

I wasn't what one would call a sociable kid, or a kid with good self-esteem. Throughout middle school, instead of talking to my tablemates I'd retreat to the fantastical worlds of my mind, daydreaming while doing my classwork with a desperate speed. School was a half-way point between me and the luxury of books and art supplies that littered the corners of my apartment. In other words, I was a lonely geek in every sense of the word. Rarely did I ever share my interests with anyone, and rarely did I ever talk to anyone. So, when I was entering high school, I realized two truths; that I'd continue my illustrious career of being an All-American geek, and similar to the people I admired in the animation industry, high school would be a passing memory. It'd be a quick but brutal preparation for the wonderful world ahead for the budding creative. All of this brewing teenage angst and anxiety was brewing within me every day as I went in and out of A.P. U.S. History.

On the day of this event, it was cold. Unbearably cold, the kind of cold that dug into my bones and made me both hyperaware of every nerve on my body and completely numb. So my hoodie was up, and I sat huddled in my chair as Ms. Zahner continued to teach. The sun was out, and the golden glow of the sun's rays on my desk reminded me that school was about to end. 30 minutes, and back to reading *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?*. It was a short story anthology by N.K. Jemisin, and I was enamored by its prose, lush worldbuilding, and how it was so focused on the experiences of Black people. It was all I could think about that day, and I repeatedly resisted the urge to just pull out the book and read it to my heart's content during class. At that moment, my hand itched to grab the book out of my bag as Ms. Zahner began explaining the last assignment of the day.

We were to write an example of a proper thesis using the template on the board; "X. However, A, B, and C. Therefore, Y." Soon, the only sound in the room was the rustling of lined paper and the

scratching of pencils and pens. I simply stared at my paper, my mind just as blank as the sheet in front of me. The gears in my head were turning, and I turned to what I was initially thinking about; the sci-fi anthology in my backpack.

There were 30-ish students in that classroom, and thus I had a 3% chance of being called on to read aloud my work. This rationale replayed in my head as I wrote down the most dumb, bonkers, and outlandish thing I could think of; my thesis argued in favor of children going into vans of suspicious strangers, with the very factual evidence of portals leading to fantastical worlds were within them, plus the chance of being affectionately adopted by a quirky family of vegan vampires.

So, it was clearly academic in every sense of the word. I scribbled it down quickly enough for me to have enough time to randomly doodle in the margins, blissfully spacing out once more. I didn't notice when the timer rang loud, signaling everyone to put their writing utensils. I didn't notice when Ms. Zahner was calling on every individual, and I didn't notice when her gaze landed on me. What I did notice was when she called on me.

"Belen!"

I flinched, getting caught off guard and certainly not expecting to be called on. My voice remained as it always was, barely audible, when I quickly read aloud my thesis before dropping the paper on my desk with the flair of my hand.

Barely anyone could hear what I'd just said. Someone had even thought that I'd said something about Twilight with the brief mention of vampires. Ms. Zahner quickly walked over, her heels clicking against the floor echoing the ticking of the clock. Ten more minutes, then I'm home free, I thought, trying to keep my nerves in check. She looked over my shoulder, scanning what I'd read. At that

moment, all I cared about were my “embarrassing” doodles, my futile attempts of drawing accurate hands and eyes.

I could hardly react before she gasped and exclaimed, “This is amazing!”

And I could hardly reply with a quiet, embarrassed ‘thank you’ before she snatched the piece of paper out of my hands and read it aloud with a clear voice that bounced off the walls of the classroom. I couldn’t bear to look at my classmates’ facial expressions as she read my weird sci-fi thesis, and my face burned like a fire with embarrassment. All I could think was that I should’ve just written about something normal, something less weird, something less me.

However, their reactions were not what I had initially expected. Instead of dead silence and confused whispers, many of them seemed to like it. I could hear most of them talking excitedly amongst themselves, a flood of compliments and positive remarks about what I’d written.

What happened next was a surprisingly happy blur, but when I walked out of that classroom, I’d talked animatedly with a few classmates with similar interests, and it was the first time I felt truly happy in the few weeks I’d been in high school. I look back at the moment with some embarrassment, probably the anxious middle-school version of me still reeling in humiliation, but mostly I’m grateful I had the unintended courage to put my weird self onto paper and for the world to see. Being myself, no matter how strange it’d be, allowed me to make new friends and feel a sense of belonging in what would be my favorite class of 9th grade (and probably my favorite class of my high school career). If I could go back to that anxious kid, huddled in that hoodie on that fall afternoon, I would encourage myself to go for that bonkers idea, and to talk to the student next to me. Mainly, I would ask that kid to be themselves. Just be yourself, and since like calls to like, the people you need to know will find you.