

# The Journey Home

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By Tunnel Writer

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She nervously stood with the principal outside her new classroom. Her family had just moved during Christmas break. Starting second semester of fourth grade at a new school didn't appeal to her. She felt sick. She had tried to tell her mom that morning that her stomach wasn't feeling good.

"It's just nerves. You'll see it's not so bad."

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By now the teacher was ushering her into the classroom.

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"We will get you a desk before class lets out so, in the meantime, you can sit at the table by the wall."

The girl silently walked to the table, and that's when she heard it. The giggling.

"Look at the hole in her coat. She must be poor," one girl whispered.

That started eight and a half years of hell.

"Hey, dog face. You're so ugly, it's no wonder everyone hates you."

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"Your clothes are so old, my sister wouldn't even wear it, and she's not even born yet."

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The girl always kept her head down as she walked to class. *Ignore them. I'm just the new kid. They will stop. Won't they?*

"Hey, ugly, see this witch hand on my desk?" The boy next to her pointed to a paper with a hand print. The green hand with black pointy fingers gave her the creeps. "If you even look at me, it will come into your bedroom and kill you in your sleep."

Every day was the same. The girl kept her head down, never looked at anyone, and preferred to keep quiet. She never raised her hand in class or spoke. She couldn't talk when called on. She'd go most of the day without speaking to anyone. *Don't draw attention. Be invisible.* That advice would serve her well into adulthood.

Recess was the worst. Teachers couldn't always see the bullying, so the girl would hang around the teachers and try to carry on conversations with them. Most teachers would tell her to go play. However, there was one teacher who especially enjoyed the girl's company. This teacher was overweight, and was the butt of many jokes and cruel

pranks. The girl felt bad about the way kids treated her, so she'd spend all recess talking to this teacher. That teacher became the girl's first friend.

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The next year, that teacher became the girl's fifth grade teacher. The girl was so relieved to have the teacher; she knew this teacher would listen to her. Mrs. Richardson tried to stop the bullying of the girl, but didn't succeed.

Her math class was across the hall. The girl knew it would be a long class.

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"You're so dumb, you don't know your multiplication tables yet."

She knew she was left behind, but she tried hard to learn.

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Sandy, the girl that sat behind her, would pinch her arm through the whole class. Her math teacher saw the girl crying one day, and took her out in the hall. She found her bravery and told the teacher about being pinched. The girl raised her sleeves and showed her the tiny bruises up and down the backs of her arms.

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Instead of having an ally backing her up, she was disappointed. "Stop crying and get tough skin," the teacher said sternly.

The girl was confused and even asked her mom, "How do you get tough skin?"

She spent the whole school year with bruises.

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Sixth grade was no better for the girl. Kids were even more cruel.

The boy sitting behind her liked to pick his nose and put the boogers in her hair or on the back of her shirt. Of course, all the kids would laugh at the boy's antics.

For Christmas, a classmate wrapped a can of dog food for her. She simply threw it away and never told her parents. She never did find out who gave it to her.

The girl started missing more and more school.

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Four girls from class knew the bullying had gone too far and took it upon themselves to anonymously talk to the principal. They told the principal that it HAD to stop. If only those girls had reached out to the girl. Perhaps, she might have had friends.

The girl's parents were called to the school. "Tomorrow is Friday. Keep your daughter home tomorrow. Her classmates aren't going to like what I'm going to tell them. She doesn't need to hear it."

They kept their daughter home the next day. Never explained why. Matter of fact, she wouldn't know about her classmates storming the principal's office until decades later. Still, it did no good.

The first day of Junior High was no different.

"Hey, dogface, do the world a favor and kill yourself."

"You're so ugly, you'd be doing your parents a favor if you committed suicide," one girl said.

"I bet they would have a party instead of a funeral," another girl said back, laughing.

