

Raining on Prom Night

Written by Margaret Evans



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Y'all know I love me a good glass of wine, right? I believe I've mentioned that a time or two. And when I'm at a cocktail party, I want a cocktail. It adds sparkle to the occasion. Greases the conversation. Makes me feel charming. (You become quite charming, too, by the way!) I like to drink and I like people who like to drink.

But I'm a little concerned. Prom season has just passed, and as the mother of a middle schooler, I am already getting nervous.

Moms talk, you see, and I've been hearing a lot about what goes on around here during prom week. Apparently, parents rent houses out on Fripp and Harbor so their teens will have a "safe" place to party. The kids stay in these houses, drinking every night – and it's exam week! – and then their parents rent limos to take them to prom, so they can – again – tie one on... safely. I suppose these parents are to be commended for taking such extravagant precautions, but there's something I don't get: Why do these teenagers think they need to drink so much? And why do the grown-ups encourage it? I hate to be a buzz-kill (heh), but last time I checked, 21 was still the legal drinking age. Personally, I believe it should be lower – I think college students, and certainly military personnel, are old enough to have a drink – but the fact remains that it's currently 21. Not only are these parents aiding and abetting their children's law-breaking – which doesn't set a great example – but they're tacitly sending the message to these kids that you can't possibly have a good time without alcohol.

And it's simply not true. I think back to my own high school career in the 80s, and sure, some kids drank. But not everybody. And certainly not all the time. In my crowd, drinking wasn't a big part of the culture. I know this concept sounds old-fashioned, but *our parents didn't allow it*.

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(Even those who did drink knew they would be in trouble if they got caught. They knew they were breaking the rules. Do parents still make rules?) Despite our teetotaling, I don't think we missed a thing. I'm convinced I experienced the full, flamboyant spectrum of teenagerly emotion – the highs and the lows, the agonies and the ecstasies – all without alcohol.

I know, I know . . . "times have changed." It's a new century and things are very different now. But what I'm trying to understand is . . . why? Why are things so different? And *must* they be? The truth is, once a young person discovers how alcohol – ahem – "enhances" a party, it really does become harder to have a good time without it. Why are we so eager to let them in on this secret before they're old enough to handle it with care . . . or even do it legally? When I hear about a class of seniors who think a week of alcohol-fueled debauchery is necessary to the Total Prom Experience – so much so that their parents feel inclined to drop big money on a place where said debauchery can unfold, just to keep them alive – I can only assume the secret's long been out. The drinking's starting much earlier. Are the parents helping that along, too?

I completely sympathize with the postmodern parent's dilemma. Heck, I'm one of them. We are told, "Kids will do this thing, no matter what. You can't change that fact. Your job is to make sure they don't hurt themselves or anybody else while they're doing it." We hear this about teen drinking, teen sex, and a host of other things everyone seems to agree teens *shouldn't* be doing but *will* do, no matter what. Well, teens were doing a lot less of that stuff when I was a teen – in a small southern town, much like *this* small southern town – and I'm just wondering what happened. What changed? And is it a *fait accompli*? Is it irreversible?

Apparently, our local high schools aren't going down without a fight; they went to great lengths this year to instill pre-prom caution (or abject terror?) into students. At Hilton Head High, all students going to prom had to attend a lecture by Dr. Nessa Miller, Savannah Memorial University Medical Center's chief trauma resident. Dr. Miller spoke to the students about what she sees in the trauma unit, showing them shocking photos of people who'd ended up there. She described what it's like to be drug tested in the trauma unit, the loss of dignity when you're stripped naked for all to see. She also discussed the dangers of drinking too much, even when you're not driving, telling the story of a patient whose esophagus was ripped away from her stomach from vomiting so much. Students at Whale Branch, Battery Creek, Beaufort and Bluffton High Schools all had to attend similar presentations in order to get their prom tickets. Many had to sign pledges not to drink and drive.

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I have no idea how effective these scare tactics have been. Hopefully, they kept lots of prom-goers from driving under the influence this year. But then again, many of them were never going to drink and drive anyway, what with their party houses on Fripp and their prom night limos. And this is what troubles me. It bothers me that, for so many families, this is the solution. Not only is it a very expensive solution, but it sends a host of messages that make me queasy. (See above.) I'm not sitting in judgment, believe me. I know I'll be faced with this same dilemma in a few years, and I'm dreading it. I just wonder if this is the best we parents can do. Is this the best *we as a culture* can do? Either terrify the kids into submission or underwrite their illegal excesses? Are those our only options? Could there be a third way?

If you put me in front of a bunch of teenagers today, I would certainly warn them against destroying their futures. But I would also warn them against missing out on the present . . . failing to revel in it, to recognize the immense wonder of it. *Do you have any idea how lucky you are?*

it is to be 18 years old?

You are so young. So full of possibility. Look at your beautiful, strong bodies. See how they carry you through the world with such ease! What, they're not perfect? So what!? They're perfectly marvelous! (Trust me, you'll know this one day.) Stand tall in them and delight in every move they make. And your minds! Your minds are agile and ready, like coiled springs. They're sponges just waiting to soak up the world. That date you asked to prom? Isn't she gorgeous in that dress?! Look how it picks up the gold flecks in her eyes. (Tell her!) The music you listen to? You will never forget it. One day, when you're much, much older – maybe you're driving home from work, feeling beat down – that song you love will come on the radio (on some "classics" station) and you will be instantly 18 again, feeling everything you're feeling now – the joy and angst and frustration and anticipation – and you will know then what you *don't*

know now . . . that 18 is magical, and it never comes again. Eighteen is warm sun on your shoulders and wind in your hair; it's sand beneath your feet and slow dances, handholding and kissing and talking all night long. Eighteen is the whole world before you, luminous with promise. It's a natural high. And It Never. Comes. Again.

Be there. Be *right* there. Notice everything. Feel everything. Delight in everything. This is no time to be out of it, no time to be "comfortably numb." This is the time to be deeply, madly, intensely awake! You need to feel *all* of it. Even the pain. And you need to remember it. Because 18 never comes again.

I know. I was there. And I'm so glad I didn't miss it.

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