Growing up female in America

Women in this country have remained silent for far too long. I’m writing this article in order to share my experiences as a privileged white female in America (mind you, I am not “complaining” because I realize any of the bad experiences I have had pale in comparison to the atrocities women and girls face in other countries and to the experiences victims of sexual assault and rape endure). I am not sharing my story to be seen as a “victim” as I am not a victim. In fact, I sense many women don’t share their experiences because they don’t want to be seen as victims or whining or complaining. Another hesitation: I don’t like to make people uncomfortable. However, I realize a change only happens when people are uncomfortable. I hope by sharing a few of these uncomfortable experiences of a white privileged female who grew up with a normal life in the Midwestern United States will give the men reading this article a better understanding of the female perspective. You might better understand why a man like Trump is polling as unlikeable by 69% of women and how his demeanor signals that we are entering a new misogynistic era.

Background

I grew up in a family where my parents weren’t exposed to a corporate culture per se. My mom stayed at home with us kids after working as a nurse to put my dad through medical school. My dad was a physician. I never felt any gender strain at home. I saw my dad cook and do dishes, when it needed done (if my mom was sick, she was attending an art class or something, he just wanted to do something nice for her, or he sensed she needed a break). They were a team and each one did what needed to be done. However, the gender roles were pretty traditional due to the fact that mom was home and dad was at work. I viewed it as a practicality thing not necessarily a gender thing. In the confines of my home, I was never told or felt there was anything I couldn’t do because I was a girl. However, the real world would have other plans.

THE COLLEGE YEARS

“Am I being paid to let these guys pinch my ass and hit on me?”

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I worked at the country club in my hometown of 50,000 people. The club scored the oil and gas convention: a 3-day extravaganza of oil and gas “executives” who golfed, swam, drank and ate. During day two, I asked my boss who was female, “Am I being paid (mind you I was paid minimum wage with all tips going to the club) to serve these men drinks and food or for them to pinch my ass and hit on me?”

“Well honey, your job is to make sure they have a good time. If that means they flirt with you and get a little rowdy, you need to handle it like an adult.
So, yes, unfortunately, you’re getting paid to let them hit on you,” my manager answered. While serving coffee to the drunk white males about 30 years my senior, they trapped me at the end of the long table against the wall, feeling up my dress (yes, we had to wear these uniforms that looked like maid’s outfits), asking me if the snatch matched (I have red hair).Truthfully, I’ve blocked out much of what happened, but I do remember when one asshole in particular wouldn’t let me pass. He said, “What are you going to do now?” I remember looking him in the eye and saying, “Well, I’m the one with the pot of scalding hot coffee...I sure hope I don’t accidentally spill it on your crotch.” Laughter ensued from the other men at the table with calls of “She put you in your place Jack...She must have heard about your small dick,” etc. “That’s fine with me,” he retorted, “I like ‘em feisty,” he retorted.

**You’re lucky you’re a girl, you can start as a secretary.**
I thought I was interested in advertising at one point in college. A family friend who worked for a big dairy company was kind enough to set up an informational interview with the head of the advertising agency that handled their account. After a few pleasantries, where he talked about his important role at the agency, I shared my experience academically with advertising. He said, “Well, you are lucky you are a girl because you can start as a secretary and learn the ropes.” Mind you, I wanted a “real job” as I had already worked as a secretary. I knew I was qualified to answer phones, file, and type letters (yes, in 1985, we still typed letters). I asked politely, of course, “Is this the same advice you would give a guy who was asking you for professional advice?” “Oh, no,” he said. “We would never hire a man to be a secretary. You’re lucky that you’re a girl because you can get into the business on the ground floor.” There was no reason to explain how sexist that advice was. It was how the world worked. I’m not even sure the term “sexist” was in my vocabulary, but I knew his advice was completely unfair, but sadly, completely honest.

**Professor Pervert**
During the summer between my junior and senior year of college, I stayed at college to take classes. One of those classes was a magazine writing class. The professor told us that freelance writing for magazines is about pitching ideas and writing great articles. Therefore, attendance wouldn’t be mandatory. I thought I would love this class. There were only about 15 students. He seemed like a “cool” professor.

