

OUR STREETS NOW

PRESENTS...

**OUR WORDS
LITERARY MAGAZINE**



ANNIVERSARY ISSUE - VOLUME TWO



Our Streets Now

Our Streets Now is a campaign demanding the right of women, girls and marginalised genders to be safe in public spaces. How it has started? Two sisters, 15 and 21, spoke about how they experience the world as young women. About feeling afraid walking home at night. About being harassed in their school uniform. About how their lives were restricted by the fear of harassment. Channelling this anger into change, they decided to start a petition. Hundreds of women, girls and marginalised genders went online to share their stories of being insulted, followed and assaulted on the streets of Britain. Soon enough, thousands of voices were joining the Our Streets Now movement, tired of harassment being a 'normal' part of growing up a girl. Our Streets Now became a community determined to challenge the myths and taboos stopping this topic from being discussed and challenged, out in the open.

**#CRIMENOT
COMPLIMENT**

*Join the
movement
now!*



HELLO FROM THE EDITOR

Dear reader,

It is my pleasure to present our Anniversary Issue - Volume 2 on the **theme of public sexual harassment (PSH)**.

I have been working with PSH for some time now - at Our Streets Now on various projects and writing a PhD thesis on the topic- and I can't stress enough the importance of discussing and tackling this form of violence. The PSH impacts on someone's being in the world are incredibly harmful. It affects our relationship with ourselves, others, and the spaces surrounding us.

In this issue, you will read three powerful poems that speak on the feelings someone has as a target of PSH. The poems show the mechanisms and beliefs behind the acts of PSH and the dehumanisation and objectification of these acts. In one of the poems, our writer makes the intersection between objectification and homophobic abuse, exploring how homophobia is used as a tool by the perpetrator.

You will also be able to accompany the lived experience of our writer working in the nightlife industry and reflect on how PSH, abuse, and other forms of belittlement affect her day-to-day life. Then, you will read an article exploring PSH in children's books, investigating whether PSH is shown in books for kids and issues around how it is displayed. This piece will be followed by an article on how the media reinforces PSH and sexism in the UK. Finally, our last piece is a short story, telling a woman's experience with PSH while on a night out with her boyfriend.

I hope you enjoy your reading!

Renata Guimarães Naso
Lead Editor



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trigger warnings

This issue covers some sensitive topics and may be triggering for some readers. Each article will be marked with a specific TW and we advise readers to seek support if needed. Go to:
<https://www.ourstreetsnow.org/support>

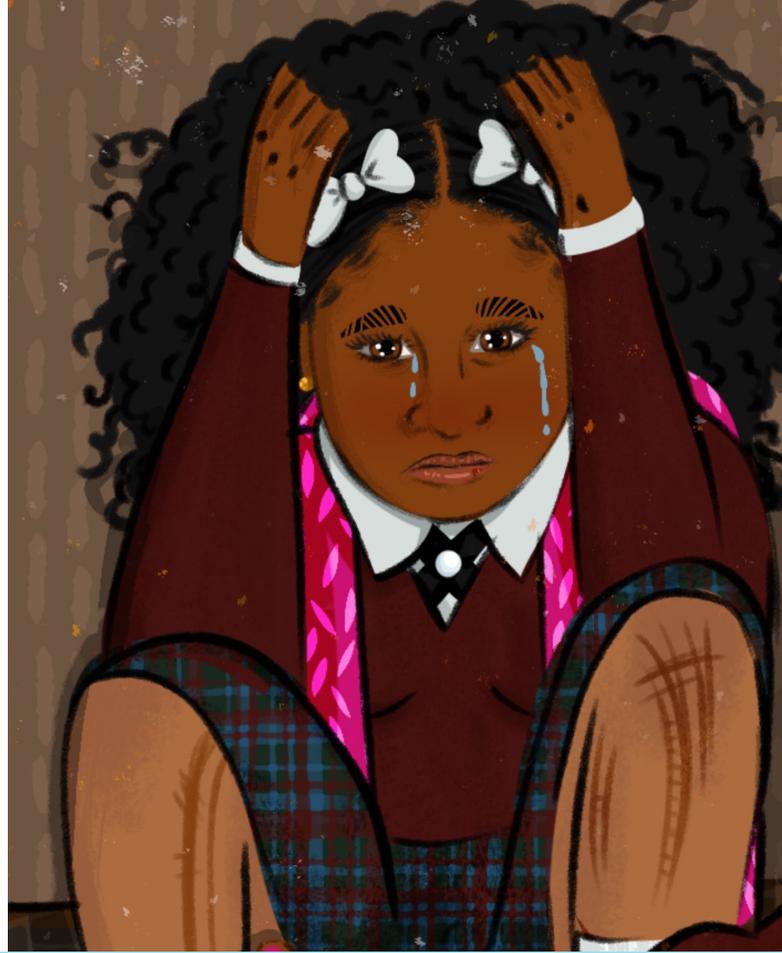


WHY DON'T YOU LIKE ME?

Written by HARRIET CLARK

Illustration by DIONE-ARIADNE BERGLAND
(@d.a.s.b.art)

TW public sexual harassment, child abuse.



Is it because
the tartan skirt no longer grazes my knees?
The jumper with the school logo on my chest no longer pulls tight across my growing bosom?
The ladders in my tights are no longer there from tripping in the playground,
your hungry eyes focusing on the bare flesh below?

Is it because
I no longer carry a bookbag, one that I had to cover my legs with to hide my body from your leering stare?
When you corner me I no longer appease you,
my eyes widened in fear which you misconstrued for innocence?
I no longer look like an easy target, too young to know better?

Is it because I now understand I don't have to be subservient and polite to men, even the predators?
Is it because I now understand that it was never my fault for wearing my school uniform?
Is it because I now understand that a grown man should not be aroused by a child?

Why don't you like me?
I know why.

DON'T YOU WANT ME, BABY?

Written by SOPHIE ASHA ARRAM

Illustration by DANI ROTA
(@dampstudio)

TW public sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault and spiking.

Our writer shares some aspects of her experience as a cis-white woman working in the nightlife industry, facing public sexual harassment, sexual and verbal abuse, and demeaning behaviour.

I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar; *that much is true.*

When I applied for a job in the service industry, I knew it would be hard work; nagging unsatisfied visitors, bar fights, and cleaning up at the end of the shift, but nothing could quite prepare me for what I was about to experience. After turning 18 during the COVID-19 pandemic, my grasp of London's nightlife industry was pretty limited.



