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### Sexual Harassment Will Never Happen To Me, Or So I Thought

Seventeen years. I have lived in New Hartford, New York for seventeen years. In my hometown I graduated with roughly 250 students in my class. That is 250 people stored in my memory; their faces, names, and characteristics. I have lived in Albany for roughly three months now, on a campus with nearly 17,000 people. As I walk to class on campus I see strangers everyday, people of which I know I will never learn their names. I have known roughly the same 250 people for eight years, my entire middle school and high school education. The bell would chime at 7:48 every morning and the ring would blast through my ears, beating on my ear drums. I'd hit a fast pace across the pavement in an attempt not to be tardy, resulting in a conversation with the most treacherous Mrs. Cunningham. I reached out and grabbed the door handle causing a cool sensation to run up my nerves, making my hair stand up. My feet hit the glossy tiles and everyone see in sight is a familiar face. I would find my friends leaning against the navy blue, rusting lockers with iced caramel lattes in their hands, from Dunkin of course. Friends faded into family as I referred to my friend's mothers' as "mom," and they would pick up the habit of stocking up on all of my favorite food, anticipating my return. At night we would open the squeaky doors of my 2010 Honda Pilot with almost 180,000 miles on it. I turned the key and felt the vibrations run through my seat as I anticipate and relish the thought of walking into my friend's suburban house basement, filled with my favorite people. Truthfully, this environment

provided a sense of safety in which I now lack in Albany. This feeling would become one that I miss as I now find myself walking down the cracked wooden stairs of an Albany frat house, not recognizing a single person. I knew once I walked into my friend's basement, there would be no question if I would be safe, or concern for the boys around me. I knew I had my friend's mom twenty feet away, right upstairs, and a list of people to call if something went wrong. My parents never had to worry about who I was with, or what could have happened if I wasn't home on time. In New Hartford the idea of sexual harassment was a fairytale thought, but in Albany it is an unfortunate reality for many. My home, friends and family is all I knew for seventeen years; the word "home" represents being comfortable, having trust in your community, and familiarity. Can I now say that Albany embodies this same feeling of "home" and safety?

Twenty-five days. I have been at the University at Albany for twenty-five days. As I prepared for the journey I was about to embark on by buying sheets, towels, and decorations, there was one non-materialistic thing that I couldn't buy. The wisdom and advice from my family. I had never heard such earnestness and caution in my parent's and family member's voices. "Don't go out by yourself!", "Always have your phone," my grandpa would exclaim to me. "Be careful, I was your age once," "College isn't all about partying," my mom would say as my eyes rolled, looking up at my eyebrows. I shook my head at them; how naive right? Once my feet hit the concrete campus of Albany, a sensation I had never felt before made me dizzy: a rush of adrenaline, a rush of hope and unfamiliarity. I sure was not in New Hartford anymore. I brushed off my family's advice of caution as I'd be on my own for the first time: caution for people, caution for classes, caution for my overall safety. I had never had to caution these simple fundamentals before, until I came here.

On day six at The University, me and my friends felt our faces moisten with sweat as the small clip fans spun around and around in a rotation. My face was lit up by the glow of *Orange County Housewives* projecting from the television. We sat there in dismay as we realized the dining hall was closed and we looked at our other options, choosing the reliable source of Uber Eats. My mouth salivated as I online ordered cheesy garlic bread with marinara sauce and pizza accompanied by ranch, of course. I heard the thumps of the elevator, one after one, as it dropped down all nine floors. I waited in the humid lobby, awaiting the delivery of what I thought would become the highlight of my night. I suddenly heard a faint noise, yelling, in the background of my pizza related thoughts. My neck cranked as I noticed two boys, I did not recognize, shouting at me and my friend. As I peeked out the door I heard their remarks; “Are you waiting for your dick appointment?”, “Can we come join?” and “Oh she has a friend too, that’s a foursome.” As my friend and I stood in disbelief of what we heard, my head became hot and I could feel the pumping beat increase in rhythm on my wrist. My friend looked at me, eyebrows up, eyes wide, and lips pursed, an expression of shock and disgust that I will never forget. Her response was to let it go, “What’s the point?” she exclaimed. I knew she was right but they had managed to get under my skin so easily, just with their words, that I had to defend myself. As I exclaimed to them that we were awaiting pizza, we heard responses of “Okay sure” and “Is that your boy’s name?” I shouted back at them as I could feel my head gaining heat and the pain on my palms from my nails, creating crescent half moon indents. I thought about the irony of how they could say these things to us, without even knowing us, and keep walking away. An absolute wave of shock rippled through my body as reality set in that, that actually just happened. I wondered if the roles were reversed and we had shouted derogatory remarks at them, if they would feel just

as dirty, sad, and disrespected as I did. They deal with no repercussions and most likely forget about the interaction within twenty-four hours, while the memory is forever burned into my head with frustration. But hey, boys will be boys.

