



PENN WOMEN'S RUGBY

Dear Women of Penn Rugby,

As I tried to fall asleep tonight, pieces of this letter kept drifting through my mind, and I realized I was never going to get to sleep until I put it all together and got it out to all of you. I'm writing because this holiday weekend, after flying to another state to visit a Penn rugger bestie, I had a long conversation that I can't get out of my head.

I'm sure you're aware of the rising discussion and controversy around sexual assault (especially on college campuses), what constitutes sexual assault, and the complete inadequacy of our society's methods of addressing it and, even more importantly, preventing it from happening. I'm aware of it too. I've followed the cases in the news, the dialogues they spark, and the changes happening too slowly, but happening nonetheless. And I've been thankful that nothing like that has ever happened to me, or to anyone I'm close to. In all my time at Penn, I never once felt unsafe, unprotected, or violated in any way, physically or emotionally. Nor had any of my close friends, as far as I knew. The more women speak out about what has happened to them, and the more our statistics on campus rape and sexual assault approach true accuracy, the more I appreciate that my experience of complete safety and assurance is not the norm. To me - thankfully - those statistics have always been numbers.

That is, until a conversation with two (non-rugger) women this weekend brought those numbers terrifyingly to life. Yesterday, seven and a half years after graduating, I found out that one of my closest college friends had lost her virginity by being raped and raped at a party at Penn. She never said anything to anyone. "I had only had a drink or two, and I don't remember anything after that. The next thing I remember, some guy was on top of me. I told him to stop and go get my roommate, and I have to give him credit because he did, and he used a condom, but it was still scary - I wasn't on birth control or anything. I still have no idea what happened. I felt sick all the day after, but I tried to make excuses for it. I actually lied to my mom and told her I had the flu. I didn't want to think that I had been drugged." She had tried to shrug it off. "At the time," she explained, "I thought that sex made me, you know, sophisticated and experienced. So it wasn't that big a deal. In hindsight, it was dirty and gross and horrible. I didn't even admit what happened to myself until years later."

And the stories just kept coming. And not friend-of-a-friend, I-heard-this-happened-to-some-girl stories; these were first person experiences. Frat parties and house parties where girls were served "non-alcoholic" punch loaded with Everclear, then taken upstairs (where no one but residents were allowed) and assaulted behind locked doors with their friends frantically trying to get to them. A girl who, sitting in a casual get-together with mostly guy friends, had one of those guys sit on top of her and stick his hand down her pants before another girl could shove him off of her. The guy walked out of the room - while all the other guys laughed and couldn't understand why the girls were so upset - then came back and threw a baseball at the girl who didn't appreciate his attentions. More laughter ensued. The other guys didn't even understand that this was a completely unacceptable and deeply traumatic experience for both girls involved. My friends also enlightened me to a number of grey areas that haven't even been discussed in the media. For example, sometimes there is a level of coercion that doesn't feel precisely like

coercion. "I never felt threatened or anything, and I always felt empowered and like had a choice," one girl said. "But it was the kind of situation where, like, I could give him a blowjob or not, and I didn't really want to, but if I didn't, I knew he would throw such a hissy fit and make such a big deal about it that it just wasn't worth it to me, so I'd just give him the blowjob." She thought for a moment. "I guess it felt like I had a choice, but there was so much implicit pressure to make it that it wasn't a choice exactly."

Or another grey area, the I'm -too-drunk-to-make-decisions-but-it's-not-obvious problem. As one friend described it, "I would be super drunk, even blacked out, but I guess I wasn't acting like a total mess, because my friends usually thought I was ok. And I would do something dumb or leave with some guy that I wasn't really into, and later I'd go to my friends and say 'Why did you let me leave with that guy?' and they'd be like 'What? We thought you were fine, and you're the one who left with him.' Like I wish they had realized that I was way too far gone and they should've stopped me." The other girl nodded. She'd been in the same position. Sounds like a lot of people have.

As more and more of this came out, the discussion provoked two distinct emotional responses in me. The first was terror. These things happened at Penn. AT PENN! To people I knew! A place where I felt nothing but safe! How could that be? How many other women experienced this? How many women still do? How many women do I personally know that have had traumatic experiences they've buried, excused, shrugged off, or accepted without discussion? And how close have I come to being one of them? Part of what kept me awake tonight was wondering this. "I read somewhere that 1 in 5 women has been sexually assaulted in some way at some time in her life," my Penn friend told me. "Judging just by my close friends - the people in my life that I would know if something like this happened to them - it's at least that. Maybe 1 in 4. Maybe more."

On the other hand, the second emotion this evoked in me was a profound and overwhelming sense of gratitude, and this is the reason I'm writing to you, women of Penn Rugby, rather than posting this as an article in some internet forum somewhere. You, women who shared my time at Penn, are the reason these experiences were not a part of my life, and for that I want to thank you.

Thank you for creating an environment where I felt free and safe to do whatever I wanted, be whatever I was, and fuck or not fuck who I pleased, as I pleased. Thank you for laughing at me while I made out with dudes (or women) in dark corners and then removing me from those situations when I was clearly too drunk to remove myself. Thank you for all the dancefloors, hallway floors, bathroom floors, dorm room beds, common room couches, curbsides and backyards and basements where I blacked out, passed out, threw up, or just generally lost my shit, and you took care of me and made sure I was ok. Thank you for the two times I can remember you physically picking me up and carrying me home.

Thank you for that time that I was hooking up with that dude in my room during Fling, and more than one of you (more than TWO of you, if i remember correctly) walked in on us half-naked without knocking because you knew I was drunk and you wanted to make 100% sure I wanted to be doing what I was doing. We have laughed about that day for the almost nine years since it

happened, because it really was a hilarious situation, but tonight for the first time I am thinking of it and actually crying tears of love and gratitude, because what if I hadn't been 100% sure? You would have picked that dude up and literally thrown him out of my house, and for that I cannot tell you how much I thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you for your kindness and your laughter. Thank you for your fierceness and your protectiveness and your care. Thank you for your time and your effort and every time you never judged me. Thank you for your friendship. Thank you for having my back.

And to all Penn ruggers, both those I know and those I never met, or have yet to meet, or may never meet: take care of each other. Push and shove. Break down doors. Do what you have to do, but don't let any rugger (or any friend) be a statistic if you can do something to stop it. Make sure your girls don't get seven or ten or twenty years down the road nursing injuries that had nothing to do with the pitch. I hope none of you have injuries I could have prevented. I hope I always did my best to help you as you helped me. And I hope you know that if there's any way I can help you now, or ever, I will.

You will always be the strongest, toughest, most fun, most wonderful women I know. I wish everyone could be as thankful for someone as I am for you.

Rugger Love,
Katie