After the second class, I got a call from him. He said he was “taken” with me and wanted to know if we could spend some time together...maybe dinner and
drinks. Like a good girl who was raised to be polite, I said I was flattered, but I had a boyfriend. He continued with a tirade I never expected, “Who the fuck do you think you are? You flaunt your ass and flash your panties at me and then you tell me you have a boyfriend? Does he know how you act?” It went on from there, and I’ve blocked the details except how I felt. I felt dirty. I felt ashamed....as if I had done something wrong. I replayed every minute that I had been in that class. Everything I wore. Each time I asked a question. Every exchange between us. The desks were like conference room tables with a front on them, so how could he see anything, I wondered. Plus, I wasn’t wearing a dress, I was wearing shorts...not short shorts, they were Bermuda shorts. How could I have flashed my panties? I analyzed all the angles. I couldn’t go to class. After all, attendance wasn’t mandatory since it was a magazine class trying to replicate the life of a freelance magazine writer. But the attendance policy was about to change.
The week after the bizarre phone call from the professor who I will refer to as professor perv, one of my classmates who lived in my apartment complex stopped by my apartment. She and I had gone to the first two classes together, but I told her about the phone call and she understood why I opted not to go to class anymore. She told me that Professor Perv told the class that attendance would be mandatory from this point forward. He pulled her aside after class, and told her to make sure I got the message. He would flunk me if I didn’t attend class.
I clearly remember the sheer anxiety I felt about having to go back to that class. I was dreading it, and my boyfriend knew it. In some respects, it is bizarre...I wasn’t sexually assaulted... professor perv just went off on me verbally. I guess the discomfort was compounded by the fact that he was a professor, a person in authority with power over my future. The feeling of helplessness and a dirty feeling of being sexualized just made it overwhelming. My boyfriend wanted to go to class with me. I told him I didn’t think that would help, but was happy when he asked if he could take me to class and wait outside. He was one of those special people who always knew what to do to make me feel better, especially when it was something big. So, we hopped on his motorcycle with me dressed in jeans and a black turtle neck on a hot July day. I’m not sure what the black turtle neck thing is: but it’s real. When you feel like a man is viewing you in a perverse, unwanted sexual way, you just want to be covered head to toe (if I would have had a hijab, I would have worn it). Mary (the neighbor and classmate) told me we had to pitch our story idea that day. I had rehearsed all weekend with my boyfriend and roommates. I had decided to take back my power. I hoped I wouldn’t chicken out.

The day of reckoning with Professor Perv
I made no eye contact with professor pervert when I entered his classroom. As the students pitched their stories one by one down the row, I could feel my
legs shaking as my turn approached. My ears were hot and I was sure they were bright red underneath all of my hair. I was glad I had worn my hair down.

Professor Perv turned to me and said, “Paige, so happy you could join us. And what will be the subject of your feature story?”

I had rehearsed it enough that the words just oozed out of my mouth as I stared sternly into his eyes. “I am writing a feature article on the condition of inappropriate sexual advances by professors as it applies specifically to female students on college campuses.”

There was an audible gasp from my classmates (Mary had ended up telling most of them about all of Professor Perv’s phone call rant because he was continuously commenting during the classes I had missed, “Do any of you know where Paige is?”) His obsession with my attendance prompted several of them to ask Mary what was going on and she told them.

Back to the story pitching session: professor perv said, “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” I replied, staring coldly at him.

“How are you going to do a story like this? Who are your sources? What research would you do?”

I was off and running now. One of my proudest moments!

“I am going to start with examples of female students who have been approached inappropriately by people in authority. College students are the customers at a university, not a dating pool for professors. I’m going to interview the dean of students to find out what procedures are in place for reporting, documenting such offenses, and making sure the students’ grades and academic records are not negatively impacted,” and it went on from there.**

When I left class, I was shaking, but I was proud that I had stood up to him. I went outside where my boyfriend was waiting. I gave him the rundown. He beamed and said, “I knew you could do it.” He said he needed to go to the library real quick to pick up a book they were holding.

