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The summer before I started college, my friends and I drove up for the first time to see the “Top of the World”. This place known as “Top of the World” is a lookout point situated on a hill that overlooks our town. Located on a lot between two houses in the richer residential area, there is no exact set of directions to get to this precise spot. All you know is the street (if you’re in the know) and even then, it’s hard to discern exactly how far you need to go to get there. If you look up “Top of the World” in Folsom, there are a lot of conflicting accounts of where it is—it’s a

place that mainly locals know where to go. However, a surefire way to know you've reached the place is if there are cars of high school kids parked alongside the sidewalk near the patchy grass lot; it's a typical high school hangout spot (much to the annoyance of the residents and the local law enforcement). And from that lot, you can see the most gorgeous sunsets and the twinkling city lights at nightfall.

When I had originally tried to drive there the day that this picture was taken, I kept missing the street needed to get to the place. My close friend was in the passenger seat next to me trying to navigate, but she kept giving confusing and last minute directions. For instance, she wouldn't give me a heads up to turn until I was at the street corner and by that point it was already too late for me to turn. Meanwhile, my other two good friends were sitting in the back seats of my car chattering away, oblivious to my frustrations about finding this elusive lookout point.

We were going to meet up with four of our other friends to see the sunset. We had never seen the sunset from the "Top of the World" and now that we were out of high school and most of us had our licenses, we decided to go there.

Finally, after nearly half an hour of missed turns, we found the spot. Our other friends had already reached, and clicked their tongues in disapproval because we had missed the start of the sunset. Although the sun had started setting when we had arrived, I stared in wonder at the view—coupled with being overwhelmed with an indescribable emotion.

I had a realization. While watching the sunset with my high school friends, I realized that I missed out on a lot of the crazy, adventurous, life-changing adventures that are often portrayed as the archetypal "American high school experience". I didn't take the time to explore who I was as a person, or use the buffer that being a minor afforded me to make mistakes and learn from them. I didn't push my limits in any way (unless you count academic/extracurricular workload) or take any risks. I didn't try out for the school musicals, chamber choir, student government, or a sports team—even though the idea did cross my mind at

some point. I was too self-conscious, so I stuck to what I knew I was good at: art and studying.

Education was highly prioritized in my household, so most of the days during the school year and the summer were spent studying, loading myself with extracurriculars and volunteering, and more studying. Given that my parents immigrated from India and that I was the first in my family to go to college in America, I didn't really know what was needed to get into college. I thought that by doing the most in terms of rigorous course loads and activities—because that was recommended by the rest of the Indian aunties and uncles whose kids went to top tier universities—would equate to being accepted into a prestigious college. And I misguidedly believed that a university's prestige was equivalent to success.

However, in the moment that the sunset was fading into nighttime, I wondered a bit wistfully how things would've been different in high school if I had taken more risks. I wondered if I had been bolder and more assertive would I have accomplished more or avoided unnecessary drama. And I wondered if I had stepped out of my comfort zone would I have had more stories to look back on fondly, and maybe to someday share with my future children.

As I drove back home that day, I carried that emotion with me. Passing by the familiar street signs and restaurants, I made a pact with myself. I reassured myself that in college I would take this as an opportunity to pursue the opportunities I never could or allowed myself to. I would learn what I want and what I didn't want, and learn to practice self-advocacy. But most importantly, I would learn who I am as a person.

When I look back on the photo and see the silhouette of my eighteen-year old self posing with my friend, I reflect on how much time has passed since then. It's been almost two years now, and I will soon approach 20 in a few months time—the end of my teenage years.

In a lot of ways, I kept my promise to my high school self. I got involved with student government my second year of college. I learned to cut out toxic people who didn't have my best interests in mind. I became less of a people pleaser/pushover that I had been in high school. I nurtured my passion for mental health advocacy. I had both spontaneous and planned adventures. And I've taken risks.

Even so, there are still some ways that I am yet to step out of my comfort zone. I am still working on being more assertive. I am still learning to be kind to myself and unlearning negative, self-defeating thought patterns. I still have yet to work up the courage to read one of my spoken word poetry pieces at a poetry slam. But someday, I'll get there—I know I will.