My alcohol knowledge consisted of stolen bottles of glens at crowded house parties and sneaking drinks out of my mum's cabinet. Nevertheless, I was excited to experience something new. I joined in May for a grand reopening of a cocktail bar and club in Croydon, South London. People from all walks of life visited the bar. Freshly turned 18-year-olds, hen-do's, we had a big Goth community that would hold heavy metal nights, LGBTQ+ events on Fridays, and Karaoke every week. >>

>> Lads were doing the Brighton Road pub crawl, businessmen & women for after-work drinks, Uni students, girlies for bottomless brunch and family gatherings – a melting pot of Croydon’s finest.

My experience in the service industry was humiliating and, unfortunately, not unique to me. I’m sure this is common for women and marginalised genders working in bars and clubs across the country. I was usually the only female-identifying member of staff working in the bar. As a cis white woman, this is my perspective on what it’s like working in this industry. Although my male colleagues are very aware of the threat to my safety, they are also naïve about the reality of the female experience in the nightlife scene. Our security team were the best, and I know they work hard to protect the staff and customers. Still, by having the most contact time with the customers by working on the floor, I was often the first to experience unsavoury situations. The overwhelmingly male demographic of the security team and the fact that they rarely work directly with customers means that sometimes it was difficult for them to identify female trauma.

I’ve lived in Croydon my whole life, and I know it’s rough. The Met labelled it as the most dangerous London borough in 2021; most crimes reported are violent and target the most vulnerable. Working late nights in a high-stress environment as a woman *definitely* put me in a very exposed position.

I probably would have walked out on the first day if it weren't for my colleagues. When you're put in a high-stress environment like a bar or a nightclub, you heavily rely on the people you work with for support. The collective experience of witnessing the constant abuse from drunk customers and their sense of superiority brings the staff very close. It was demeaning, to say the least. People take the server/ customer dynamic to the extreme. I think people take pride in the entitlement they gain from not being responsible for their messes. And due to the nature of the nightlife scene, I doubt it will be changing anytime soon.

They trained me to be confident in making around 50 cocktails, pouring pints, serving drinks with professionalism and learning to clean the inevitable spillages. >>

inspiring reading

TITLE Overflow
AUTHOR Travis Alabanza
PUBLISHER Methuen Drama
YEAR 2020
LANGUAGE English
GENRE Stage Play



>> It was super exciting when we opened the doors for the first time after the COVID-19 pandemic. People felt like they had a new lease on life. The energy was ecstatic; everyone enjoyed their newfound freedom through parting, dancing and getting absolutely off their faces. They opened their hearts and wallets to us. I would make an average of £60 in tips a shift. I would sell expensive bottles, giant cocktail sharers and pornstar martini trees, racking in 1.7k for the company on a busy night. I was in my prime. I was excited to finally welcome the clientele.

Eventually, the honeymoon period would fizzle out, and the harsh reality of this industry crept up on me. Suddenly I began to see beyond the dazzling frontier and witnessed the exploitation first-hand. I remember the first time I was made to feel highly uncomfortable. It must have been early May 2021, a few weeks after we opened. I was waitressing, serving a group of young people, probably only a few years older than me. Eight customers spread over two tables, nothing I wasn't used to. I welcomed them and shared our happy hour timings and deals on shots. They ordered a few pints and cocktails, and one of the lads ordered 12 Jager bombs. I was pretty pleased with myself. I didn't even have to upsell; he willingly offered to spend £48 on shots alone. They ordered the same for the second round, making my job very easy. By the time they wanted to order again, I could tell that the boy with the jager bombs was acting a bit unsteady. He shared the shots with his mates, but I could tell he'd drunk most of them. He requested another round of 12 Jager bombs. I asked my supervisor for advice since I was concerned that the customer might be too intoxicated, a standard safety precaution. He came with me to check on the table.

The bloke in question was an old-school friend of my supervisor, and there I was again, giving out another round of discounted Jager bombs.

When bringing the drinks over, the guy began to obnoxiously flirt with me. I entertained it for a bit, knowing the bar was closing soon, and I was hoping to get a decent tip. But after explaining that I had to continue with my work duties, he still insisted that I should give him my full attention. It was now 03.15 am; final orders. I went round to each table to check if I could serve anyone before we closed for the night, and of course, that one guy decided that he wanted to order 24 Jager bombs (at this stage, he had already bought 36). His friends seemed hesitant. This time I got my manager and asked him to check if I should refuse service. He came over with me, and apparently, this guy is a regular customer; they're on a first-name basis. He negotiated 12 instead of 24, and there I was, bringing out another tray of shots. I figured it was the best I could do since I took all the correct safety measures, and with only 25 minutes left until we shut, I felt slightly relieved that I wouldn't have to tolerate this customer for much longer. >>

meet the writer

Sophie is an actor, writer and creative director, born & raised in Croydon, South London. She spends her free time watching movies, reading plays and bingeing *Drag Race*. She has never been formally trained as a writer but uses her personal experiences to influence her work. She tries to steer away from the usual heteronormative, white-washed storylines and writes for a more diverse, progressive and inclusive audience.

>> Suddenly, I heard a glass smash and instinctively ran over with my brush. One of the girls had dropped an empty martini glass, which was no big deal. I clear up the mess and make small talk with the table, asking them about how their night was. There were still a good amount of shots left, and I reminded them that we were closing in five minutes. The guy then necks three of the shots without pausing. Then, somehow, he manages to manoeuvre his arm around my waist and corners me up against a wall. He began telling me that I had lovely eyes, lovely skin, and lovely teeth. He then asks for my name.

He was a large lad, probably 6'2 and muscular, myself just above 5 foot, making me feel very intimidated; even if I tried to resist, he could very easily overpower me. I said gingerly, "My name's Sophie." He then asked for my number. I told him we were closing soon and that he should finish his drinks. I saw a wash of anger glaze across his eyes, and without thinking, he picked up a full pint on the table and began to pour it on the floor in front of me, saying that he wouldn't have enough time to finish his drinks so he might as well run them on the floor. He dropped the glass, and it smashed in front of me. At this point, his friends finally realised what was happening; he grabbed another pint, and another. They all stood there speechless, not knowing what to do. They tried to grab drinks from his hands. Eventually, he stopped. I said, "I think you need to leave".

My manager peeked around the corner, unaware of what had just happened. The group started making their way out of the bar, as that one boy was still attempting to hassle me. His friends were very apologetic. Ultimately, I wasn't hurt physically.

