Our Opening Sentences Come to us from Audre Lorde

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing.

A Reading from the 8th Chapter of the Book of Proverbs

Does not Wisdom call,

and does not Understanding raise Her voice?

On the heights, beside the way,

at the crossroads she takes her stand;

beside the gates in front of the town,

at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

“To you, O people, I call,

and my cry is to all that live.

O simple ones, learn prudence;

acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

Hear, for I will speak noble things,

and from my lips will come what is right...

Take my instruction instead of silver,

and knowledge rather than choice gold...

I, Wisdom, live with prudence,

and I attain knowledge and discretion...
I have insight, I have strength.

By me kings reign,

and rulers decree what is just;

by me rulers rule, and nobles too...all who govern rightly.

I love those who love me,

and those who seek me diligently will find me.

My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,

and my yield more than choice silver.

I walk in the way of righteousness,

along the paths of justice;

All my paths are peace.

Here Ends the Reading.
The first time I felt tough was in a Bloomingdale’s changing room. It was bar mitzvah season, and since I went to Grace CHURCH School, these congregations of thirteen-year-olds dancing to the “Cha-Cha Slide” were unfortunately few and far between. So, my mom and I hit up the ever-trusty, ever-overwhelming Bloomingdale’s to find the perfect dress for my big night. We stormed the store, emptied the hangers and between all the pink, yellow, and blue dresses we had amassed, one little black one made it into the mix. It was unlike every other floofy princess dress I had ever worn. I looked at myself in the mirror in that dress and felt like the most powerful creature alive. For the first time, I felt like a woman and I loved it. I wanted to walk into an office and fire someone. I wanted to order a lobster, take one bite and just throw the rest of it out. I wanted to strut down the New York City streets in six-inch heels. I felt like the type of woman who throws her head back when she laughs and leaves red lipstick stains on her champagne glass. I could not wait for my womanhood to begin. Of course, I didn’t buy the dress. Bar Mitzvahs aren’t exactly the scene for angsty 13 year olds to act out their “Devil-Wears-Prada”-esque awakening. But that dress made me ready to take on life.

The first time I was harassed on a train I was fifteen. It was the end of summer--right in the middle of pre-season for my illustrious sophomore year JV tennis team. School had been delayed another week because the building was quite literally an active construction site. And I was feeling free and grown-up and good. So good that I decided to put on my favorite white shorts and a cute new tank top before taking the 6 train uptown to my friend’s house. The cold subway seat under my bare leg brought me right back to that Bloomingdale’s changing room. I was excited to be on the train, to see my friends, and to have what I thought would be the best night ever. But soon I accidentally made eye contact with a very loud, clearly drunk man sitting across from me. Partly because I didn’t know better and partly because I felt like I was on top of the world, I smiled at him. I will always regret that smile. That man sitting across from me took my smile as an invitation.

He filled the five feet between us with pleading, “Come on! Smile once more. Please, just one more smile.” He slowly began claiming parts of me, parts that mere moments before were mine-- my hair, my eyes, my body. I fixed my eyes on the dirty floor, praying he would stop and planning my escape--my survival. I thought I might die in that train car. Soon, the man moved closer, he placed his calloused hand on my bare thigh and I smelled the alcohol on his breath. Suddenly, I wished I had worn a snowsuit. In that moment, I never wanted to show an inch of my skin ever again. The man leaned in, as I turned my head to the side to avoid his face, and said to me, “You know what I do to little girls like you? I..” And the way he finished that sentence is too horrible and ugly to even say out loud. Every single person in the subway car was suddenly fascinated with the ceiling. No one looked at me, helped me, tried to stop him.
At that very moment we reached twenty-eighth street. I had gotten on at 23rd street. All this happened in one stop.

So, I jumped up and slid out the closing train doors, timing my escape so that the man couldn't follow me out if he tried. I didn’t look back. I ran and I kept running. It was only when I reached the safety of my own lobby that I cried. I went upstairs and told my mom. She understood. Similar things had happened to her more times than she could count. After an hour of hugs and comforting, she told me to not wear such skimpy clothing on the subway. Also never smile. As a girl, I’d been taught that smiling was nice. But my mom was talking a woman now.

