

My American Nightmare

No parent wants to see their little girl go out fearing the world but ready to experience it all at the same time. Yet they have to prepare them for that. Carry pepper spray. Put the keys between your fingers. Lock your windows, even when you're on the third floor of an apartment building. Don't let anyone hold your drink. Learn how to fight. Bite. Scratch. Kick. Punch. All lessons I've learned from my parents. All told out of love and care, hoping I could protect myself, when really all they did was make me fear the world more.

I've had to protect myself since I was 10, when the boys at the end of the street couldn't keep their thoughts to themselves. Running was no longer a way to get exercise, but a tactic to escape the boys on the golf cart who could catch you. I didn't run by myself again until a few years later. I kept protecting myself when I was 11, and the man at the finish line of the 5k kept asking where I lived, where I went to school, where he could find me. There's a certain irony in running from the finish line. I protected myself at 12, when the boy in school took Urban Dictionary's "National Smack that Ass Day" a little too seriously. This time, I ran at him, ready to leave a handprint on his face until the teacher walked in the classroom. I let my guard down at 13, stuck around for puppy love with the boy who gave me his sweatshirt and leather jacket and flowers. It doesn't last that long when he gets wide-eyed for your best friend, running away from you. My guard went back up at 14, when the boy who put his hand on my back let it slide down farther than I wanted it to go. At 15, the creepy old man staring at me, following me around the gym. Again, there's irony in running away from the treadmill.

The list goes on, leading up to now. I'm 18, pepper spray in my bag, keys between my fingers. Ready to bite, scratch, kick, punch. *Amy Vanderbilt's Etiquette* no longer holds up. I have to be a scrappy female if I want to survive; manners are thrown out the window. This is my American Nightmare, because the American Dream would be not fearing walking down the street alone at night.