But I couldn't help thinking about how my manager had failed me, and his lack of awareness had put me in a tough situation. I can't help thinking that it wasn't entirely his fault; that guy shouldn't have drunk that much, his friends should have kept a closer eye on him, maybe he was in a very fragile mental state, perhaps he was just a victim of the toxic adolescent drinking culture in the UK? I shouldn't have to explain his behaviour, but I still find myself searching for excuses as to why someone could act this way. It feels arduous knowing where to place the blame in cases like this. That customer never returned, leaving me to clean up the floor.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a stand-alone situation. These things occurred many times but presented themselves in other narratives, with different faces behind each experience. There was no generic portrait of a person behind this. Some women would shout profanities at me, men who would grope, and married couples who would invite me on 'sexual adventures' whilst I was working. Over time you become numb to it, build up a wall, and learn often-damaging defence mechanisms to protect yourself from getting hurt. Coming out of work felt like recovering from a deep-sea drive. I'd lay awake for hours just thinking about all the things that were said to me on my eight-hour shift. It's an absurd concept to come to terms with; you practically have to be insane to deal with that type of abuse and remain professional daily. Now, I look back and wonder why I continued to work there all that time; I spent six months there. I think the fear of not being able to find a new job was overwhelming as it had taken me many months just to find this one. It was becoming increasingly difficult in post-pandemic London, especially as I had just finished school and had no professional experience. I just began to tolerate my dissatisfaction with my job. >>

"Over time you become numb to it, build up a wall, and learn often-damaging defence mechanisms to protect yourself from getting hurt. Coming out of work felt like recovering from a deep-sea drive. I'd lay awake for hours just thinking about all the things that were said to me on my eight-hour shift. It's an absurd concept to come to terms with; you practically have to be insane to deal with that type of abuse and remain professional daily."

>> On a Tuesday evening, it must have been around 7.30 pm, a group of three men dressed in suits came into the bar for what I assume were some after-work drinks. Tuesdays were usually tranquil. We don't have security on the premises until 10 pm; even then, they were rarely needed. I served the customers their pints and began a quiet and uneventful shift, or so I thought. Half an hour later, I checked in with the table, and since they were all good for drinks, I started to walk away. One of the guys suddenly snaps up, the youngest of the men in his mid-thirties. All of them were wearing wedding rings. He was barely halfway through his Peroni, but he seemed all over the place. I could only assume he was high. He hollered me over and asked my name.

I tell him my name's 'Grace'. I learnt that from my colleagues; never give customers your real name. I was sceptical initially, but it made it harder for people to find me on social media. It's like when they tell owners not to put their dog's name on their collar because it makes it easier to kidnap them: in my mind, it was kind of the same thing. Straight away, he asked me loads of questions; my age, where I live, and what I do with my free time. All of which I politely answered.

I felt him glaring at me, and I could tell he was not asking these questions with any hint of authenticity or concern for who I was. He then asked for my number. I then told him I don't give my number out to strangers. He laughed, then called me cocky. He said that girls like me have too much confidence and that I've missed my opportunity to give him my number.

I learnt that when faced with these situations, it's better to diffuse than resolve them: when people are drunk, it can be unpredictable, and that's not a risk I wanted to take. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, but I just laughed awkwardly and walked away. I put my head down and just continued with my other tasks. At some point, they left without thanking us for the service, but I didn't take any notice. The next thing I know, another customer is running up to me, telling me that the bathroom has been flooded. Every single one of the four cubicles had its sink blocked up with tissue paper, and the taps turned on at full speed. The floors were completely soaked. I paused in confusion, but I knew straight away who did it. >>

>> This grown man really went out of his way to make me suffer for rejecting his advances. I felt so angry. It took every fibre in my body to stop me from crying when I was mopping up those toilets. It was a personal attack, and I was being punished for exercising my right to say 'no'. That night at work really affected me. So far, I have dedicated my time to making the customer's experience as easygoing and enjoyable as possible with carelessness. At that instance, it was all thrown back at my face.

I've experienced my fair share of horrible situations where I have been a victim. I hoped that during my time at the bar, I managed to prevent others from harm. I wish I'd prevented spikings by alerting security on suspicious activity and diffusing what could have been violent fights. I instinctively found myself taking mental notes of the faces in the room. Are there any people being over-friendly, space invading, predateous even? Have any drinks been left unattended? Can I see anyone feeling uncomfortable? I'm always on high alert. I don't hesitate to check in with people I have concerns about or report suspicious behaviour to security.

I preferred to take on the abuse from rowdy customers than to have someone who was an intoxicated bear that strain. I think this clearly indicates my mental state during that period; I didn't value my safety or happiness; I put all my energy into helping others and didn't take the time to help myself. I'd rather walk away from a situation than address the problem to avoid conflict; I think that's a very toxic habit to pick up. This job has made me develop a higher tolerance for abuse, which isn't necessarily a good thing. I'm worried it could impact how I approach future relationships and work environments. After months of working at that bar, I finally gained the courage to quit.

The nightlife industry can be a dangerous environment, a breeding ground for perpetrators. Although the bright lights, the buzz of the drinks, and friendly customers may distract you, it is essential to hone in on your instincts. Stick with your friends, watch your glasses, and protect your personal boundaries. If you feel really uncomfortable, it may be beneficial to find a female-identifying staff member, whether they're a bartender, waiter or security; just ask for help. I think I speak for all women in this industry when I say that we have experienced a lot of harmful behaviours. We can sense the warning signs; we've witnessed first-hand the corruption and blatant misogyny within the night-time entertainment sector. And we **will** go out of our way to ensure that no one else has to face this. ●



"Stick with your friends, watch your glasses, and protect your personal boundaries. If you feel really uncomfortable, it may be beneficial to find a female-identifying staff member"



EAT UP

Written by ROBYN HILL

Illustration by ALIA SINHA
(@minor_grace)

TW objectification, sexualisation, public sexual harassment.

'Hey girls.'
'Mademoiselle,'
'Oh, so beautiful-'
'Wanna blow me?'

Pieces of meat
something to eat
trays of delights
traipsing the street
the perfect thing for
their midnight feast-

or
at two in the afternoon
eleven in the morning
it could be dead on midnight
we could be dead at midday.

See,
if they're a little peckish
they don't need bird beaks to
peck peck peck
through our skin.
Instead, normality, skipping stones,
hurling words across the streets
to our school skirts,
pacing pushchairs
and everything in between.