I was eighteen the first time I was called a slut. College parties have the mysterious allure of a Gatsby party to a high schooler: notorious, wild, and definitely better than anything you had ever been to before. So, I was excited for my first. I soon learned that it actually meant bad smells, crowded rooms, and loud music, but I tried my best to have fun. I jumped around, sang lyrics, and generally kept to myself. People bumped into me, and sweat dripped down my back, but I just carried on, absorbing the thumping beat.

It wasn’t until two strange hands grabbed my waist, slid down my back that the music suddenly got quieter and my heart started thumping louder. There is no worse feeling in the world than being touched when you don’t want to be. A girl I barely knew came to my rescue and together we disappeared into the crowd. But he was always around me. I watched as this college guy touched other girls and they flinched away, making faces at their friends who would link arms and guide them into the crowd. When he found me again, he started to pull me, no words, no asking, just pulling me away where the crowd could no longer protect me. My heart was beating in my ears, and trying my best to survive the situation, I told him I had a boyfriend.

Enraged, he responded, "I bet your boyfriend would be pissed to see you acting like such a slut.” He convinced me I had done something wrong. Somehow, I was the one who couldn’t sleep that night, tossing and turning out of fear, guilt, shame, I don’t know what. But I bet he slept like a baby.

I can’t remember the first time I stood up for another girl. I know it has happened, don’t worry, I’m not that bad. But I can’t remember a time when I really fought my battle, when I didn’t back off, or back down, or laugh it off at the end. And I have heard some really awful stuff, we’ve all heard some really awful stuff. It’s the phrases, the terms said, when you find yourself one of the only girls at a lunch table, or maybe sitting around in the loud section of the library.

If you’re anything like me, and I know some of you are, you have spent most of high school trying to be a “Chill Girl.” I dedicated my first two years to being “laid back!” and the kind of girl who laugh along and maybe drop an “Ew!” or “You’re gross!” when boys said terrible things
about other girls in front of me. Because I was “Chill!” and “fun!” and “different from other girls!” And now, looking back, I have never regretted anything more. Because for every time I laughed at a joke or shrugged at an inappropriate comment in fear of looking bitchy or prude-ish or feminazi, I contributed a system that only hurts me. This system that completely blurred and destroyed the vision of the thrilling womanhood that I had looking in the Bloomingdale’s mirror in the seventh grade. The system that turned me into an object, a little girl to be followed home, a slut. I wanted my mind to be appreciated, venerated, respected, but instead it was dismissed, pushed aside, violated. I know women haven’t create the issue, but every time we keep our mouths closed we contribute to it. And I think we can’t go any longer without addressing that.

So. Here I am. Completely exposing myself. Let me elaborate on exactly what it means to be a “Chill Girl.”

While this next story is fabricated, every quote, every term is one that has actually, in real life been said to or around me in the halls of Trinity School. I have merely distilled them for, well, the sake of time. Now, before I tell this final story, let me make something totally and completely clear. I am in no way attacking or even judging the boys in this scene. I am fully aware that boys experience their own pressures as they become men both at Trinity and everywhere else. I won’t try to speak to that, I can’t. I’m talking about culture. How we all contribute to it.

Allow me to set a scene. A “Chill Girl” is sitting at one of the round tables in the loud section of the library. At this library table, the Chill Girl has been granted access to an exclusive conversation with some of the boys as now she gets to hear how they talk about girls. It will start with the obvious, how a girl looks, dresses, acts. Duh. The “Chill Girl” already knew the boys talked about all this stuff. What she learns for the first time in this library conversation is that there is an entire vocabulary she is unaware of, a whole set of phrases created to pick her apart. The first term is relatively mild.

“But Person X is pretty hot.” Someone will say.

“Nah bro. She’s beat.” Another will respond.

Beat: I never know exactly how to define this word. Someone once explained it to me as being “beat with the ugly stick.” But I have come to know it to mean, already worn down, used, not fresh enough to be lusted over. The “Chill Girl” will just nod in agreement, taking note in her head to not come across as beat. She does not stand up for Person X. Maybe Person X was beat after all, she certainly did not know as much as the boys anyway.

The conversation continues.
“Have you seen the body on Person Y?” One might mention.

“Word dude. She’s a classic Butter Face though, gotta watch out for those.”

“Still worth it.” Another will respond

Butter Face: a shorthand for “but her face,” meaning that every part of the girl is attractive but her face. The Chill Girl will make a small disgusted face at the phrase and maybe even drop a “You guys are gross!” But, the boys will merely laugh at her reaction and she will also. All she can do is hope she is not a Butter Face, or, just pray her body is worth it. In the mirror that night she will analyze both thoroughly.

