when my mother was catcalled because I felt that she deserved so much more respect, and that she shouldn’t be treated as an object. Then, a couple of weeks later when I was fuming over it again and thinking of retorts I should have made, a moment of epiphany sprung into existence: *I* didn’t deserve to be treated like that either. I was blaming myself for being harassed because of how I dressed and how my body was naturally developing, instead of blaming the deplorable and indecent actions of those men. In short, I had victim-blamed myself. I had become ashamed of my own body and hid it to avoid attention, but I got it anyway, because catcallers and skeezy perverts don’t care about you. All they care about is the feeling of domination and satisfaction they experience when objectifying people.

And so, a month before junior year started, I decided to go back to wearing whatever I wanted after a year of subduing my appearance, but with a few boundaries if I was headed somewhere I’m not fully comfortable. Part of me is still a little paranoid that my body is going to be used against me, because unfortunately it could still happen anytime, but there’s no point in living in fear. I’m still aware of how I look in other people’s eyes because objectifying yourself is a hard habit to knock, but

I've become less ashamed of my body as the years pass by. I've gotten comfortable in my own skin again, and a good part of that comes from loving what I wear and being able to experiment with my style.

Now as a junior in college, I'm still going strong with wearing whatever makes me feel confident and happy. Those crusty cretins may have taken a year away from me, but they're not taking away my entire life because I refuse to let them still have that power. In fact, as my metaphorical middle finger, I wore that pivotal dress outside again a couple of months ago, after five-and-a-half years of it hanging in my closet. It was time.

Works Cited

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