Public sexual harassment in middle-grade books

Many negative childhood experiences are explored in children's books, so why are there so few children's books featuring public sexual harassment?

Public sexual harassment (PSH) has long been a theme in young adult (YA) literature, at least in books primarily aimed at teenage girls and young women. In *What's A Girl Gotta Do?* by Holly Bourne, an experience of PSH is the catalyst for heroine Lottie's campaign, where she commits to calling out every instance of sexism she sees.(1) In *Blood Moon* by Lucy Cuthew, Frankie is harassed online when a meme about her bleeding on her boyfriend's fingers during a sexual encounter while she's on her period goes viral. (2) There are some limitations to the discussion of PSH in YA literature - the genre primarily focuses on white cis girls, and there are far fewer examples of fiction that reference PSH of girls and young women of colour, trans girls, non-binary teens, and cis or trans boys.

Written by ALICE NUTTALL

Illustration by LACUNNA
(@la_cunna)

TW public sexual harassment of a child (involving public masturbation); discussion of child sexual abuse in the context of fictional narratives.

However, while it certainly could be explored in much more detail, at least the problem of PSH is acknowledged and explored in YA literature.

The same cannot be said for middle-grade books, the section of literature aimed at readers aged 8-12. As a young child, I remember reading *Bill's New Frock* by Anne Fine, a book telling the story of a boy who wakes up one morning with everyone around him believing that he is a girl and has to live a day in the life of someone assigned female by society.(3) One experience Bill has "as a girl" is being whistled at in the street by an older teenage boy; the first time this happens, Bill experiences shame, while the second time, he musters the courage to call his harasser out.

>>



>> However, *Bill's New Frock* was first published over 30 years ago. I can't think of any middle-grade book published in the UK since *Bill's New Frock* that has focused, even partly, on PSH experienced by pre-teen children. This is staggering in light of the rise of third-wave feminism in the 1990s and fourth-wave feminism in the 2010s, and particularly following the advent of the #MeToo movement in 2006 when media began to focus strongly on the prevalence of sexual harassment in various public and private spheres.

I wasn't alone in struggling to think of examples of PSH in middle-grade books. I put out a call in the various writing and literature *Facebook* groups I belong to, asking if anyone knew of any more recent middle-grade stories that even include PSH, even if the main plot does not explicitly focus on this topic.

No-one could. One person commented that this was disappointing, as the PSH of young children is a widespread and serious problem that shouldn't be ignored. My first experience of PSH happened when I was nine, and while I didn't understand the full implications of an "adult man leering at me with one hand moving in his pocket" at that age, I was still confused, frightened, and ended up feeling unsafe in that public space. Pre-teens and other young children undoubtedly experience PSH - so why doesn't it turn up more often in literature aimed at that age group?

I believe that a major reason is how uncomfortable many adults feel about confronting the fact that there are not an insignificant number of people (usually cis men and boys, although not always) who would sexually harass such young children. >>

>> It is, perhaps, a little more palatable to people to acknowledge that PSH happens to people in their late teens because despite still being children, those teens will often have a vocabulary around sex and sexuality (and, by extension, sexual aggression), and be able to verbalise their experiences and understandings. So, discussing PSH with them is perhaps easier. In addition, writers may feel uncomfortable about broaching any aspect of sex, sexuality, or sexual aggression with a younger child who may not have begun recognising and developing their own sexuality yet. Even with the vast distance between an author and a reader, the adult might feel that they are effectively initiating a conversation about sex with a child that they are not a parent or guardian, which, to many adults, would feel like an abusive act in and of itself – particularly if the book is intended to be read independently by a child, instead of being read with a guardian.

Children's books that feature narratives about sexual assault often have them happen 'off the page', with the act described in more clinical, less explicit terms later in the story; 'he touched my private parts', for example. However, this would be more difficult to do with an instance of PSH. PSH may entirely consist of, for example, words shouted at a child that would have to be repeated verbatim to show that this was sexual harassment instead of anger, ageism, racism, or another form of non-sexual negative interaction. Similarly, a sexual gesture, or the public masturbation I unknowingly witnessed aged nine, is difficult to describe in a narrative without being explicit. Even adult readers may not necessarily identify an instance of PSH in a generalised description of "a man with his hand in his pocket".

meet our writer

Alice is a freelance writer based in Oxfordshire. A member of the *Our Streets Now* team, Alice spends her free time running, lifting, playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, and annoying her two long-suffering cats.

An author writing about PSH for a young audience would have to tread the line of being clear without being so explicit that the book would end up being marketed towards an older age group because of the content.

Preserving this innocence – or, to put it in more realistic terms, this lack of knowledge – in young children is another reason that writers may not be addressing the topic of PSH in middle-grade books. Currently, educational policy in England mandates compulsory Relationship Education for primary school-aged children, but Sex Education is only required at a secondary level (although primary schools can opt to teach it).(4) >>

>> While primary-level Relationships Education could include a component on PSH, particularly as part of the emphasis on "Respect for others", the main focus of the curriculum seems to be on modelling healthy relationships between family members and school peers, and educating children about bullying or emotional abuse - necessary learning, but not the only kinds of negative interactions a child will encounter.(5)

Adults may fear that including PSH in the curriculum, or in books or other media, might make them aware of something they had hitherto not noticed and would result in a child becoming fearful because of their understanding. This may also be why there are more children's books that deal with direct sexual assault and child sexual abuse, such as *Maybe He Just Likes You*(6) and *When You Know What I Know*(7), than with PSH.

While sexual abuse and assault of children are considered severe and direct enough to warrant raising awareness in young readers, the non-physical nature of PSH may mean that adults, including writers, hope children may simply not notice it, and drawing attention to it may only cause distress. It is also possible that PSH has been so normalised within society that authors - even those who have experienced PSH themselves - do not feel the need to focus on it because they view it as an inevitable and "natural" part of life. PSH is a form of violence, even when it does not escalate into physical attacks. However, it is not commonly perceived as such at this point in time. Currently, we live in a world where young children are sexually harassed in public - and children's authors, as adults who care about children and their welfare, need to acknowledge this.

They need to prepare their child readers for the fact that PSH exists and show them that, when it happens, it happens because the harasser chose to do so, not because of anything the harassed child did.

