Running

I love running.

Not running as an exercise or a sport. Just running-from people, from problems, from situations… The first time I had a piano recital, my mind went blank. The music notes were dark, black scribbles that I suddenly forgot I could comprehend. So, I stood up and did the one thing I was truly good at-I ran from the room.

The next semester I found myself taking choir.

I ran when my friend skyped me one day. It was the usual banter until it was not. She said that I was ugly but that day I believed her. I could’ve told her that hearing the words: “Ugly”, “Fatass”, “Nun” “Shut up” “Nobody cares about you” had worn me down. That at some point, I’d started staring at the mirror hating the person looking back at me, that calling her an asshole didn’t quiet the voices that mimicked what she said.

That I needed to shut up.

That nobody cared.

That I was a loser.

Ugly.

Fatass.

Nun.

I wanted to say that I’d rather talk about her college life-hear about her crazy roommate and her boyfriend than keep up the insulting game that had become our dysfunctional friendship. Instead I said our usual “bye bitch” and ran to the nearest nook to cry.

I wanted to shout that retaliation had only made me dislike myself more. That I still loved her, but I couldn’t keep this up. That I’d left high school, but those words and feelings kept haunting me. I was sorry I had started to fight fire with fire. It felt like we were both getting burned, and mine had started to leave me with scars-both physically and emotionally. I’d started to sneak off the surgical blades from my parent’s first aid kit to cut myself and writing goodbye letters while thinking of ways to end my life. Perhaps if I’d had the courage to tell her how devastating the words and jokes had become, it wouldn’t have come this far. I’d tried numerous times, but I could never get the sentiments across. As for the rejoinder, it was a useless armor I had attempted to shield myself with but even that couldn’t protect me. In fact, it made me think that I was deserving of it. You give it, you take it, just as we’d always been taught.

“Stop pretending to be a victim. You’re not faultless here.”, she’d say.

And maybe I wasn’t.

But as I sat there in the cold, the saltiness of the tears still coating my skin, I didn’t know how I’d ever get back to the person I was before “us”- naïve, shy, quiet but above all, someone who didn’t feel disgusted by my own body and my own self. It was the first time, I thought that “this”, whatever “this” had become had to stop.

The next time we texted, she wrote, “So you fucked anyone yet?” I’d always told my friends that my personal choice was that I wouldn’t have sex until I was married. I’d braved nun jokes and sneers for two years before, but I just didn’t want to anymore. I didn’t reply and instead I just made a silent decision that I wouldn’t deal with meanness. I wouldn’t take it and I wouldn’t give it. My hands shook in anger and humiliation as I left the message on read.

It’s a slow jog at first. Being confident, feeling okay with yourself, stopping yourself from uttering mean words. Telling someone “No” ...…it doesn’t come easy. It’s even harder learning to apologize when I end up hurting other people or forgiving someone who makes me feel that insecure again. Somedays I can’t help but feel the old feelings of being ugly, shake off that heavy blanket of self-loathing that covers me. Somedays I clutch to it when things go wrong because it is almost achingly familiar. Other days, I catch myself in the mirror and instead of hating myself, I stick my tongue out impishly and walk away happy. I keep hoping that those days will outnumber the “bad” days.

Last year, I had another piano recital and although I promised my music teacher that I would rather give up my firstborn than perform, in the end, I did it. Botched notes, horrible tempo, hands trembling like a leaf in the storm… Mozart probably rolled over in his grave and yet I felt exhilarated when it was over.

A few months later, I signed up for Pinkathon-a run that raised funds for women-empowerment. I wore an ugly pink sponsored t-shirt and showed up at six am with my best friend and my mom with zero practice. I gasped for air as lithe girls ran past in a blur. My lungs burnt and my non-athletic limbs complained. I puked in the middle and kept going. But I smiled when it was over. Maybe next year I’ll do a longer one.

Truth is I don’t run away anymore.

I stand.

Sometimes behind my principles, sometimes for the people I love, sometimes when I accidentally sit on my Ipad for the umpteenth time.

I am also not scared of being honest. I say, “That really hurt me, please don’t repeat that to me anymore.”, “Are you okay? Tell me if this is actually making you uncomfortable”, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I won’t do it anymore.” and “You look great today!” (to myself). I run to my friends and always tell them how amazing, how beautiful they are and how thankful I am that they are in my life. I utter “I love you” as if they were free merchandise and the people in my life, the students in a college fair.

I run.

-to trains I’m late for, that take me places that I’m a stranger to. I talk to random people and laugh at every small thing I can. I make jokes of the situations that aren’t what I expected them to be.

I’m constantly in awe of this life I once hated.

I have been running from things my entire life but now I finally know that there are things I can run towards.