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### **Motivation**

When I was younger, I never really used to enjoy school. One of my earliest recollections is of my grandmother walking me to preschool, leather belt in hand because I'd refused to go. My mother would ask me, "do you want to be a dunce?" In my family, being a dunce was the worst person you possibly be because according to my parents, dunces never succeed. They can't get jobs because they didn't get good grades in school, and they let people walk all over them because they're too stupid to notice or set boundaries. So I did well enough in elementary school to get out of the dunce category, but my stance didn't change. My unwillingness to go to school went on until high school, where I realized that schooling was much more than just a way to survive. Though 11th grade was when I truly turned myself around, my middle school years intertwined with one English teacher were what exposed me to writing and set me on the path to uncovering the true meaning of education.

For the first two years of middle school, I had an English teacher named Ms. Salmon. Despite us never speaking again, her experience as an educator is connected to my own story, which in a way, wouldn't make any sense without her. When attending middle school, it was very apparent that everyone hated Ms. Salmon. Middle school culture was insanely aggressive, especially for the teachers, which is why Ms. Salmon was verbally roughed up and spat on by most of her students, especially those in my class. I might have been the only kid in that class who had even the tiniest grain of respect for her. My fondest memories of middle school were

spending my lunch hours in her classroom, writing cringy short stories with my best friend at the time. Ms. Salmon and I had a good mentor and mentee relationship going on, but it didn't always start that way. I used to be one of the zoned out, music-blasting, gum-chewing, disrespectful kids in her class. I don't remember what changed or when I stopped failing her class and started listening to her. Maybe I felt that it took too much necessary energy to defy her, or maybe I thought that all of Ms. Salmon's teachings on the three types of irony or different types of poetry were much more interesting than watching my classmates act up or bully her. + That was when I realized that she was a good teacher, stuck in a bad situation. I never understood why everyone was so hard on her. It could be because she gave too much work or because she responded brashly to students who continuously disrupted her class. I can still envision her sunken face as muttered curses to herself when picking from the floor, littered highlighters she had given out to the class before. That was the first time I ever felt sorry for her.

On one spring day, Ms. Salmon had finished assigning homework and a classmate scoffed at the board and told me that I'm one of the few kids passing her class. I don't think there were only a couple of kids passing, but I'm certain that a lot of them weren't listening. It was their discontent for the teacher that made them fail. They thought that by refusing to do the work and monkeying around in the class, they were hurting Ms. Salmon, but the true victims were shown when more than half of the class had to do extra credit work to pass. I know that every one of those kids knew what they had to do to pass. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to dig themselves out of their ditches so fast. Some of them even went on to the honors class. That year of 7th grade was when I realized that only I had control over my education and whether I learned. Looking back at the long days of middle school, I would have loved to sleep through Ms. Salmon's class,

but the quality of her work and my willingness to learn kept me awake. I wanted to grow stronger as a writer.

Another thing that Ms. Salmon gave me was my first bit of confidence since elementary school. When I started junior high, I thought I would become a pop star. I patiently waited for what I thought would be the inevitable arrival of my time to shine. However, with each day passing and feeling like my name was written in Regina George's eternal Burn Book, the pop star in me reduced to a little mung bean, in need of sunlight and water. Ms. Salmon was my water. She didn't nurture me, but she provided the tools necessary for me to cultivate my own sunlight and express my newly unleashed confidence through a pen and paper. I didn't end up becoming an Instagram famous singer, but I embraced a new-found passion for writing. I began to channel my wants, experiences, and perspectives on societal norms into stories and rants. If I had stayed unmoved, who's to say where I would be today? I don't think I would have even applied to college.

What I've taken from the experience is that you have to learn for yourself. No matter how hard you try to work, you won't reach your full potential unless you take a moment to melt into what you're doing. A lot of teachers completely berate unruly kids. They call them clowns, dummies, unteachable, and even *dunces* when the reality is that every student is capable of growth. These children aren't unteachable, just unmotivated, bored, and insecure. In elementary school, teachers were always quick to put a kid in the special education class if they had a chain of bad behavior. So many of those kids were overlooked when it came to programming for gifted classes. Much like how a good portion of children of color are misdiagnosed with learning disorders when they just need understanding and others are under-diagnosed when what they

need is the intervention. If it weren't for those crucial years of middle school, I'd probably be chasing a broken dream without any real plans for my future.

The last lesson I learned came from high school. After starting the writer's institute in the 10th grade and seeing so much raw talent from the other students, I felt like I didn't deserve to be in their class. Yes, it was *their* class, and I was only an outsider. I second-guessed everything I'd written and forlornly deleted almost every attempt at an assignment or personal project. In addition to that, I would skip the classes I was bad at just to avoid the feeling of struggle. This chaotic cycle of—skipping class because I didn't know what was going on but not knowing what was going on because I skipped—finally came to an end in junior year, when I started seeing my failures as the beginning to achieving my goals. Now I've learned that there's more to the process of learning than staying focused and following instruction. When I get frustrated with something difficult, I remind myself that after the discomfort of processing comes the satisfaction of knowing. I could try to focus all I want but without motivation, I'll never truly succeed.