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Creative Nonfiction

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Evil Roots

Ever since I was a little toddler, I wiggled, shook, bounced, and sang at every moment possible. I was oblivious to the occasion or my surroundings so I only focused on the music and my moves. I'm talking about commercials, advertisements, and whatever else provided a tune for the beat of my always-busy drum. My mom would rush to get her camera in order to film all of my dance moves and choreography that I prepared to a library of different songs. The never ending supply of those old fashioned home videos are both hilarious and disturbing. Home videos only have one purpose: to embarrass the crap out of you when you're older.

My mom was a single mom for a while so my Nana helped raise us for most of my childhood. As a kid, I would go everywhere with my Nana. Every day was a new adventure to Walmart, the mall, the pet store, or anywhere we wanted to travel. Each day we went grocery shopping, I always pointed out the dance studio that was on the left side of the pet store. At the young age of six, my Nana enrolled me into this dance studio named *Attitudes*. The first task we had to do was to fill out the paperwork to make sure I was eligible to dance there. After turning in the redundant, five page long, essay format, question form, the lady slid next to me, gazed into my soul, and asked what seemed to be the strangest question, "How old are you?"

Confused and concerned I timidly said, "I'm six years old, is that okay?" Having no problem crushing my little six-year-old heart, the front desk lady abruptly said, "I'm sorry but we don't take children under the age of eight in order to keep our professional look." My Nana, doing what she did best, scolded the young lady for having awful customer service and we left in a hurry. Before we even pulled back into the driveway, my Nana got a phone call from the owner of *Attitudes*, they were apologizing and begging us to come back and have me try out. Moral of the story is, I ended up being the youngest one in the dance studio and that is where I found my true passion for dance.

Fast forward about two years later and I ended up moving from Virginia Beach to Chesapeake. My mom got remarried to a man there and we inevitably ended up merging our families together. I insisted that I would only move on one condition; we had to find the perfect dance studio. After hours of searching through ads and talking on the phone, my mom finally found an affordable dance studio that was under new management. The very next day, we went to visit this studio and meet the owners and as soon as we stepped foot in the front door, we felt like we were at home. Everyone was so welcoming and sweet. One of the teachers even let me sit in on her intermediate classes so I could get a feel for their pop style. My mom really pulled off what I thought to be impossible. She truly did find the perfect dance studio for me. My feelings were both bitter and sweet because I was so excited about this new dance studio, but this meant I was definitely moving to Chesapeake to live with my new step-dad.

Although, I don't remember much about my life before I moved to Chesapeake, I do remember not wanting to move because I would miss all my friends and family in Virginia Beach. I hated the thought of living somewhere else, I hated the thought of living with someone

that wasn't my dad, and I hated the thought of leaving all that I have ever known. My attitude definitely got worse before it got better. Robbie, my step dad, is now a 30-year veteran in the Navy, but when I first met him he was still active duty and barking orders like it was his job... maybe because it was. He had two teenage children at the time but they lived with their mother. Before he married my mom, he was practically a bachelor with minimal to no responsibilities. Things changed, and they changed quickly. We had chore charts, curfews, bedtimes, schedules; you name it, we had it. My brother, sister, and I absolutely hated the orders and the yelling that Robbie felt like he had to do in order to parent us. Needless to say, it was a very rough first couple of years as a new family.

After trudging through my first few years with Robbie, we managed to build a bond that couldn't be broken. After all, he provided for us for a very long time. One thing that I will always be grateful for is my braces. You might be thinking, "That's an odd thing to be grateful for" but if you saw the way my teeth looked, you wouldn't wonder any longer. My canine teeth looked like they were coming out from under my nostrils and my bottom four front teeth were jumbled together like a stack of fallen dominos. One sunny day, the summer after my seventh grade year, I was taken to an orthodontist and sized for braces. The metal obstruction in my mouth was a cool reminder of how lucky I was to be getting my teeth fixed. Although it was an embarrassing journey I had to embark on, it was one that would be worth it in the end. After all, it's what all the cool kids were doing, right?

That same summer, after my seventh grade year, I found out that I was selected to be on my dance studio's competition team. That Monday, when I saw my full name written on the front door of the studio, under "new competition team," my heart started beating out of my

chest and tears started to well up in my eyes. Simply just the sense of feeling like I was a part of something special was an exhilarating feeling. This was the start of many friendships, many fun times, and many long practices, all that I was very happy to be a part of. Being on this dance team could have very well been the highlight of my preteen years.

Being on this team wasn't all rainbows and butterflies. Though there were countless football games missed, school functions unattended, and sleepovers ignored in order for me to stay committed to the team. On Mondays, my class did Jazz from 6:30-7:45 and hip-hop from 7:45-9. Tuesdays, we had ballet from 6:15-7:15 and musical theater from 7:30-8:30. The entire team had production (a six-minute-long dance that includes all levels of the competition team) rehearsal from 6-8 on Wednesdays and 4:45-6:45 on Fridays. Thursdays were my least favorite because we had pointe from 6:30-7:15 and ballet from 7:15-8:15. As if this wasn't enough practice, the team also had to be at one weekend practice a month, that consisted of both Saturday and Sunday, for three hours each day. Needless to say, I had very little free time and my only friends were at dance.

