

A Life of Hanging Fire

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Mom keeps telling me to stop staying out so late. By late, she means midnight. But midnight isn't even that late, right? For someone who is eighteen and trying to make the most of their last summer before college, twelve am is not late. It was always midnight when the fun would start. But mom is angry because she can't fathom why I would need to be out of the house so late. How do I explain to her that I'm not pumping my body full of alcohol and drugs but rather dancing with my brother and our friends in an abandoned parking lot to 'California Gurls' by Katy Perry? How do I make mom believe that I'm still going to Skyzone to play dodgeball for two hours with a bunch of twelve-year-olds? How do I tell mom that for the first time ever, I'm finally living and not just existing?

I abandoned God this summer. And I think that is why I had so much fun. Now you may wonder why I made this decision, and it's because I struggled to feel a connection to my religion. And when I look back on it, I honestly think I always did. I realized over time that it is possible to be a good person outside of religion. So in the past few months, I left behind my prayer obligations. I said yes whenever my brother asked me to stay out late. And I finally exposed myself to environments previously forbidden from me. Some people may think my behavior was shameful, but to me it was therapeutic. I let go of a lot of burdens I carried. Like disappointing my mom. Being a bad Muslim. Needing to follow a constant strict routine. I got to truly feel weightless and for that, I have my brother to thank.

After all, it was his idea to form a summer friend group consisting of him and his best friend, Matt, along with me and my best friend, Prajakta, whom I call P. The whole suggestion warmed my heart honestly because my brother and his friends are two years older than me. I never thought that they would even be interested in hanging out with girls younger

than them. But from them, I had received immense kindness and acceptance. It started with making Dance Videos to songs in random deserted locations at night. From 'Superbass' by Nicki Minaj to 'Nameless' by Lil Keed. Then P and I would watch the boys play five v. five in basketball at Nottoway Park. Or the night we had forced the guys to all find dates so we could have a Masquerade-themed party.

The type of people my brother introduced me to had greatly impacted my personal growth this summer. They were all people with very distinct personalities and different lifestyles than I was used to. I was exposed to a new world of prioritizing myself and living in the moment. I experienced just how liberating it was to quit planning ahead all the time. And it was in moments like playing Codenames with all my new tipsy friends that I realized my smiles had become genuine. Every Tuesday evening when I'd get ready for Trivia Night, I was reminded that I had so much more to live for other than education and trying to meet my mom's expectations. And while my brother had caused me quite a few social burnouts, I was still grateful to learn the importance of boundaries, self-care, and spontaneity.

So yes, mom was mad because I spent too much time outside the house doing God knows what. And she'd had one too many talks with me about not hanging out with my brother and his friends because I'd catch feelings. But funny enough, P started dating Matt and it was a whole perfect cliché romance because now, my best friend is dating my brother's best friend. And it all came together when they were drunk at one of the late-night hangouts we'd have. Before the summer, I'd never been around drunk people nor had I ever considered drinking, and that created an image in my head about what drunk people were like. I thought them to be reckless, obnoxious, and sloppy. But after a few nights of drinking, I learned a lot about the world of alcohol. And what I learned from my new group of friends about drinking helped prepare me for

the social aspect of college. That was such a valuable gain because I had remained sheltered from certain concepts my whole life, and getting to experience them was eye-opening. Liberating almost.

But throughout all the fun I was having between working at a popular thrift store near my house and spending nearly half my paychecks on Popeyes, I encountered many times of doubt and emptiness. I was living a whole new life as a whole new person that I could not recognize. And as I thought about it, I found that I became the type of person I used to look down on in the past. Staying out late, hanging with boys, dabbling in the world of substance usage. I was the person who I swore I'd never be. And now that I had become it, I battled between deciding whether I had lost or found myself. I was in a new world where both felt the same. And while I had considered the possibility that I had become my own villain, I had felt oddly free. As if there was this weight on my chest for the past eighteen years of my life and it had suddenly been lifted. I felt so happy and comfortable with where I stood that I could not understand how something so wrong could feel so right. And I guess that's where that saying comes from.

I still think that the reason I must've felt so lost was because I had adopted the lifestyle I was forbidden from my whole life. And how was I supposed to feel like my best self when I'd been raised to believe the person I'd become was evil? I grew up expecting this lifestyle to be disappointing and lacking fulfillment. However, it was within this same lifestyle that I'd found comfort and happiness. It was in this same lifestyle that I fell in love with life and all it had to offer. And I know this sounds cheesy, but all the small things I used to overlook were suddenly so much more valuable. Strangers smiling at me on the street would make my stomach all warm. The rare cool summer night breeze was so much more comforting than any other time

I'd experienced it. And I wondered if I'd continue to feel this way about the world after I went off to college alone. I didn't know if this new version of myself was a temporary appearance for the summer or if she was here to stay. Because even if I wasn't sure who I had become, I knew I didn't want to let go of this new me just yet.

I realized that who I was now was not the best version of myself just because I had decided to put my desires first. It was not because I had stopped practicing a religion I was unconvinced by. Nor was it because I had decided to break all the rules that I felt constrained me. I was finally the best version of myself because I had learned to appreciate the world around me. I began to finally value my life along with the simple and common things in it that I used to take for granted. Like that dusty mauve color that would paint the sky right before the darkness bleeds in. And the smell that fills the air right after rain that makes you wrinkle your nose. Or when you're laughing with your friends and it's one of those silent laughs that make you weak in the knees.

I had become so appreciative of the small things in life and I found that I had wanted to share all those small happy moments with everyone. I wished everyone could experience the serene silence at night when the world is finally asleep. Or feel the distinct thrill of making eye contact with your crush from across the room. I hoped everyone could hear songs the same way I heard them during karaoke with my friends. And it may be absurd now, but I learned to appreciate my mom's nagging. Her anger. Her worries. Her concern. It had once felt like an annoying ever-present nuisance I had to deal with. But now, it was a sign of her immense love. It is something I started to cherish. And after I had begun to view the world through a more appreciative lens, I finally realized that finding the best in life had led me to truly find myself.