**After the day of reckoning: knight in shining armor**

The next day, I had my broadcast journalism class and my professor pulled me aside when I mentioned my topic for my next story (I was going to use the same topic for this class as my magazine class). He told me he thought it was about time somebody took care of Professor Perv. He could sense I was confused and then told me that after class he and Dr. Turner heard a commotion in Perv’s classroom. It was my boyfriend slamming Perv up against the wall screaming, “Did you see any fucking panties today Professor Fuckhead?” My broadcast journalism professor said he and Dr. Turner stuck their heads in the room and promptly turned around and left. “It’s about time somebody kicked his ass. It was just a matter of time,” he said.
I must say as a woman who saw herself as independent, competent, and secure, it was strange to me how happy it made me that my boyfriend put this guy in his place and that this other professors agreed with my boyfriend’s approach. It somehow validated the “wrongness” of what Professor Perv did to me. I guess it’s kind of sad that the validation from men that this guy was a creep is what ultimately made me feel better. However, I do believe the most effective way to reach men who exhibit offensive behavior is for other men to communicate disapproval. Since the offensive behaving men obviously don’t have respect for women, they don’t value a woman’s opinion as much as they do their buddy’s opinion.

Newspaper job interview: Are you interviewing me or my fiancé?
I interviewed for a job as a reporter and the editor said, “I see you’re engaged pointing to my ring. What does your fiancé do?” I said he was in his last year of school (this was the daily newspaper in the college town where I had graduated) and worked as an assistant manager at the liquor store. “So, when are you getting married? I mean where is he planning on moving when he graduates? Do you two want to have kids?” he asked (not rapid fire like that, but he kept probing with ever more personal questions). The interview had taken a turn to be more about my fiancé than me. Finally, I said I didn’t think an employer was allowed to ask questions like this. He and his colleague kind of grinned and said, “Oh, you don’t have to answer.” I didn’t get the job. I stopped wearing my engagement ring to interviews.

THE REAL WORLD
Get glasses
I had a boss, who I liked a lot, who thought he should give me some advice, “You should get glasses. You’re too good looking for anyone to take you seriously. Plus, it’s kind of distracting.”

So, you were a lingerie model?
I had an HR manager enter the break room where I was playing ping pong with colleagues and announce to everyone, “I heard you were a Victoria Secret model. Is that true? I want to hear all about that.”

Enduring the afterglow of business trip exploits in Asia
I sat in yet another meeting where I was the only female at the multi-national corporations where I worked. The 10 men had just returned from “business meetings” with our Asian vendors. They started the meeting by recapping their travel exploits from a recent trip to Japan. More specifically, discussing their after-hours business entertainment with the female “companions” the vendors had hired. I was appalled and disgusted. They were worse than a
locker room of stereotypical teenage boys. Finally, I said, “I’ve got stuff to do and I don’t have the time to sit here and listen to your sexual conquests in Japan, but I’m sure your wives would be interested in hearing about it.”

**It’s not just men…women can dish it out**

My editor at a daily newspaper (female) entered the newsroom and said, “Well…look at Paige today. Doesn’t she look like she just walked out of Vogue magazine?” and then followed up with “She has made me very popular at the police precinct (in reference to the fact that I was the police beat reporter). They tell me they love to see her come and they love to watch her go.” She never praised me for any of the stories I wrote or broke; the fact that I worked seven days a week if needed; covered traffic accidents/fires on my nights and days off. She only referred to my looks and the derogatory sexual comments men made about my looks.

**Affair bait?**

I had another female boss who was convinced her husband had the hots for me and suspected an affair (they owned the company together and both of them worked there). She continually harassed me and ended up firing me. She was right. He was having an affair, but it wasn’t with me. It was with her twin sister! True story.

**What’s the obsession with the color of a redhead’s pubic hair?**

At another job, I felt ashamed and embarrassed when I found out the guys had a pool going…whether the “snatch matched.” Yes, the red hair thing again and I guess that was quite a fascination for them. The race was on for a full investigation. It’s a little difficult to be taken seriously in the work place when your colleagues are focused on the color of your pubic hair. Humiliating.

