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Author

Guillen, Beatriz

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“I DID NOT KNOW”: A LETTER FROM A WOMAN JANITOR TO HER SEXUAL HARRASSER

Beatriz Guillen*



Image of the author, Beatriz Guillen

You were younger than me: you were a 28-Year-old American and you were my co-worker. I was a janitor and you did the recycling.

You were friends with our supervisor and he (my supervisor) always encouraged you.

“Come on, she is single, why don’t you go and have sex with her?”

I was embarrassed.

You started to be very friendly with me, but shortly you started to make comments about me, especially about my hair. “Do not tie your

* Beatriz Guillen is a female janitor who is a sexual harassment survivor. SEIU-USWW is predominantly composed of immigrant janitors and 70 percent of them are women. In 2015, about half the women of their membership reported being violently harassed, especially during their night shift, by male supervisors exploiting their power. Guillen is an active member of the *Ya Basta!* (which translates to Enough is Enough!) campaign to end sexual harassment and assault of female janitors in the workplace. Their campaign successes include the passage of California law which requires anti-sexual harassment training for all janitors and their respective employers. In addition, janitorial companies have committed these crimes are listed on a public registry.

hair Beatriz, it looks better when your hair is down.” One day our manager sent us to clean a very big building together. That was the day that we exchanged phone numbers just in case I needed some help with the recycling or carrying heavy things. Innocently, I gave it to you, because we did not have walkie talkies. If I had known what you were going to do I would have never given it to you.

I did not know.

On a Saturday night while I was with friends, I received a pornographic text from you.

It said, “Have you ever tasted white penis?”

I was really upset and I showed it to a friend who was also a co-worker.

We thought that you were drunk or that you might had made a mistake.

The next week you did not say anything about the text, but you kept making comments about my appearance. You would say, “Your fluffy hair looks very nice” and on other occasions you would say that I looked like Bozo the Clown.

I did not know.

The next week at work you asked me if I wanted to see pictures of your private parts. I said no and I asked you to leave me alone.

My supervisor laughed at me. He kept telling me, “Come on. Just do it. Just have sex with him.” He thought that it was funny or maybe it entertained him. I don't know, but it always made me feel very uncomfortable.

On another Saturday I received more pornographic texts of you, but this time more obscene.

The text messages said that you wanted me to give you oral sex. That you were going to grab my head with your strong hands in my hair and pull my head up and down on your penis. You said that you imagined me on top of you having sex with you.

I felt dirty. What had I done to you to make you behave that way?

I asked you to stop and I told you that I did not want anything with you. I asked you to leave me alone.

My co-worker said to me that she believed that your behavior was sexual harassment.

I did not know.

Your text messages became more explicit and obscene. Finally I decided to tell my supervisor. I said to him, “Look at this! It’s horrible!”

My supervisor just laughed at me. He said to me, “It’s finally gonna happen!”

I said to my supervisor, “This is serious.”

I finally decided to talk about this with the only female supervisor. I explained to her what was happening to me. I showed her the text messages. She could not believe it. But I had the proof in the text messages. She said to me that it was sexual harassment. I told her that he never touched me.

She told me that it didn’t matter that he didn’t touch me, it was still sexual harassment.

I felt ignorant, but **I did not know.**

I was scared, I was scared that you would find out that I had complained about you. I was scared that you would take revenge on me, that you would follow me and that you would make those text messages a reality.

When I saw my supervisor, I told him “This is your fault. You always encouraged him to bother me. Because of you this happened to me. This is sexual harassment.”

He laughed at me, later in the day all my co-workers knew about the text messages. I was the subject of all the gossip in the building. Everyone was laughing at me. I know it was my supervisor who told everyone who told everyone what had happened to me. Everyone talked about what I had probably done to provoke this guy to do what he did to me. I was so ashamed.

For them and my supervisor, this was fun, as if they just wanted something to talk about or fantasize about at night.

Thank God the female supervisor fired my harasser. But I lived with fear for so long thinking that he was going to look for me, punish me and live out what he said he was going to do to me on those texts. I ask myself what would have happened if I hadn’t had proof of what had happened?

I did not know.

I did not know that this was harassment and that it is illegal. My supervisor told me that there was a brochure about sexual harassment we were given when we are hired.

That is not training. That will not change the culture of sexual harassment on the night shift when the majority of supervisors are men. And in many cases, such as mine, they (the supervisors) just go along with what the harassers are doing to us, or they themselves are the harassers.

I am now a promotora and I know my rights. But what would have happened if I didn't have proof? What would have happened if there wasn't a female supervisor who took believed me?

I know that in my case, like those of my female coworkers, the harassment would have progressed, it would have escalated, and maybe he would have eventually raped me, if I hadn't spoken up or received help.

This saved my life. And today I want to help educate and lift the consciousness of female janitors like me who are ashamed to say that they didn't know what kind of penetration constitutes a rape, what sexual assault is, what is sexual harassment and what stalking is. I didn't know.

Now I know.

Knowing what the difference is, knowing where to go for help, can save our lives and those of our daughters.