Unfortunately, many young readers will experience PSH and the accompanying feelings of fear, shame and confusion - and reading about it in the stories they love might help those children feel less alone and, most importantly, realise that they are not responsible for the sexually aggressive actions of an adult or another child. We need to get past our own discomfort, the way that we did with books for teens and young adults, and bring the topic out into the open - and show the child reader that, whether they clap back like Bill, or stay quiet because that's what they need to do to stay safe at the moment, what has happened to them is real, serious, and not their fault. ●

inspiring reading

TITLE Blood Moon
AUTHOR Lucy Cuthew
PUBLISHER Walker Books
YEAR 2020
LANGUAGE English
GENRE YA



YOUNG AND PASSIONATELY FEMALE

Written by GEMMA TUTTON

TW homophobia, misogyny, fetishisation.

Illustration by DELPHINA H
(@callmedaphne)



I realised why you hate us.
And why this hate presents itself
through fear, fetish, and then anger.
We're the embodiment of desirability
what you look up at 2 am
we're portrayed as yours.
Young and passionately female
yet we do not care for you or your desires
and still, you see us as a performance
something to watch, desire and use
until we're not.
Until we say no
until the message finally breaks through,
we're just not that into you.
And no, there is no need or desire for a man
to make the love we have real.
Cracks appear, and your ego shows bruised and blue
your tongue spews hate
because how could we ever not engage
with what you desire
it isn't just that we enjoy each other without you
'nice legs' turns to 'what a waste',
turns to *insert slur here*
and that softness you once saw turns from desirable,
to desirably easy to target
every green flag which told you 'go'
turns to red, and you turn into a ball of rage,
charging at them hate.
Attacking our youth, our gender,
the blissful absence of you
and the flowers of joy and love which grow from that.
Because what is femininity without its service to men
so when I see that 92% of queer girls have been publicly sexually harassed
I feel their fear from your rage
I feel their hurt from your hate
I feel their anger from your absolute arrogance and entitlement
and together, we stand in protest.



THE DISGUISED SEXISM SOLD TO US BY THE MEDIA

The media reinforces sexist attitudes, influencing public sexual harassment by covert sexism ingrained in society. Narratives portrayed in different forms of digital production are a massive influence, with undercovered sexism everywhere, from marketing campaigns plastered on billboards to fictional films shaping children's image of gender.

It is not shocking that the media is riddled with sexist jokes, backwards attitudes and harmful stereotypes of women and girls. The advertisement and commodification of femininity to damsels in distress and underlying sexist perspectives surrounding gender roles and sexuality in Western societies are evident in the conceptualisation of these representations.

Written by ZHARA KEOGH-BEHAN

Illustration by LADINADESIGNS
(@ladinadesigns)

TW public sexual harassment, rape culture, victim-blaming, misogyny, hypersexualisation.

In 2014, Laura Bates published *Everyday Sexism* exploring the different branches of everyday sexism, including testimonies from her website, *Everyday Sexism Project*. Although this was written nearly a decade ago, entries to the *Everyday Sexism Project* website remain consistent. Most importantly, her chapter 'zooming in on everyday sexism and media' brings to light the many ways sexism lies in visual representations of women and men's attitudes towards women.

The content we consume in the UK, mainly consisting of UK and USA-produced media, portrays narratives of double standards and underlying references to rape culture. Bates comments on the everyday sexism which occurs in our media and mainstream press as "the biggest and most important example in this country. >>

"Teaching girls to degrade and sexualise themselves to make a statement to an influential male figure is not a lesson that is truly feminist."



>> I just think how can we fight the other forms of sexism if every day the work is undone and undermined by the big booming message that screams from all of these 'WOMEN YOU ARE NOTHING, YOU ARE WORTHLESS, YOU ARE HERE FOR OUR ENTERTAINMENT AND WE WILL USE AND TREAT YOU HOW WE WANT'."(1)

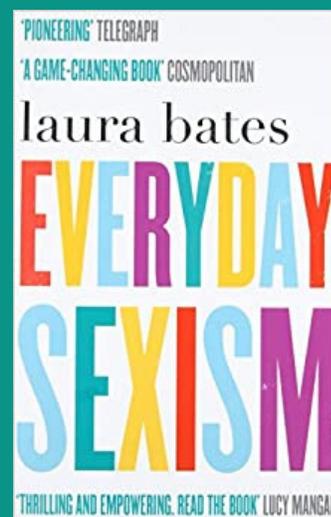
Bates exemplifies this through the popularity of songs like Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams' *Blurred Lines* - which was highly criticised for its lines referring to rape - or, more covertly, The Wanted's *Walk Like Rihanna*, which represents women only being valued for their sexual looks. The promotion of lyrics such as these - reflected in the bottom layer of the rape culture pyramid - depicts the public sexual harassment (PSH) of 'catcalling' and the everyday sexism of the 'locker room banter' that we are forced to endure. More recently, awareness of the harm of similar lyrics has been recognised, with Pharrell Williams releasing an apologetic statement for the lyrics in the song *Blurred Lines*, in reference to his naivety at the time. Such awareness may be due to the increasing attention on social media and the calling out of controversial male attitudes towards women.

So, if this is the case, then undoubtedly, sexist attitudes are on the decline. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. The male gaze, although frowned upon, is still a fundamental part of society, with the media inadvertently sustaining and influencing heteronormative ideals. The methods of portraying conventional gender roles and stereotypes are becoming more covert. Feminine and masculine aesthetics still exist in advertisements and marketing campaigns: the "pink and blue marketing tactic" is used to reach a target audience by using pink for females and blue for males, putting gender in the box of traditional colour association. The use of pink and blue are becoming more and more uncommon. However, they have been replaced with floral features for women and dark earthy tones for men.(2) This shows a form of covert sexism disguised as a movement forward.

Another form of covert sexism is shown through the "good girl phenomenon", used to represent the ideal women as passive, young, thin and white; still apparent in 85% of advertisements featuring women. These narratives come with an additional obsession with marriage and finding the 'perfect man'. >>

inspiring reading

TITLE Everyday Sexism
AUTHOR Laura Bates
PUBLISHER Simon & Shuster
YEAR 2014
LANGUAGE English
GENRE Feminism, Sexism, Gender Issues



>> Storyboards, ethics and meanings are creatively discussed within the long and strenuous process of producing a visual product, raising the question: how can marketing teams and ethics boards overlook the impact of harmful sexist messages? Therefore, the importance of delving into this topic allows us to bring to light the intake of sexist attitudes through everyday visual narratives, raising awareness of the lack of ethics and harm it may have on everyday mentalities towards females.

