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Polished Draft

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What She Saw in Me

Looking back, I realized school was difficult for me, and I wasn't always the best student. In a whirlwind of events that took place in my childhood, education was not the main priority. As a child your focus is not necessarily excelling in academics to set yourself up for a successful future. Your mind is distracted, thoughts are scrambled and your attention span is all over the place. Without proper direction things can get messy. I cannot put blame on anyone when it comes to the events that took place. Sometimes life brings painful experiences that are completely beyond our control.

It started in 2005. My mother was giving birth to my youngest brother when things took a drastic turn. At the time I couldn't comprehend what the nurses were telling us. "We need to rush her into surgery because she isn't in good condition. She is in critical condition, her blood isn't clotting and she is bleeding out. I am so sorry she has coded on the table, and she may not make it..." As a child you don't always understand the conversations happening around you. You try to process the conversations by watching body language, looking at emotions and for reactions. We sat outside of heaven's doors watching them swing open and close. Sitting next to me was my grandmother and step father. They would stand up and rush to the angels delivering messages from inside the gates. Their hands clasped together in prayer, their eyes filled with tears. My grandmother shouted out " please lord don't take my daughter!" Those words echoed through every hall. I was five years old and trying to comprehend the possibility of losing my mother.

Following the surgery, my mother was set into rehabilitation. She needed to learn how to walk, talk and eat again. My grandmother was taking care of me during this time as well as my mother. I returned to school feeling lost and confused. I didn't want to be there, I couldn't understand the lessons and the teacher's words began to fade into sounds. I would think about visiting my mom after school was over and if she would be able to speak or remember who I was. My grades began to fall by the wayside as the family was caught up with important matters.

When I transitioned into middle school my foundational skills from elementary school were basically non-existent. There I sat in 7th grade English; it was a Wednesday morning meaning I missed Monday's class and Tuesdays. I walked into class with my chin in my chest, avoiding eye contact with my teacher focusing on remembering which seat I was assigned to. Before I could find my seat, I felt this tap on my shoulder, the one I hoped to avoid. My teacher gives me a head nod signaling me to step outside the classroom, so I do. My jaw clenches, my palms sweaty, I began to think, what am I going to say when she asks me where I have been or why I'm missing classes. I begin to internally panic. She folds her arms and with a stern voice she says, "You have been missing too many classes, I'm going to have to notify your parents." I look at her with a nervous stare but not for the reason she believed in a fear of punishment. What if the school finds out the reason I'm staying home is because of my mother? I shook my head in understanding and proceeded back into the classroom to my seat.

"Open our books up to page 54 chapter 2", the teacher looks around for a person to read aloud. As she looks around the class, she sees my hand down, eyes locked on the book, "Alissia pick up on page 54." I immediately felt this huge bubble form in my throat; chills shocked my entire body. I opened my mouth and what came out didn't even feel like words more or so sounds. Each word broken up like I was in 1st grade learning how to pronounce the syllables in a

new word. When I finished the paragraph the air around me felt still, it was a mournfully painful listen for me, the classmates around me and most of all the teacher. I felt the tears begin to crawl down my rosy, red warm cheeks as I tried to hide myself behind my book in embarrassment. It was at that moment, I told myself that this will not happen again because I do not plan to attend the class in the future. This anxiety led me to develop destructive habits during my time as a student. I started withdrawing from school and skipping classes due to the overwhelming fear of embarrassment. Not completing homework when it was due and inevitably failing tests and exams. There was no one to hold me accountable for my actions besides myself and naturally, my way of dealing with problems was simply to avoid them. I somehow made my way out of middle school, after facing a long period of deep depression, and anxiety along with unpacked childhood trauma. The turning point that propelled me into my unforgettable high school years.