One ordinary Friday night practice, coincidentally the night before my very first competition, all ten of the girls in my class lined up and took turns practicing one specific move that we were all struggling with. We went down the line, one by one, and proved to the instructor that we could perform the move flawlessly. The move we had to execute was a double pirouette into the splits, catching ourselves with our hands as we landed with our legs spread apart. The anticipation crept as we waited for our turn to arrive. The angst that came with being patient became too difficult to bear. It was finally my opportunity to show my teacher and peers that I had what it took to be on this team. I prepared for the turn, pulled

myself onto my left toe and whipped myself around to do a double pirouette, so far so good. In the middle of the second turn I realized that I was moving excessively fast to be able to go straight into the splits, so I improvised and wedged my leg down too early in hopes that it would slow me down. In an attempt to complete the move, I jumped into the splits so quickly that my hands didn't have enough time to catch up and my face hit the ground as fast as you could blink.

Everything happened so quickly that when I picked my head up the room was spinning and I had the warm irony taste of blood in my mouth. As I was trying to stop the ground from spiraling, my dance instructor had the look of shock painted on her face. She quickly ran to my side, helped me stand up, and led me to the bathroom. Standing in front of the spot stained mirror, I saw my oversized top lip with my braces attached underneath them. First, I assessed the situation and tried to figure out the best way to free my lip from my braces. I slowly leaned over the sink and reached both of my hands to the creases of my top lip. There was one metal square on my tooth that was completely engulfed in my lip and I had to wiggle its way free. The only way to do this was with the help of my dance teacher looking inside my mouth and explaining where I needed to move my lip. Finally, it was set free and I was left with a busted, bleeding lip the night before my first competition.

I noticed the next day that my tooth had been pushed back a smidge from the impact that the floor had on my face. I thought nothing of it because I figured my braces would be tightened in a couple weeks and that should straighten my teeth back out in no time. A few days passed and it didn't cross my mind again because my braces did exactly what I thought they would: put my tooth back in place. Luckily, the worst thing that came out of this situation

was a busted lip going on stage for the very first time. I am very thankful that I had a team of awesome friends that helped me get over the embarrassment. I very quickly had the affectionate nickname of “Angelina Jolie” because of the size of my top lip. I soon came to the realization that laughter truly can be the cure for anything.

Being the carefree teenager that I was, I believed that once my busted lip healed, the problem was over. Little did I know, my tooth had actually been pushed back far enough to where it damaged the root. About a year after the incident, I got my braces taken off and the first thing the orthodontist said to me was, “How did your front tooth become discolored?” Well, not understanding what he was talking about, I replied with, “Excuse me? I didn’t know it was discolored... what color is it?” He then explained to me that the tooth was grey, which probably meant that the root had been damaged by some blunt force that knocked it back. As soon as he said that I thought back to that Friday night at dance practice. What I once thought was no big deal, quickly turned into a matter of possibly losing my front tooth. I immediately thought of all the possibilities that could happen and how we could save my tooth. I was somewhat relieved to find out that all I would need done was a root canal but at the same time, that sounded terrifying.

Following up with my dentist, it was true that the root canal would solve the problem of my dead tooth by cleaning the root out and filling my tooth with whitener to help match it to the color of my other teeth. They said it was a fairly easy procedure but it would still take some time and recovery since it was one of my front teeth. This horrified me since I had never had a root canal done before, so I put it off until my next dentist appointment. When that appointment came, we asked for an estimate and my mom decided to wait until my next

appointment because it was Christmas time and we couldn't afford it at the moment. This cycle of pushing the root canal off until the next visit became a bad habit that was comfortable to do. It wasn't until about five years later, when I started to experience sharp pains in my tooth that I realized that it could possibly fall out if I didn't get it fixed. I automatically called my dentist to make an emergency appointment to get reevaluated and hopefully schedule the next step. A few weeks went by and it was finally time to get this procedure that I had been dreading for five years. I prayed heavily for strength and courage because I knew I would be awake the entire time. The root canal took about two hours total and I felt virtually no pain. It was a bit nerve racking but the dental assistants walked me through every step (preparation, procedure, and after care) and I felt completely safe. When the root canal was over, I had a beautiful white tooth and very slight soreness.

Growing up, I was constantly in the spotlight while on stage dancing. When you are the center of attention, confidence can either make you or break you. I never had a problem with feeling self-conscious until my friends and family started asking me questions about my discolored tooth. I would get frustrated and embarrassed because I knew it was something that I couldn't change at the time and maybe not ever. Despite the few years of embarrassment, I believe that this fiasco was a blessing in disguise. If I didn't fall and bust my lip, I would have never knocked my tooth back. If I didn't knock my tooth back and kill my root, I would've never had a dead, gray tooth and felt self-conscious about my smile. In turn, this self-consciousness that I was feeling almost every time I smiled, for almost 5 years, was met with a feeling of gratefulness of being able to fix my smile into what I've always wanted it to be. This drawn out event that happened in my life has helped me to not take everyday splendors for granted. We

need to appreciate the fact that we are healthy and alive. We need to appreciate our beautiful eyes and our pearly white teeth. I know that appearance isn't everything, but confidence is and you can't be confident if you lack self-esteem.