How advertisements are perceived by society has developed over time due to the awareness around sexism, this has caused a split of opinion of whether images are “iconic” or “harmful”. For example, Wonderbra’s *Hello Boys!* campaign in 1994 is still one of the most popular and impactful campaigns in the UK, with the billboard having “sent men veering off the roads”.(3) The sexist tone of the advertisement is arguably vastly clear in its message of pleasing men or “boys” and in its use of sexualisation and the male gaze on women’s bodies. Advertisements which portray such messages are influential in the mentality of male dominance and possession of the female body. In turn, it leads to verbal, physical and sexual consequences in the form of harassment: the automatic (and entirely wrong) assumption that if a woman’s breasts are exposed, she is broadcasting the message of “Hello Boys!” to gain male attention and to serve male pleasures. By reinforcing heteronormative roles, the advertisement is not only visually broadcasting (by means of a billboard) heteronormativity but also allowing a deterministic male view that every woman is available to them despite their status in the LGBTQ+ community.

In recent times, with the recognition of sexualisation as sexist and harmful, the *Hello Boys!* campaign by Wonderbra was relaunched in 2018.(4) As opposed to *Hello Boys*, the advertisement’s message *Hello Me* was similarly advertised on billboards across the UK to celebrate an era of empowerment. The campaign focuses on self-love for women instead of acting according to the male gaze, which is a more meaningful and impactful message to portray. Nevertheless, despite this recent awareness surrounding sexist norms, a re-launch addressing a previous campaign does not remove the underlying sexism in a society fuelled by these images in the media.

Most prominently in academic research, Angela McRobbie delves into the male gaze interconnected with ideologies in the media.(5) Bridget Jones is a prime example of the pop culture ingrained in societal norms discussed by McRobbie, setting an example that the male gaze is present in every female action. >>

meet our writer

Zhara is a Criminology graduate working in social media and creating content with food (while eating it too, of course!). She is passionate about how social issues link with marketing and hopes to create fun campaigns without the underlying stereotypes.

>> Bridget Jones' character seeks empowerment in her professional and personal life. The navigation of independence in Bridget Jones' relationships and career throughout the film aims to defy the negative voices around her. Specifically, society's value of an idyllic body size makes its way into every part of her life. The film's core message intends to normalise different body sizes, specifically in the world of relationships and sexual attraction.

However, this is dragged down by fantasising about fulfilling a traditional female role, serving the purpose of wife, mother and homemaker. Bridget Jones' actions depict confusion about how to act as a feminist; is she seeking empowerment for herself, or is she trapped under the male gaze? This is explicitly shown in a scene where she confidently walks into her office empowered by her transparent blouse, with the core purpose of gaining male attention. Teaching girls to degrade and sexualise themselves to make a statement to an influential male figure is not a lesson that is truly feminist.

Although the messages of body positivity and independence are central throughout, Bridget Jones has been branded as an anti-feminist, showing an imbalance of moral messages for young girls. However, the film remains a pop culture classic, usually referenced as an accompaniment to ice cream as a post-break-up necessity for young girls. Because, what a girl needs to get over her ex-partner, is the lesson of how to sexualise themselves and obsess over their weight as the reason for the relationship's inevitable end. If teenage girls are sitting on the sofa relating to Bridget Jones at her lowest point of heartbreak, then the influence of the importance of drawing male attention is major.

While criticism has drawn attention to the underlying sexism, films and television programmes are still obsessed with the principle idea of finding the perfect man to marry and settle down; putting this above career aspiration and personal growth. Furthermore, the body positivity discussion is directly aimed at white women. This creates an issue of heteronormative ideals and racialises these ideals, specifically in mainstream media, linking back to the 'good girl phenomenon' where whiteness comes into the idyllic image of a woman.

Depictions of sexist behaviour in the media are becoming increasingly covert, with academic research delving into the different definitions of feminism in modern-day media. One that is particularly interesting is the term 'Media Ready feminism', which defines feminism in the media as an empowering feminist facade that feeds back into patriarchy.⁽⁶⁾ The conceptualisation of 'Media Ready Feminism' considers developing definitions of modern feminism, presenting a modern perspective that arises in everyday images in the media. The commodification of heterosexuality and male fantasy, disguised as "girl power", causes a skewed version of feminism which is sold to women. Regression in removing sexist norms is caused by society rewarding narratives that draw sexism rather than focusing on sexism not occurring in the first place.

Furthermore, having male-orientated control over the representation of empowerment removes the ability of the individual to decide what empowerment means to them. Instead of opening up the conversation for individuality outside of gender, there is a continuing focus on the so-called "accomplishments" of the mainstream feminist movement, such as having an all-female cast in Hollywood films. While this is a positive step forward in mainstream film and television, it should be the norm, not a rare occasion. >>

>> The measure of female voice and non-male-centred conversation between female characters is lacking in a disproportionate amount of Hollywood films.(7) Although the idea of non-male-centred conversation is raised, the underlying sexism still exists. For example, the fact that two female characters may have a scene talking about something other than men, sex and relationships doesn't remove the sexism from an accompanying scene of a woman receiving "catcalling" as a compliment.

Personally, this is most memorable in Amy Schumer's character in the film *I Feel Pretty*. The female lead is characterised as not conventionally "pretty" as decided by society; this is in terms of body size and height, which are continually compared to the unrealistic images of supermodels. However, she wakes up one morning believing she is the most beautiful woman in the world. Her empowered confidence and fearlessness come from within, but their validation is found in men's attitudes. For instance, the joyous reactions to men whistling to her on the street, constantly asking for dates and entering wet t-shirt competitions designed to sexualise women are all part of the validation of her beauty which sparks her inner confidence. In turn, this contributes to the normalisation of sexist behaviours and attitudes through sustaining hypersexualised treatment of women as if they are not human. The terms "catcalling" and "wolf-whistling", for instance, are animalistic and degrading. Partaking in activities intended to serve men's gratification, disguised as something that represents inner confidence, is harmful and normalises the male gaze. Being the subject of the male gaze is not a compliment and is an example of patriarchy and heteronormativity in modern society.