September 3rd, 2018, labor day. The streets filled with empty, crushed red solo cups, the mix of song beats and rhymes fill your ears as you walk from destination to destination. The blurred vision of red, white, and blue, waving in the air on flags and on the attire of students dancing surround you. My first labor day away from home. As I stepped out of the Uber into downtown Albany, I prepared myself for the busy day that was ahead of me. My friend's faces were painted with nothing but pearly white teeth and excitement. I felt the sun beating on my forehead as strands of hair began to cling to my face. I was ready for my first labor day, as sorority members "dm-ing" my friends and I on instagram had promised it's the best day of the year. As my feet crossed over the cracks in the sidewalk, cars boomed by blaring profanity throughout the air in song form, one car in particular caught my eye. The car was red, rusted, and the music was loud. The passengers in the car were hard to see through the dark night like tinted windows, that was until the windows began to roll down. The deep raspy voices of early-twenty something aged men beckoned at my friends and I from the windows. I saw the uncomfortable glances on my friend's faces and felt my lips press together from their original grin position, as I grew weary of my surroundings. In that moment I contemplated and questioned my own actions of simply turning my head, making eye contact, and walking in the same general direction. The car pulled over and all I heard was high pitched, two syllable whistles, and the comment of "You bitches looking good today, where are you going? Come on over to Quail." The next voices I heard were my friends telling me to "Walk faster" and "Don't look at them." This was the

second of three cars that pulled up to me and my friends that day, all relaying similar messages to us. Sadly, this was the least concerning interaction among them. As my legs moved faster over the cracked cement, we could hear their muffled voices in the distance, taunting us. I could hear faint remarks regarding our bodies and labor day themed outfits. My friends didn't say much about it, except that they were thankful that we were all together. We agreed the events of that day would only amplify and justify our rule to not walk alone in downtown Albany. I had to censor my own actions that day as my heart beat a little faster, my feet moved a little faster, and my common knowledge of people having respect for others faded. I know I am definitely not in New Hartford anymore. But hey, boys will be boys. Or in this case, men will be men.

September 15th, 2018. Two days before my eighteenth birthday, a sunny Saturday filled with sleep and homework. I decided to celebrate the landmark birthday of eighteen on Saturday night as I had two tests the following Monday, and the definite need to study. The night went as usual, a clean and silent Uber ride as a stranger drove my friends and I. We came to our stop and stepped out onto the sidewalk, where we were immediately engulfed with college kids and the aroma of The 212 Market's cheap food and alcohol. As we planned out the night, several destinations were on our game plan. The second destination I was particularly skeptical of attending. As we approached the house, I saw a line pouring down the stairs like a colony of ants walking in a row. The rap music bass was thumping and vibrating the railings outside of the house as I held onto them. My palms became sticky as I shuffled up the steps and was greeted by a heat wave at the front door. I am immediately thrust inside by the crowd of people behind me, eager to get in. I quickly lost my friends in the immense crowd of strangers around me. As I wandered through the party, body pressed against body, I began to feel something. Something I

hoped was an accident. I wish I was right. I turned my head and saw a large man, whom I have never seen before, never talked to before, and in which I was walking in the opposite direction of. His hand was outreached when I turned around and felt him touching my body, unwanted, and unasked for. He reached out and aggressively squeezed my lower back side then proceeded to slap my derriere multiple times in a row. My face frozen in a state of shock, I was able to murmur out a simple, “No thank you” while trying to be poised in a situation I have never encountered. A situation I naively thought I would never encounter. A situation in which I felt true fear. I was alone, unaware of my location, and surrounded by a sea of strangers and him. I felt heat flow throughout my entire body and a flash of panic overcome my face, in fear of what was to come next. I quickly traced my steps out of the house, as my friends were reluctantly outside waiting for me. I tried not to look back at the house as I walked away and I never spoke of what happened to anyone. As I went home that night after celebrating my birthday, my family’s warnings in which I so naively ignored echoed throughout the prism of my conscience. Was it my outfit or maybe my quick glance, that invited him to grope me? But boys will be boys and I’ve learned to accept that.

I know to keep my head down when I walk down the street: I know to keep my distance from people that I don’t recognize when I’m out: I learned to be cautious of how my simplest of actions will be perceived. I changed my lifestyle and habits to accommodate to the standard of “boys will be boys.” This simple fact has become apparent in my life. I came from a home of security and safety, not listening to the warnings of my loved ones. I have been in Albany for twenty-five days; I am cautious and expectant of what will happen in the next twenty-five days.