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Written by Brooke Quach.

#Metoo. Aziz Ansari. *Cat Person*. #Timesup. Performative allyship. Consent. Sex Ed.

These are only some of phrases, names, and ideas that have been thrown around social media in the midst of the movement against sexual harassment and assault. These terms embody the nuances of the movement and bring to light the systemic problems that perpetuate these harmful behaviors. When you look at the number of sexual assault and harassment alerts from UTPD that frequent our inboxes, it becomes obvious that we, as a student body, have a lot to address. We cannot rely on seventh grade abstinence-only pledges or online sex-ed and consent courses to deter college students from engaging in sexual harassment and assault. We need conversation and dialogue that acknowledges the complexities of consent and gender dynamics. Consistently harsher punishments must be imposed. It is not enough to say “Oh god, rape is bad,” and then brush it off as your brunch comes to your table. It’s even worse to say something along the lines of “Maybe she should have just gotten up and left the room.” These responses ignore and undermine systemic forces that help answer why a woman feels powerless during violent sexual encounters.

The protagonist of Kristen Roupenian’s, “Cat Person” articulates one of the most relatable, and at times inexpressible, feelings that resonate with many women. While on a date with Robert, a man she meets through a flirty encounter at work, Margot realizes that he could easily overpower her if he chose to do so. There’s an unannounced power dynamic between her and her date– where the man is always the one who has the authority and ability to cause harm. Harm doesn’t necessarily mean rape or physical abuse, but includes guilting, shaming, and verbal or emotional abuse in any form. Although Margot has initiated a desire for sexual intercourse, there’s a moment during their encounter where she feels that she doesn’t want it anymore; that “the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon.” As a result, she “bludgeons her resistance into submission.” She feels that she must finish what she has started; that her sexual agency now belongs to the consideration of her male date.

As women, we are socialized to consider how our actions and words will affect others. We navigate the world by tip-toeing and trying our best not to anger anyone. We hold the emotional burdens of others, men in particular, on our shoulders, hoping that we haven't created any ill will against ourselves. For a cis-gendered male, it is hard to understand the feeling of constant powerlessness. Because the identity of the cis-gendered male is rooted in power, it is difficult for them to empathize with what women endure every day. Men in power do not fear rape, being fired, or being invalidated because of a system that is predominately operated by men. Men do not tip-toe; they walk confidently. If they must, they stomp and trample until they get what they want. In a workplace setting, ill-will translates to abuse of power and the threat of losing one's job. In Margot's situation, she feels obligated to preserve Robert's ego at the price of her sexual dignity and comfort. When she finally gives a blunt, straight-forward rejection, she is confronted with intrusive, derogatory, slut-shaming language. Although this is a work of fiction, the burden is universally relatable. In the context of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, more women are coming out with their stories of sexual harassment and assault.

15% of female undergraduate students at UT have reported being raped, and an additional 12% have reported attempted rape. Respectively, these statistics are 15% and 12% larger than they should be. They are indicative of the larger systemic issues that pervade our community. These statistics demonstrate that people do not understand consent; that they are not afraid of the consequences of their violent actions; that they feel they are above a system that already does not do enough for its sexual assault victims. As a community, we must acknowledge the invisible forces that disenfranchise women and reflect on what it means to obtain consent. In the meantime, Kristen Roupenian sums up the complexities of our experiences through "Cat Person":

"We should probably just kill ourselves," she imagined saying, and then she imagined that somewhere, out there in the universe, there was a boy who would think that this moment was just as awful yet hilarious as she did, and that sometime, far in the

future, she would tell the boy this story. She'd say, "And then he said, 'You make my dick so hard,'" and the boy would shriek in agony and grab her leg, saying, "Oh, my God, stop, please, no, I can't take it anymore," and the two of them would collapse into each other's arms and laugh and laugh—but of course there was no such future, because no such boy existed, and never would."



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