

## Talking to Strangers

*by Erica Johnson*

My parents had a lot of rules for me growing up. In middle school they included “no eating breakfast before you get dressed” and “no watching movies with cursing in them.” Then when I was older: “no driving when it’s dark out “ and “no dating without parental supervision” But one rule was ageless, sacrosanct: Do not talk to strangers. I knew it was impossible that my parents could object to me ever talking to anyone I didn’t know. To prove this, I pointed out to my mother that she’d forbidden me to call 911 for help because I wasn’t personally acquainted with any emergency dispatchers. This insight was underappreciated.

The only other person I knew that had to put up with this was my little brother, Alexander. He never had issues with the stranger rule because he so rarely sees cause to talk to other people in general beyond the occasional sarcastic comment. Alexander isn’t so little anymore—he’s a senior in high school and pushing six foot one now. Also I found out last year that my parents and I are the only people who call him Alexander; all his friends and teachers have called him AJ since he started third grade.

I don’t see my brother very often: he goes to boarding school and I’m in college so our schedules don’t overlap much. But occasionally they do, and on a very small subset of those occasions Alexander will let me drag him around on errands with me. Hanging out with him what I was most looking forward to doing over J-term this year.

Unfortunately that didn’t happen. With two days left before my flight back to Boston, we had yet to hang out and I didn’t plan on going home again for several months. So, I took a shot in the dark and texted him to see if he’d get breakfast with me before school the next morning. Alexander’s phone is only ever on when he’s decided to call someone else, so I was a little dumbstruck when my phone buzzed a few minutes later with a reply.

It read: Panera, 7:13am with a tacit “don’t be late” at the end.

It was still dark out at 7:14 the next morning when I groggily pulled up to the back entrance of his dorm. I expected this transgression to earn me some complaining, but Alexander buckled himself into the passenger’s side without saying anything. I tried making small talk, but after few failed attempts I stopped pushing him and focused on the car radio instead.

Waiting in line once we got to breakfast was the first time in a while that my brother and I stood side by side. I noticed that he looked much older than the mental picture I’d had of him: his hair was no longer accessorized with lint, his frame wasn’t quite so lanky, and his voice sounded lower when it came his turn to order.

Over bagels we exchanged a mix of impersonal questions, one-word answers, and uncomfortable silences. I asked him about college apps and the teacher's whose classes we'd both taken, then found myself at a loss. I didn't know enough about my brother's life to have a more interesting or meaningful conversation than that. It took us about 15 minutes to finish our food, and by then we'd long since run out of things to talk about. I dropped my brother off at school an hour earlier than planned, and went back to the house to pack for my flight.

I got this sinking feeling during my drive home, and I sometimes still feel it now when I think about that breakfast a month ago.

My brother and I have never been close; in fact he was my sworn nemesis when we were little.

But back then I could have told you what his friends were like, or what he did for fun on weekends. Now that I've grown up enough to see Alexander as a person I want to be friends with, he's also become someone I don't really know. That morning I unexpectedly realized another violation of my parents' rule about strangers to which they couldn't possibly object: talking to my little brother.

Since then I've been trying to figure out how to change things with Alexander, and I'm still not sure. I talked my parents into letting him visit me here at Harvard, which is somewhere to start. I doubt my brother will become best friends afterwards or even anytime soon. But hopefully one of the next times I see him, he'll be a little bit less of a stranger.