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The Year I Learned to Bend, Not Break

At the beginning of my sophomore school year, I walked through the front doors of my high school with my heavy backpack and my slightly oversized t-shirt with an air of confidence that was just barely holding me together. I had no idea then how much this year would stretch me or shape me and ultimately show me what I'm really made of. This wasn't the year I expected. In fact, almost nothing went as planned. I started off with a list of goals taped to my wall. Get straight A's. Make varsity. Win the science fair. Apply for that summer program my counselor recommended. Simple enough, right? Ding-Ding then life happens. Life shows you a funny way to remind us we're not in control of everything. That's where the learning begins.

September: The Weight of Expectations

School seemed to start off well or at least it felt that way. I was trying to juggle AP classes, balance cross-country practice, and pretending to have time for it all. I was exhausted by the second week. Although my body was tired, I kept pushing myself harder as I thought that's what everyone does in high school. Although I felt overwhelmed, I didn't want to admit it. I didn't want to disappoint my parents and even myself though I was struggling every day. One afternoon, after getting back from a brutal Algebra 2 Test and losing a 5K against my peers in Cross Country, I went straight to my room, shut the door, and cried. It was not loud sobbing tears, just quiet heavy ones that felt like they had been waiting all week. It was then I realized something had to change. I couldn't keep living like I was a machine. I wasn't one.

October–December: A Lesson in Letting Go

With some nudging from my English teacher, Mrs. Kerpash noticed the bags under my eyes before I did. I dropped one AP class and started seeing the school counselor once a week. Weirdly, I felt better and didn't feel ashamed. I felt like I could finally breathe. One lesson I learned this year is that letting go isn't the same as giving up. It takes more courage to release the weight than to pretend it doesn't exist. That winter, something shifted. The biggest turning points came in December during our school's winter talent show. I had secretly been writing poetry all year, something nobody really knew. Mrs. Anderson encouraged me to share a piece. I almost didn't as my hands were shaking so hard backstage I thought I would drop the mic. But I read my poem. It was called "Unfinished," about not always being who people expect you to be. When I looked up after the last line, the silence was heavy and then, applause. It was the loud kind and finally I felt cheerful and happy as much as winning a race in the finals.

Afterward, someone I barely knew from biology class came up to me and said, "That poem? It was exactly how I've been feeling."

That's when I understood the power of vulnerability.

January–March: Cracks and Growth

The new semester came with more curveballs. I didn't make the track team this time around. Initially, I was crushed. It felt like a public failure and I hated that everyone would know I wasn't good enough. But instead of stewing in it, I pivoted. I joined the yearbook committee. It turns out, I love photography. There is something magical about catching a moment in a picture before it vanishes from your memory. A hearty laugh after a fun-filled afternoon with your friends, a high-five after a test, or someone staring out the window like they're dreaming. I learned that you don't always have to be the one in the spotlight and sometimes you feel happy without it. Sometimes you feel happy capturing someone else's spotlight and it feels just as rewarding.

One day, while I was interviewing a senior for a yearbook profile she told me, “Life doesn’t always give you what you want. But sometimes, it gives you what you need.” That quote stuck with me like glue because it was true. I didn’t achieve my old goals. But I have grown. I got honesty. I got a version of myself I actually like.

April–May: Finding My Voice

By spring, things started to shift. I wasn’t trying to impress people anymore. I wasn’t constantly tired. I still had hard days, sure. But I wasn’t carrying them alone. I became someone others came to for advice. One friend called me “the most grounded person I know,” and I laughed because, if only they knew how much of the year I spent trying not to fall apart. Maybe that’s what makes growth real, not when you become perfect, but when you become useful, even if your edges are still a little cracked. I submitted a small bunch of poems to a couple of writing competitions in the month of May. Although I didn’t win a final prize, I was shortlisted for the semifinals and that was good enough. It reminded me that my voice matters. Even if it shakes.

June: Looking Back, Moving Forward

Now, as I pack up for summer, and start thinking about next year. I feel like I am standing on a different foundation. One not built on perfection, but on presence. I learned how to ask for help. I learned that failure isn’t the opposite of success. It is part of the process. I learned that rest isn’t laziness. I also learned that being soft doesn’t mean being weak. If I had to pick one proud moment, it wouldn’t be an award or a grade. It would be the moment I stood on that stage with my poem, heart pounding and said the truth out loud anyway. If I had to choose one quote that I loved this year. It would be what my counselor said in one of our early meetings.

“You don’t have to be the strongest person in the room. You just have to be honest about where you are.”

So, where am I now? I am still learning. Still writing. Still messing up sometimes. But I am here, and I am proud of that.