

The first day of junior year began with a bleary-eyed struggle against my wrecked sleep schedule, my circadian rhythm hopelessly unprepared for the harsh return to 6:30 a.m. alarms. Even after a reasonable 11:00 p.m. bedtime, I woke up cursing my past self, hit snooze, and desperately hoped that it was all just a bad dream. My alarm blared a second time, confirming my worst fears, and I reluctantly parted from the comfort of my covers. I half-heartedly threw on the best outfit I'd wear all year, until the same linty jacket inevitably stole the show. I learned the hard way (getting sick on the second day of school) that my third period AP Lang class was basically a freezer. No matter the season, it was always freezing cold, making it hard to focus through shivers and goosebumps.

As I trudged downstairs, I was greeted by the sight of my younger sister practically vibrating in her seat as she ate breakfast. Despite my firm insistence that middle school was the furthest thing from a "magical" experience, she stubbornly clung to her fantasy of freedom and friendship. I couldn't help but roll my eyes at my sister's naïveté, but I knew she would find her footing quickly. Since elementary school, she'd been popular, and I used to tease her by singing, "*Popular, you're gonna be popuuu-lar!*" from *Wicked* whenever she smugly bragged about being recognized in the girls' bathroom. I, on the other hand, could only dream of even being known by my classmates, much less my entire grade.

I entertained that delusion as I waited for first period to begin, imagining myself chattering with a flock of faceless girls, planning a shopping spree at the mall, or gorging on a box of Crumbl cookies, only to realize we'd inhaled thousands of calories in one sitting, or—

"Excuse me, can I sit here?" came an unfamiliar voice, snapping me out of my daydream.

I turned to see a girl with the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen, each lash curled perfectly. Nodding like a bobblehead, I croaked out a meek "*Sure!*" and motioned to the empty seat beside me. A comfortable silence settled over us as she unpacked her things, quickly broken when we began bonding over our tragic fate. Starting the day with Pre-Calculus wasn't ideal, but at least I wasn't suffering alone. For once, I had someone to complain about homework with, spiral over tests beside, and debrief answers with on the way to second period.

Unfortunately, my lucky streak in the friendship department ended there, but even one friend was more than I started with. Not exactly the mall-hopping daydream I'd imagined, but a step out of invisibility. I'd take it.

It wasn't anything dramatic, but it gave me just enough confidence to push through the hardest year of high school.

Hard was right. Between the five AP classes, the constant deadlines, and the pressure not to screw up, there wasn't much room to breathe.

Desperate to salvage GPAs wrecked by underclassmen negligence, everyone piled on AP classes as a last-ditch effort. The six-week period allowed students to tentatively dip their toes in the water, to determine whether they could keep up with its merciless flow or risk being swept away by the current.

Looking back, Pre-Calculus was the perfect introduction to what junior year would feel like.

Calling my Pre-Calculus teacher strict was an understatement. She would snap if you smiled the wrong way, and would come to class unprepared, rarely reviewing the material before teaching. Sometimes, we'd be sitting there in silence as she muttered to herself, trying to learn *with us*.

Still, her willingness to provide additional resources was commendable. Despite AP Pre-Calculus being a newer course, she organized an online calendar that included due dates, annotated notes, instructional videos, and supplementary practice worksheets. We could snark about her attitude all we wanted, but no one could deny that she set us up for success.

We spent the first two months of APUSH under the rule of a substitute. Unfortunately, while he was easy to talk to, he wasn't qualified to teach the material, and many first-time AP students took advantage of that. After months of coasting through easy busy work and earning free hundreds, they scrambled to keep up with the demanding workload our actual teacher reintroduced. In fact, by the next semester, a quarter of our class had dropped out.

Before we even met our real U.S. History teacher, the rumors about her began to circulate, further fueled by our substitute's own assumptions.

*"I heard she's really mean."* A girl at my table whispered anxiously. *"Apparently, she yelled at the student council during a meeting."*

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that our history teacher was nothing but kind and welcoming, easily my favorite teacher this year. On the day she returned, she greeted me by name, startling me with her attentiveness especially after being away for so long. Most importantly, she knew how to engage even the least motivated, bringing the subject and our classroom to life through interactive discussions, activities, and games.

Back in elementary and middle school, history felt like a chore. I memorized facts just long enough to pass the test, only to forget them immediately after that. Now, I could retain information from earlier units and draw connections across different time periods. For the first time, I found myself genuinely interested in history, a shift I credit to my teacher's influence.

With an extroverted, slightly scattered teacher, Psychology was always unpredictable. She'd pace the curriculum based on the class' progress and extend due dates accordingly, reassuring us that we'd have plenty of time to cover the material. Her flexibility with extensions was a double-edged sword though; she often pushed deadlines back *on* the original due date, leaving me frustrated that I hadn't prioritized more pressing work for other classes.

I secretly tried to catch up on said work during class, but the documentary on the screen had other plans. One minute I was scribbling answers, the next I was teary-eyed as the baby monkeys in the Harlow monkeys experiment pitifully clung to their cloth mother, deprived of the comfort and security only a real mother could provide.

Environmental Science felt like a nature documentary, with my teacher's calm narration and the football players acting as the wild animals. She never raised her voice, even when they spent class talking, texting, or tackling each other mid-lecture. Every day, without fail, the rest of us would sit silently, exchanging unamused glances as she struggled to wrangle them back into their seats. They'd behave for about five seconds before the ruckus started up again.

The class itself was fascinating, though I'll admit, my mind wandered during the pollution units, with chemical compositions going in through one ear and out the other.

Strict, composed, and impossible to read, my AP Lang teacher scared me more than my grades did. While I respected her unwavering composure, her standoffish demeanor dissuaded me from seeking out feedback on my writing. I'd frown at yet another low grade, unsure of what I'd done wrong, but too anxious to ask for help.

My grades took an even bigger hit during Socratic seminars. I'd sit helplessly in the back, waiting for an opportunity to chime in, only to be cut off by another classmate. As the minutes ticked by and my teacher announced there were only five minutes left, I quietly mourned my A, knowing I hadn't contributed a single word.

Though I never mustered the courage to speak during Socratic seminars, I redeemed myself with a presentation on *The Beauty Myth*, a piece of social commentary. I put together a well-organized slideshow and clutched my flashcards, only glancing at them once or twice. My voice quivered occasionally, and I stumbled over a few words, but I was surprised by how clearly and confidently I

could project. I grinned with pride at the feedback from my teacher and was ecstatic to see a perfect 100 written at the top of my rubric.

*“I didn’t come this far to only come this far.” — Matthew Reilly.*

I first saw that quote scrawled in dry-erase marker on my Kinesiology teacher’s whiteboard. At the time, groggy and reluctant, I couldn’t have imagined the chaos, challenges, or growth ahead. I started junior year just trying to make it through the day. But I did more than that. Each day, I reminded myself not to settle for silence, for shortcuts, for “good enough”.

I may not be popular or fearless, but I try. Whether it’s striking up a quiet conversation or raising my hand in a room full of louder voices, I’m still trying to be the change I want to see. Entering senior year, I intend to uphold those same standards, using everything I’ve learned to guide me forward.

After all, I didn’t come this far to only come this far.