

Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader.

By Bari Weiss

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Aziz Ansari after winning the Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series — Musical or Comedy this month. Frederic J. Brown/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

I'm apparently the victim of sexual assault. And if you're a sexually active woman in the 21st century, chances are that you are, too.

That is what I learned from the “[exposé](#)” of [Aziz Ansari](#) published last weekend by the feminist website Babe — arguably the worst thing that has happened to the #MeToo movement since it began in October. It transforms what ought to be a movement for women's empowerment into an emblem for female helplessness.

The headline primes the reader to gird for the very worst: “I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life.” Like everyone else, I clicked.

The victim in this 3,000-word article is called Grace — not her real name — and her experience with Mr. Ansari began at a 2017 Emmys after-party. As recounted by the woman to the reporter Katie Way, she approached him, and they bonded over their admiration of the same vintage camera.

The woman was at the party with someone else, but she and Mr. Ansari exchanged numbers and soon arranged a date in Manhattan.

After arriving at his TriBeCa apartment on the appointed evening — she was

“excited,” having carefully chosen her outfit after consulting with friends — they exchanged small talk and drank wine. “It was white,” she said. “I didn’t get to choose and I prefer red, but it was white wine.” Yes, we are apparently meant to read the nonconsensual wine choice as foreboding.

They went out to dinner nearby and then returned to Mr. Ansari’s apartment. As she tells it, Mr. Ansari was far too eager to get back to his place after he paid for dinner: “Like, he got the check and then it was bada-boom, bada-bing, we’re out of there.” Another sign of his apparent boorishness.

She complimented Mr. Ansari’s kitchen countertops. He then made a move, asking her to sit on top of them. They started kissing. He undressed her and then himself. In the 30 or so minutes that followed — recounted beat by cringe-inducing beat — they hooked up. Mr. Ansari persistently tried to have penetrative sex with her, and the woman says she was deeply uncomfortable throughout. At various points, she told the reporter, she attempted to voice her hesitation, but Mr. Ansari ignored her signals.

At last, she uttered the word “no” for the first time during their encounter, to Mr. Ansari’s suggestion that they have sex in front of a mirror. He responded, “How about we just chill, but this time with our clothes on?”

They dressed, sat on the couch and watched “Seinfeld.” She told him, “You guys are all the same.” He called her an Uber. She cried on the way home. Fin.

If you are wondering what about this evening constituted the “worst night” of this woman’s life, or why it is being framed as a #MeToo story by a feminist website, you probably feel as confused as Mr. Ansari did the next day. “It was fun meeting you last night,” he texted.

“Last night might’ve been fun for you, but it wasn’t for me,” she responded. “You ignored clear nonverbal cues; you kept going with advances. You had to have noticed I was uncomfortable.” He replied with an apology.

Read her text message again.

Put in other words: I am angry that you weren’t able to read my mind.

It is worth carefully studying this story. Encoded in it are new yet deeply retrograde ideas about what constitutes consent — and what constitutes sexual violence.

We are told by the reporter that the woman “says she used verbal and nonverbal cues to indicate how uncomfortable and distressed she was.” She adds that “whether Ansari didn’t notice Grace’s reticence or knowingly ignored it is impossible for her to say.” We are told that “he wouldn’t let *her* move away from him,” in the encounter.

Yet Mr. Ansari, in a statement responding to the account, said that “by all indications”

the encounter was “completely consensual.”

I am a proud feminist, and this is what I thought while reading the article:

If you are hanging out naked with a man, it's safe to assume he is going to try to have sex with you.

If the failure to choose a pinot noir over a pinot grigio offends you, you can leave right then and there.

If you don't like the way your date hustles through paying the check, you can say, “I've had a lovely evening and I'm going home now.”

If you go home with him and discover he's a terrible kisser, say, “I'm out.”

If you start to hook up and don't like the way he smells or the way he talks (or doesn't talk), end it.

If he pressures you to do something you don't want to do, use a four-letter word, stand up on your two legs and walk out his door.

Aziz Ansari sounds as if he were aggressive and selfish and obnoxious that night. Isn't it heartbreaking and depressing that men — especially ones who present themselves publicly as feminists — so often act this way in private? Shouldn't we try to change our broken sexual culture? And isn't it enraging that women are socialized to be docile and accommodating and to put men's desires before their own? Yes. Yes. Yes.

But the solution to these problems does not begin with women torching men for failing to understand their “nonverbal cues.” It is for women to be more verbal. It's to say, “This is what turns me on.” It's to say, “I don't want to do that.” And, yes, sometimes it means saying goodbye.

The single most distressing thing to me about this story is that the only person with any agency in the story seems to be Aziz Ansari. The woman is merely acted upon. All of this put me in mind of [another article published this weekend](#), this one by the novelist and feminist icon Margaret Atwood. “My fundamental position is that women are human beings,” she writes. “Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions. If they were, we're back to the 19th century, and women should not own property, have credit cards, have access to higher education, control their own reproduction or vote. There are powerful groups in North America pushing this agenda, but they are not usually considered feminists.”

Except, increasingly, they are.

The article in Babe was met with digital hosannas by young feminists who insisted that consent is consent only if it is affirmative, active, continuous and — and this is

the word most used — enthusiastic. Consent isn't the only thing they are radically redefining. A recent survey by The Economist/YouGov [found that approximately 25 percent](#) of millennial-age American men think asking someone for a drink is harassment. More than a third of millennial men and women say that if a man compliments a woman's looks it is harassment.

To judge from social media reaction, they also see a flagrant abuse of power in this sexual encounter. Yes, Mr. Ansari is a wealthy celebrity with a Netflix show. But he had no actual power over the woman — professionally or otherwise. And lumping him in with the same movement that brought down men who ran movie studios and forced themselves on actresses, or the factory-floor supervisors who demanded sex from female workers, trivializes what #MeToo first stood for.

I'm sorry this woman had this experience. I too have had lousy romantic encounters, as has every adult woman I know. I have regretted these encounters, and not said anything at all. I have regretted them and said so, as she did. And I know I am lucky that these unpleasant moments were far from being anything approaching assault or rape, or even the worst night of my life.

But the response to her story makes me think that many of my fellow feminists might insist that my experience was just that, and for me to define it otherwise is nothing more than my internalized misogyny.

There is a useful term for what this woman experienced on her night with Mr. Ansari. It's called "bad sex." It sucks.

The feminist answer is to push for a culture in which boys and young men are taught that sex does not have to be pursued as if they're in a pornographic film, and one in which girls and young women are empowered to be bolder, braver and louder about what they want. The insidious attempt by some women to criminalize awkward, gross and entitled sex takes women back to the days of smelling salts and fainting couches. That's somewhere I, for one, don't want to go.

Correction: *January 16, 2018*

An earlier version of this article incorrectly characterized a recent poll about sexual harassment. The poll reported that 25 percent of millennial-age men thought that asking to buy someone a drink was harassment, not 25 percent of millennial-age women.