This heteronormativity in the media further contributes to the silencing of the LGBTQ+ community by imposing conventional masculine/feminine characteristics. The stereotype of the "hero" as a strong muscular male goes hand in hand with the damsel in distress narrative. These fixed forms of gender roles are portrayed in *Disney* movies. The hero/damsel in distress narratives harms the perspective of young girls and suppresses the exploration of typically feminine traits amongst boys. There is a significant impact of heteronormativity in the media on LGBTQ+ people, where homosexuality is seen as the Other to the heterosexual norm.(8) 'Queerness' of storylines exemplified in children's films are typically based on stereotypes, where villains are associated explicitly with queer connotations due to their exaggeration of gender. For example, the notion that villainesses reflect drag queens' characteristics comes from *Disney* films such as *The Little Mermaid*, where Ursula is modelled from the performer and drag queen Divine. Further, prominent, drag-queen-esk makeup is worn by various *Disney* villainesses, contrasting against the minimal appearance of princesses and heroines.(9)

Heterosexual storylines reinforce the outlook on relationships for young people, where hetero-romantic love is portrayed as both magical and natural. This heteronormative perception of love is one that is exceptional and defies everything in the character's regular and usually restricted life. However, emphasising heterosexual love creates a gendered view of romance and relationships, which normalises heteronormativity. Recently, there has been an effort to move away from making so many gendered typecast roles by creating more female-led heroes and princesses with more complexity than the one 'saved by the prince'. There are still barriers to exploring LGBTQ+ characters, where the interpretation of characters' sexuality seems bigger than a genuine representation.

>>

>> Individuality away from romantic storylines has been shown through the popularity of *Frozen*, where children follow the journey of Elsa, who does not encounter romantic problems, and Anna, who also finds that men are not the answer to everything. Furthermore, *Black Widow* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe creates a film which individually focuses on a female lead without the help of the many male leads. Although this does not undo the damage of the damsel in distress narrative, it has created a new era of films that future generations can identify with.

The development of narratives in mainstream media is apparent in the trial and error of various descriptions in visual images. The central theme found while exploring different forms of media is the covert sexism which underlies the media we see and experience in everyday life. Although the awareness of sexism is increasing, the sexist nuances in the media are still present. Classic storylines, such as those in romantic comedies that reflect the male gaze and hetero-romance and the blurred line between the empowerment of feeling “sexy” and sexualising women as a marketing tool, are engrained narratives in our media intake and what we all grew up with.

But why should our experiences of film, music and adverts growing up have sexism weaved throughout? Our future generations deserve a diverse range of narratives that reflect different emotions and experiences that reflect reality rather than a heteronormative fantasy that has been forced upon us so far. We are seeing a gradual productive change in the mainstream media. However, continuous analysis of whether sexism underlies is necessary.

Moving forward, the education of social issues within the creation of visual images is the best way to produce narratives which reach a range of audiences without pushing an ideal way of life. The more politically aware the mainstream media becomes, the more we will observe a proactive and positive change in the media that young people receive. ●

Do You Have A Boyfriend?

A night out is supposed to be full of dancing, laughter and joy, but nights out sometimes come with darker clouds that aren't easily erased. Radha and Kai decide to unwind after a week at work, but date night soon turns sour at the hands of a stranger.

Written by ASHA ASKOOLAM

Illustration by LACUNNA
(@la_cunna)

TW depression, anxiety, sexual abuse, public sexual harassment, misogyny.

It was a typical Friday night; Radha and Kai decided to go to a local bar after work and a long, hard-working week to let loose and have some fun. Radha hadn't been for a night out in a while as she'd been so busy with work and starting her grad scheme.

The club was in a basement underneath a bar, the lights were dim, but the twinkle pierced through the dark blue glow, glittering across the bar.

"Wanna get a drink?" Radha asked, tugging on Kai's hand. He smiled, eyes dancing in the twinkle of the fairy lights. He leaned down and kissed her. Radha melted against his body, hands coming up to clutch his shirt. When he pulled back, he kissed her forehead.

Radha giggled, kissing his neck, before turning towards the crowd by the bar with Kai right behind her. It was already quite busy, but it would surely get louder and more alive as the evening passed by. At the bar, she grabbed the drinks menu while Kai stood behind her with his arms around her waist, chin on her shoulder.

"What do you want to drink?" she asked, showing him the menu. "Hmm, just whatever you're having," he responded, kissing her bare shoulder, "you know I'm not fussy about drinks. It's also really unfair that you've chosen to wear this. How am I supposed to keep my hands off you?"

Radha flushed, feeling her cheeks heat up. >>

>> Even after all this time of being together, he still managed to make her giggle like a teenager. “You bought this for me, remember?”

She was wearing a mustard dress that hugged her frame, showing off her curves. It had a plunging neckline and thin strappy straps. The back was open with a criss-cross pattern that needed to be tied to hold the dress up and zipped to the length of the dress at her waist. It fell around her upper thighs with a pretty lace design.

“I know I did,” Kai smirked, kissing her neck, “I love it on you.”

Leaning back against him, Radha smiled, “then don’t complain.”

Once they ordered their drinks, they moved to one of the booths to sit down. The music was quite loud and, thankfully, not terrible. Radha’s drink tasted sweet, the flavour danced on her tongue and lips until Kai leaned in, kissing her softly so that all she could taste, feel, and sense was him.

Sometimes, she wondered if he would ever grow tired of kissing her and if the feeling of safety in his chest would feel old and tired. But when she felt his hands cup her face and heard the hum at the back of his throat when she kissed him back, she knew he never would. For some reason, they had been brought together, and she suspected it would stay that way for as long as she had oxygen in her lungs.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Kai asked when he pulled away, hands still holding her face, “you look like you’re in deep thought about something.”

Radha laughed, shaking her head, “it’s nothing. I was just thinking about you.”

Kai looked at her with an expression she could only describe as adoration before he took her hand and led her to the dancefloor. >>



>> It didn't matter how often she danced with him or felt his hands against her skin, she would still feel butterflies in her stomach and giggle against his neck.

"Don't tell me someone's feeling it already," he joked, spinning her around so that her back was to his chest, hands on her hips.

Radha leaned her head against his shoulder, "we both know I can drink more than that before I start to feel it. Not as much as you, but still more than one drink."

"You make it sound like I have some kind of problem," Kai grinned, helping her move her hips to the song's rhythm blasting from the DJ's speakers.

"Just a little," Radha laughed.

The night started off being exactly what she needed to unwind. She could feel herself letting go of the week's stresses, enjoying the feeling of being held with the beat of the music dancing off her skin in a dim glow. About halfway through the night and a couple of drinks later, Radha was waiting for Kai to return from the bathroom at their table. She leaned back in the seat and stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows creep across.

"Hey, pretty," a voice said to her left.

Radha looked up, seeing a stranger sink into the booth next to her. He smelt of cigarettes and alcohol and had a toothy grin and glinting eyes. He made her feel uncomfortable, just by how he looked at her, like she was something to devour.