Now the conversation might shift off of girls and to discussing the respect, or lack thereof, for some of their male counterparts. “Dude, Ted is such a jerk but his body count is insane. I gotta respect him for that.”

Body Count: how many girls a boy has hooked up with. When hearing this one, the Chill Girl’s stomach will churn. She has just been told that she is a body to be counted, not a person to be listened to, to be respected. The phrase body count will be burned into her mind every time a boy shows interest in her, every time she allows one to touch her. It will make her wish she never allowed them to in the first place. But the Chill Girl won’t say any of this, she won’t even make a face at this term. Of course she was merely a body, how could she think she was anything more?

You see, the most appalling thing about this library table conversation is that the “Chill Girl” will leave feeling somewhat fulfilled. She was granted this exclusive access to the boys’ conversation that the other Chill Girls were not. She was given the honor of being an “Even Chiller Girl” and she is proud, even if it came the expense of other girls.

Unfortunately, this hypothetical-library conversation is just the beginning. Some of the other quotes that stung the most for me include, “I could never date a girl that is smarter than me,” or “I have never met a funny girl.” Even more, we have been ranked in order of attractiveness on lists, and those lists were edited right in front of my face all while I just stood up a little bit straighter and tucked my hair behind my ear and prayed I wasn’t the one being moved down. I have heard comments about my friends, younger girls, older girls, sisters, you name it and I have never put up a fight. I know I am not the only one. We try so hard to be laid back, to be the girl you can talk to, and it's simply not worth it anymore.

It wasn’t until recently that I realized how I needed to change. How I, we, needed to move away from this culture of being the “Chill Girl.” It wasn’t until the Brett Kavanaugh hearing last fall. And I know even saying that name will divide the room but I’m not talking
politics here. Just for this one moment, I ask you to put aside all the beliefs, opinions, preparation for the rebuttal and just listen. Some boys did not understand why were scared. And that made me scared. Because even my closest, most feminist, most caring, guy friends could not understand why I could not talk about that hearing without choking up. Because whether they are more or less extreme than mine, we all have the same stories. We’ve all feared for our lives on the train, at a party, or behind closed doors. We have had the moment where our heart beats in our ears and complete survival mode kicks in. And, as much as it hurts to say or even think about, some of us are going to be sitting in a courtroom, telling our stories to a group of people who won’t believe us, and that is scary as Hell.

So, I here, in front of the entire Trinity School, declare myself done. I stand ready to share what is too embarrassing or terrifying to say out loud. I am ready to be brave, to fight for ourselves, for each other, for the dignity and respect that we each deserve.

Because I don’t want to do it anymore! I don’t want my womanhood to be stolen from me. I want being a girl to mean whatever I want it to mean. Whether it means feeling as tough and powerful and beautiful as I did in that changing room in seventh grade or wearing pink and loads of makeup or playing sports, not playing sports, being girly, not being girly, being a leader or being quiet, who cares!? It’s should be ours to define. I don’t want anymore unwelcome hands on my waist. I don’t want to be called a slut. I don’t want to be threatened on the train. I don’t want to feel guilty for nothing. I just don’t. And it starts here. It starts at Trinity. It starts by standing up for that girl who was just called “beat” or stopping that comment about a girl three years younger. It starts with us.

I don’t know why I spent so much time trying to be different from other girls. Other girls are quite literally some the coolest, most impressive people I have ever met. I mean, we kind of kill it here at Trinity. We speak our minds, stand up for what we believe in, we’re leaders, presidents, dominate on the sports fields, on the stage. Sometimes, we just need to be brave. We need to say what isn’t always easy to say.

Because there is nothing truer or freer than girls supporting girls. When we dance with each other and the lights start flashing and we throw our hair and belt those lyrics. At my all-girls sleepaway camp there was no competition, no comparisons, no hatred, just cheering for each other, encouraging each other, defending each other...loving each other. Sisterhood exists AND...it is holy. Need a hair tie? A girl will provide. Feeling frustrated? A girl will listen. A boy getting a little too close? A girl will pay attention, watch closely, link arms, and save. Need somebody to tell you look great in that black dress? A shower of compliments is on the way. No girl left behind.

Thank you.