

A Proper Ending
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I used to be an avid counter of days.

They were measured in a countdown app that I had on my phone, and each day I would just stare at the numbers.

God, there were so many of them.

Each was tied to a different event, but the one thing they shared was that they numbered the days until something good would happen.

A concert, a birthday, maybe even a graduation. Both the mundane and the celebratory.

I found these countdowns to be a useful tool to make time pass quicker, pushing me into the frame of mind to constantly search for something to look forward to.

To be honest though, they were really just a way for me to find a reason why I should continue living.

If I could just have something to anticipate, if I could just find a reason to care. If I could just find enough strength in myself to be able to survive just one more day.

One more day.

You have no idea how many times I felt unsure whether I could make it to even one more day.

And for a long time, this was how I lived: on a day by day, case by case basis. Each good moment would take place, then pass. And I would cling desperately to those memories to propel me to the next good moment.

Some of the numbers were small, some were large. But that was on purpose.

I staggered the countdowns so that I wouldn't lose hope—I had to be realistic. In years that seemed to be overwhelmingly made up of bad moments, I had to take full advantage of the good ones.

But after some time, I managed to stumble across a turning point in the most unexpected of circumstances:

Vanderbilt.

I had only been on campus for a day or two, and I remember jogging down the stairs outside Murray House, breathing in the early morning humidity and squinting at the piercing blue sky above me.

And that's when the realization arrived.

For the first time in years, everything in my mind was quiet. I was simply taking in the sights, sounds, and smells around me. I felt the breeze gently pushing strands of hair into my eyes. I felt the rough texture of the asphalt pressing into the soles of my shoes. I heard a cluster of birds chirping brightly in a nearby tree.

I was living in the moment—I was alive.

And it had been so long since I had been this happy.

I cried a few days later for the first time in months.

Within my first few days on campus, I found friends who I instantly knew would be with me for all the times to come. I rediscovered a love for playing music that I thought I had lost years ago.

Above all, I found myself unexpectedly affected by the raw, infectious energy of a college campus which has proved crucial to my healing and growth.

This has been the year that saved my life.

This has been the year of late-night Munchie runs and philosophical conversations with friends stretching well into the early hours of the morning, of cool fall evenings spent blasting “Dynamite” in a hollow football stadium and a simple, overwhelming sense of contentment.

I became happy in a way that I could not have described to myself even a year ago.

I was no longer counting down the days. I learned to take each one as it came, and I felt grateful.

I was grateful to be alive.

What a strange feeling that was for me. Sometimes I could hardly believe that this was what real life was.

But Vanderbilt had allowed me to see it become a reality.

And when March arrived, I was already planning out how I would finish the year. I was looking forward to the last Rand cookie and the last Jeni's run, to finally seeing the trees on campus turn color. I was looking forward to taking in my last days living on the Commons, to stare out at the Nashville skyline from Murray House and watch with excitement as the days grew warmer.

I was looking forward to saying goodbye to a year which had given me everything.

But it was cut short. So, I returned home.

And I struggled immensely.

Everywhere I look, I see reminders of who I used to be. The person that I was on campus fades just a little more from my memory each day, and I am utterly terrified. I don't want to erase my hard-won progress; I don't want to slip back into the darkness.

I don't want to set countdowns anymore.

Truthfully, I would have had to face this battle eventually.

But with the rush in which everyone left campus, with watching the dining halls shut down with yellow caution tape, with a freshman year which concluded with a weary, anticlimactic essay submission to Brightspace, I can't help but feel that I needed just one full year of good moments to convince myself that I had truly changed for the better.

Because now I'm just counting down the days until I'm back on campus.

And sure, it's a better countdown now, one that I keep only in my head, but in dreaming of Vanderbilt, I am no longer living in the moment.

I'm just back to tying myself to an event in the future.

And this is the realization which I still can't fully accept. Because when I'm back to counting, it must surely mean that I am still broken.

I suppose all I have left are my memories.

But there were so many loose ends, so much fear and uncertainty in my last moments on campus.

And it angers me that in a year which had so many good moments, this is how it concludes.

It's true that I have three more years on this campus and believe me when I say that I am grateful for them. But is there anything quite like the first, when everything is so wonderfully new and different and life-changing?

To be honest, I'm grieving for what could have been.

This year certainly wasn't perfect, but it came pretty damn close.

And for something like that, I think the least that we all deserved was a proper ending.