"I'm not interested," she replied, getting up when he grabbed her wrist.

"I only wanna talk," he smirked, slurring his words slightly. His friends were walking over from the bar, three other men following. And all of them were smiling that same smile. It was the grin that every man who had ever touched her inappropriately, followed her, or made her feel uncomfortable, wore. Luke had been the same. He had never cared about her boundaries or how uncomfortable he made her. He would always be the man that lied, hurt and attacked her, and despite being in prison for what he did to her, there would always be a Luke with the same smile and demeanour that say *we don't care*.

"And I said that I'm not interested," Radha pulled her wrist free, "I said no."

"What, do you have a boyfriend?" one of the men said. He had dark eyes and wore glasses. >>

inspiring reading

TITLE He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know is

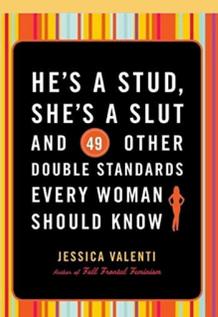
AUTHOR Jessica Valenti

PUBLISHER Seal Press

YEAR 2008

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Feminism, gender studies, cultural, political



meet our writer

Asha is a writer with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing and a Master's degree in Creative Writing. She has a background in content writing, having written for her campus' paper *Smoke Magazine* and edited the English Society's blog. She enjoys discovering new worlds and magical places for people to escape to. Everyone has a story, and as long as you're willing to listen, you'll find the one meant for you.

>> Though he looked like any other guy you'd see at a club, he had that wicked look in his eye, a cunning smile that said, *I want this one.*

"What does it matter if I do or don't? I said I'm not interested. That should be enough. What, so you'd respect my hypothetical boyfriend more than me saying no?" Radha scoffed, "geez, learn how to take rejection."

She grabbed her bag and stood up, walking away from them, ignoring how they laughed, leered and swore at her. And then she felt one of them slap her butt as she walked past. Radha didn't even turn around. For a moment, she froze, feeling the eyes of people around her staring, laughing or telling their friends. At that moment, she felt utterly alone, vulnerable and frightened. The worst thing? No one did anything. With tears in her eyes, she ran down the stairs to the bathrooms, not caring about bursting into the men's toilets. She called out for Kai with a sob in her throat.

"Baby! Hey, hey, what's wrong?" he spun around from the hand dryers, drying off his hands. The minute he saw the tears on her cheeks and the scared look on her face, he brought her into his arms. "Sweetheart, it's okay. I'm here. I'm here. What happened?"

"You...you were gone for so long," she sobbed into his chest, arms wrapping around his back and holding on tight. Logically, she knew that he was only gone for just over five minutes, but it had felt like an eternity.

"I know, I know," he replied, stroking her hair with one hand and the other around her, "I'm sorry, baby. There was a queue, and half the toilets were blocked. What happened?"

Radha looked up at him, well aware that people were staring at them. "Can...can we go, please? It smells awful in here."

Kai kissed her forehead and nodded, "yeah, sure, it's pretty disgusting down here, huh?"

When they passed the group of men that had bothered Radha, one of them shouted, "so you do have a boyfriend! Good luck with that one, mate. She's a right prude."

That made Kai pause. He frowned, looking down at Radha and then the drunk men.

"Kai -"

"They did something, baby?" he asked. Radha could see anger and concern swimming on his face, melding over with the love she could see in his eyes; his fierce need to protect her was something she wasn't sure she'd ever get used to.

"It doesn't matter -"

Kai nodded, a grimace on his face. That was enough to answer his question. It happened quite quickly; one minute, Radha could see him putting something together in his head, and the next, he was walking over to the table, despite her trying to pull him back.

"She's just got taste, dickhead," Kai spat at them, picking up one of their drinks and pouring it over their heads. Without a second glance back, he took Radha's hand and said, "c'mon, honey, let's get out of here."

Outside and in the cool air, Radha felt her eyes brim with more tears. Kai pulled her back into his arms before they took over. >>

>> “Did they hurt you?” he asked. His voice was soft, but she could hear the residual anger he had felt towards those men in his tone.

“He grabbed my wrist,” Radha said softly, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Kai took her wrist in his hand and kissed it gently. “It’s okay now, baby. They can’t hurt you anymore. I got you. You’re safe now.”

“He...slapped my butt too,” Radha squeezed her eyes shut, feeling shame and guilt washing over her body as if it was somehow her fault. But she knew it wasn’t. Still, it didn’t stop those feelings from creeping up on her.

“Radha, look at me,” Kai nudged his nose against hers, dipping his head to get her attention.

When she opened her eyes, more tears spilt free, but she was met with nothing but warmth and kindness on his face. “You don’t need to feel shame or guilt or think I’m going to be angry with you somehow. What happened has nothing to do with you or how you dress, and it is absolutely not your fault.”

“I know,” Radha nodded, hugging him tightly so she could bury her face in his chest, “it was just so horrible, and it made me relive so many things.”

Kai took off his jacket when she shivered and wrapped it around her, “I know, and I know that I can’t protect you from it all, and you shouldn’t have to live with this fear. It’s not fair at all. What can I do to help?”

Radha looked up at him, a small smile forming on her lips, “it’s not fair that they listened to you.

It’s not fair that I live in a constant state of fear. It isn’t okay that I had to take self-defence classes to feel safe, rather than young boys and men understanding and respecting consent. And I know I can’t change any of that, at least not in a big way. I already know those things aren’t my fault. It’s nice that you say them to me when I’m scared or harsh on myself, though. You being here, that’s more than enough. But if you ever see that happening to someone else and I’m not there, make sure they’re safe, or if you hear any of your friends talking about women in the same way, call them out on it.”

“Of course I will,” Kai nodded, kissing her forehead, “little by little, you’re going to change the world, baby. And I’ll be right there with you.”

Before leaving, Radha decided to tell the bouncers about what had happened. In the Uber that drove her and Kai home, she turned to see the four men being kicked out of the club. She knew that she could not have physically removed them from the club, and they would not have listened to her, especially being a woman and not a staff member. A part of her was relieved, and the other part was annoyed because, of course, they were only removed when another man kicked them out. Of course, they only backed off when Kai made his presence known. Men will always respect another man’s presence, opinion and voice, even if it were a hypothetical man she used to get them to back off.

The cycle of public sexual harassment would continue long into the future. Radha knew that, but at least she may have saved another Little Red Riding Hood from being frightened that night. ●

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