**TO THE MEN I CARE ABOUT**

When I discuss gender inequality with the men in my life (both personal life and professional), I sometimes get a confused look followed by an attempt at humor that goes something like this, “I wouldn’t mind if I got sexually harassed at work…I would be flattered,” followed by laughter. I explain to them they might feel differently if they were making 72% of the money that equally or lesser qualified female counterparts were making. They might feel differently if their job performance was rarely acknowledged, especially in comparison to their looks (something of which they didn’t do to earn since they were born with those eyes, lips, hips, penis, etc.)

Another scenario is the idea that “I must think I’m pretty hot (or thought I was pretty hot). Such a cross to bear (sarcasm).” No, I don’t think I’m hot and that is precisely the point. Commenting on my looks, more precisely my body parts, at work in a positive way is almost as bad as commenting on them in a
negative way. My looks are what I was born with. I didn’t do anything to get the looks genetics gave me. Don’t get me wrong, in my personal life, I like it when the man I’m dating compliments me on something as shallow as my looks. I guess because it feels good to be attractive to someone you are attracted to. But it’s not the same at work. I’m there to achieve, not to date. Commenting on my physical attributes doesn’t elevate me, it demeans me and undermines my work.

To all the guys out there reading this, imagine that your penis was displayed daily with the size it is when erect, like women’s breasts are. Does the size of your penis have anything to do with what you can achieve at work?

PRESENT DAY – WE’VE COME A LONG WAY – Thanks Anita Hill – BUT STILL ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Now, that I am older, a different version of inappropriate gender behavior has emerged. When men in the work place are discussing younger women as objects (the interns, new hires, etc.), commenting on their body parts, making ridiculous gestures, and trying to flirt, I do what I wish someone would have done for me. In my mom voice, I ask them if they think their behavior is appropriate, especially in the work place. Sometimes they counter with the fact they think it’s flattering to the girl to get attention. Or, obviously she is asking for attention with the way she looks (reminds me of the old rape trial days where the woman’s skirt was too short so she must have been asking for it). I gently remind them that they are old enough to be this “girl’s” father and it is indeed NOT flattering to young professional women to be hit on by old men. It’s creepy and uncomfortable. The twist? They think I’m jealous! Because of course all of us women are competing with one another at work for the sexual attention of men. From their perspective I’m just jealous of these younger “girls” because my “looker days” are behind me.

I’m not saying all men are pigs

For every story I’ve shared of a guy acting inappropriately, there was at least one who stepped up to help. The captain at the police station who called off the officers who started cat calling in the hallway (in front of prisoners in lockup by the way). The professors who let me know Professor Perv was indeed a perv and my boyfriend who defended me privately and publicly. My boyfriend who not only stood up for me without telling me, he encouraged me and supported me to stand up to professor perv and the broken system.

What’s the point?
The point of this story is that it’s the culture of misogyny we need to fight. And I think much of the fight has been fought. Thousands and thousands of women like me have raised incredible young men who get it. They don’t see women as
women first and equals second. They see women as partners, collaborators, managers, leaders, in the same way they see men. The gender is irrelevant in the information age. The brawn isn’t required. It’s the brains that matter now. However, that’s where my concern regarding Donald Trump and his many derogatory comments regarding women comes into play. It’s as if he sees women as being placed on this planet as eye candy for men first. Sure, if you’re smart, too, and can make lots of money to boot, that’s a bonus. But it’s as if he wants to go back in time to the good ole’ days where women knew their place: you can be smart, but be pretty first and don’t make the men look dumb. It is my hope that other women will share their stories as I know all too well there are many that make the few I’ve shared seem trivial.

Don’t get me wrong. I love this country. I truly do feel privileged to have the life I have had. But it can always get better...right?

*Unfortunately, when I interviewed the powers that be at the university, their response to my questions about such procedures was, “Well, we would just sit down with the student and the professor and work it out. We find there usually has been some type of miscommunication. Oftentimes, there was a dating relationship that went awry.”*