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Mrs. Dickinson

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Essay #1

To clarify, I did not ask to go to school with her. I did not ask to have classes with her, or to spend three years in various extra-curricular activities with her. I in no way wanted to be involved in her life, nor her in mine. And yet, these things happen, and sometimes you just have to plow through life with a chain around your ankle and an overly bombastic bowling ball dragging behind your every step.

Her name is Brittney (actually, it is something quite different, but I have changed it for the sake of my own well-being). From grammatical errors to flawed logic, conversations with her were nothing but strenuous. She is the only force alive that has proven too stubborn for me to impact in any way, shape, or form, and her self-righteousness and paradoxical talent for gauging everyone's flaws but her own have led to many an argument. And not just with me, mind you. A squadron of exacerbated high schoolers took the challenge in rotations so regular we might as well have made a schedule. And yet, like the fungal infection you can't quite get rid of no matter how many ointments you apply, she stayed, ready to take us on day after day after day.

Needless to say, my tribulations with Brittney ought to be counted as one of my impressive feats of high school, or at the very least the spotlessness of my record in the wake of the rage she spurred merits consideration. She is the epitome of the metaphorical (or quite possibly literal) demon every child faces at some point in their school days; that insurmountable task that threatens to take your life or your sanity, whichever comes first. And yet, three years after the inception of my greatest trial, I find myself at

the summit. While she remains a supernatural force roaming the halls of the school, I have been bestowed with a newfound patience, an ability to tolerate a conversation with her, and the startling capacity to reason with the absolutely unreasonable. I never believed I could actually learn something from somebody who pushed me so much in all of the wrong ways, but since reaching an understanding of how to confront my demons, I have been able to work with people of all shapes and sizes, from the jocks to the jerks, from the brats to the Brittneys.

It's the ultimate paradox: learning the most important lessons from the people you want to listen to least. And yet, three years with Brittney have profoundly impacted me in ways I'm just now beginning to understand. She may still be the same beast she was freshman year, but I at the very least am changed for the better. That being said, if she should ever find this essay, there is a very real possibility that my life will be in danger and I will be forced into the Witness Protection Program. Should such a tragedy occur, please be on the lookout for a letter from Paul from Seattle.

Essay #2

Have you ever told a ten-year old they're going to hell? No? It seems a bit insensitive, possibly even hurtful, doesn't it? Well, apparently my neighbors did not get the memo, and by the fifth grade I was well aware of my imminent descent into the endless inferno.

At this point in time I find it necessary to clarify that I did not actually *do* anything to receive the omen of my unavoidable damnation. I was not an arsonist (though some select science fair projects might suggest otherwise), or a cat burglar, or even that annoying boy in the back of the classroom launching spitballs at the quiet, nerdy kid. In fact, I was the quiet, nerdy kid. With few friends and fewer opportunities to make new ones, I was fairly reclusive, choosing to excel in my classes instead of at socialization.

So what did I do wrong?

The answer, I learned, was something almost entirely alien to me. Growing up with a Jewish mother and a non-religious father, I was completely unaware that being an agnostic with Jewish heritage made me the black sheep of the community. It wasn't until my best friend of the time expressed his concerns for the fate of my heathen soul that I discovered the wariness with which my peers viewed me. Mind you, this was in the fifth grade, so eternal damnation seemed about as important as a mid-life crisis. Namely, ten-year-olds tend to not really care about that sort of thing.

And yet, as I progressed through elementary and middle school, I was branded by my rejection of the Church, and of any religion, for that matter. More and more friends expressed their confusion regarding my lifestyle. I came to terms with the harsh possibility that any conversation approaching religion could quickly lose me a friend, while those who stayed failed to understand, choosing instead to bestow sideways glances and nervous whispers upon my heathenistic presence. How could I have morals if I didn't have faith? How could I choose the right path if I didn't have a deity to guide me? I

was interrogated for my faithlessness, or shunned for the obvious corruption of my soul. Some even went so far as to read me scripture during classes, hoping to become the saint who converted me with verses and psalms.

But as the questions continued, I learned a valuable truth about myself. First, I was much too stubborn to cave in to the desires of my peers, regardless of the social consequences. But more importantly, I came to comprehend that *I* was my sense of morality. I was my direction, the guiding force in my own life. At an early age, I was able to distinguish right from wrong, and to discover what mattered most to me in life. I didn't need spirituality so long as I had a sense of self.

My peers are still a bit ambivalent in terms of my lifestyle, but challenging the local ideal of "Christianity or bust" has allowed me to gain a confidence in myself and my ability to make the right decisions in life. So long as I can think for myself and fight for what I believe in, I can be the best person possible, achieving my potential and growing to be so much more than just me.