High school felt different. I was lucky enough to have been invited to join a colorguard group and there I felt like I met my family. Along with this outlet came this amazingly sage, down to earth woman who wanted to mentor me. She gave one look at me and saw so much more than what I saw in myself. She saw raw talent and the potential for greatness. I finally felt seen and important to someone. I was given the sole thing I was missing throughout my childhood education and it was opportunity and encouragement. I would express myself to her what if I audition for the high school dance company and don't get accepted because I'm not like the other girls. What if I take this class and I don't do well. She would tell me the hardest part is making the leap, just go for it. Give it your all and most of all don't be afraid to fail. Failure is what builds us up and makes us strong. Take that failure, learn from it then go again. To never give up because I believe in you but that means nothing if you don't believe in yourself. I took that feeling and ran with it. My scores began to improve. I discovered what drive and ambition

was and I began to succeed. I made it into my high school dance company and was able to dance underneath world renowned choreographers from New York. I began to set goals for myself and achieve them but my story wasn't over yet.

I took a three year break after high school to pursue my dance and colorguard career in the midwest. Touring all over the United States performing. Winning medals and becoming one of the youngest choreographers for a dance company in Cincinnati, Ohio. Then Covid hit and the world stopped. I was working as a shift manager at Chipotle and creating online choreography videos. I wasn't making enough to support myself anymore and I knew that I wanted to further my education. So I prepared for four months straight conditioning, lifting weights, running several miles on a daily basis. I went on a very strict diet, only eating vegan meals and drinking protein smoothies. I watched as my baby cheeks melted away, my stomach began to flatten and muscles grow. I felt prepared as I could ever be in the best shape of my life so I proceeded to pack up all my things, shipped them home and joined the United States Navy. I committed myself to five years of service with the sole purpose to build a foundation. I didn't have a car, a savings account, a place to live or a degree.

I remember standing among a group of young male sailors and our leadership would enter the shop and pick out who they wanted for their maintenance. They would look around the room and pick out all the males, ignoring that I even existed. I would raise my hand and say "could I be a part of this maintenance?" They would laugh and say "you wouldn't wanna get yourself dirty and the equipment is too heavy for you. Let the guys handle this, you just sit there and look pretty as you were, adding a gross wink." It wasn't the fact that he was bald with a beer gut that made it gross or the fact that he was married with two kids at home. It was the fact that the only thing they found me useful for was something sweet for them to set their eyes on. I

would get questions like do you do gluts alot? I saw you in the gym last night. Do you want to be my gym girlfriend? I know that I'm married but my wife said I could have a boat boo and I want you to be that.

I remember shadowing a younger sailor on a qualification I was studying to obtain called bowsafety. I thought it was so nice of him to give me the opportunity to shadow him on the station during operations. I set myself up on the station and plugged my sound powered headphones in and climbed the ladder to peek my head over the side of the ledge leading to the flight deck. Behind me I felt his hand grab my waist and squeeze. My stomach began to turn. I turned around and said "why are you holding my waist?" He assured me it was for security reasons. I felt unsure however, I didn't question it as the flight deck is very unsafe. You have helicopters turning and fighter jets blasting and actively moving all around you. After operations ended we began to head back to the workcenter. He stops me and pulls me aside and says " you know a lot of people get sucked off where we were at night time." I felt my fist begin to ball up as my eyes filled with tears of anger. "Maybe you and I..." I stopped him. " DO NOT FOR ONE SECOND take my kindness for weakness. I am here for ONE sole reason. To become the best sailor I possibly can be. I don't know what kind of sailor you thought I was but you CLEARLY you have me confused and lastly, F you!" These moments took a toll on me, I felt like I had to become someone I wasn't so I could stand up for myself and not be taken advantage of. I learned so much in my time in the Navy. I learned I don't owe anything to anyone. I don't have to prove to a man that I am capable of doing what they do. In my last deployment I was awarded by the Department Of The Navy a combat achievement medal for leading 451 critical combat maintenance actions and mentoring and training a group of young sailors, men and women throughout combat operations in the middle east. I learned that not only I could do their job but I

am a badass woman who is helping pave the way for future generations. Women can be in a male dominated rate and not only succeed but excel.

That confidence transferred over into the student I am today here at Old Dominion University. I place myself into my studies with full confidence. My goal for my first semester was to achieve A's across the board and I was able to do just that because this time is different. The fear never disappeared. I just stopped letting it decide who I could become.