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*They're right. I would be doing everyone a favor if I just killed myself. But how? My dad doesn't have guns. I'll think of something. I'll find a way. I know!! I'll hang myself. That would do it. But when? When would be a good time?*

Before she could make that decision, something happened to put a stop to her suicide plans. One evening, shortly before her 13th birthday, she would see something that would change her life forever....

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"Hey, Dad, There's a new show on TV tonight. May I watch *Beauty and the Beast*? Please??"

Her dad agreed.

The girl placed herself on the floor and as close to the TV as she dared. She knew if she sat too close her parents would tell her to scoot back. "It's bad for your eyes."

Her eyes were glued to the TV. THEN she heard the phrase that would get her through school, the bullying, and even helped her fight the suicide....

"You have the strength... You do."

The girl's lungs quit working, her heart sped up. He was looking at her. Those eyes... the compassion. The girl felt her eyes tear up. He was talking directly to her. *Don't give up. Keep going. You'll get through this.* That's the message the girl got out of that one simple phrase.

A few moments later, Catherine is running down an alley and pushed into a van. Everyone is laughing and pointing at her. The girl let the tears flow. That was HER LIFE.

Her heart hurt for Catherine. *Stop! Stop laughing at her.* She wanted to throw her hands over her ears, stand up, and scream as loud as she could. Instead, she waited to see what happened next.

Vincent. Giving Catherine a silent nod.

That simple gesture stayed in her mind. She went to bed that night thinking about what she had seen. She could only focus on two things: the phrase, and the nod.

*Perhaps I can use that. Maybe when I'm bullied, I can close my eyes and picture Vincent nodding. I'll try it Monday at school.*

Monday at school everything was the same, except now she had a survival method: when kids are mean, look at an empty wall and imagine Vincent giving a small nod.

It worked.

The girl's imagination was so good that when kids knocked her down, she pictured Catherine, Jamie, or whomever she felt like that day helping her back up. Same thing when kids knocked her books out of her arms and kicked them down the hallway so she'd be late for class. She'd picture someone helping her pick them up.

"Hey, guys, look at this," Misty shouted to her classmates in metal shop as she grabbed a folder away from the girl. She walked over to the blackboard and wrote what was on the folder:

Burch

vincEnt

cAtherine

moUse

faTher

marY

jAmie

Narcissa

Devin

samanTha

cHarles

Ellie

reBecca

gEoffrey

williAm

. winSlow

peTer

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Misty then threw the folder back at the girl while her classmates laughed.

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*How dare they. This was private. I hate school.*

That same day, Misty and another girl pushed the girl into a metal table when the bell rang. A huge red mark crossed her whole stomach. The tears wouldn't stop. She picked up her books to walk to the bus. She barely noticed a classmate in the teacher's office talking to the teacher and pointing.

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The next day, that teacher called the girl into his office next to the workshop. He calmly asked what had happened the day before.

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The girl looked out the office window where a couple of girls were glaring at her. The teacher stormed over to the window and drew the blinds.

Tears flowed as she explained about being pushed and then she showed him the ugly bruise on her stomach.

"Go to the bathroom and collect yourself. Take your time. There's 50 minutes left of class, no need to rush back. If you need to cry, go ahead."

When she came back, the girls were glaring at her even more. "We're not allowed to be near you," Misty said as she and two other girls stood up to find other seats.

It wasn't long before she was a Junior in high school. Her grades were atrocious, and she was looking at failing all her classes.

Her history teacher noticed that, of all his students, this girl tried the hardest, and got nowhere. He made it as easy for her as he could. Open book tests and closed book tests weekly for the class. Best of the two would be their grade. He gave those who missed more than two days and didn't carry a C average the final exam to take home and make notes. Heck, he even allowed the students to use their notes on the final. He did everything but give her the answers, and she failed the final. Something was wrong.

"I want her tested," he told her parents.

Her parents agreed, which caused the girl to take a day-long test in the library with the principal.

"Your daughter has a learning disability. No wonder she struggles so much. She is at a 4th grade comprehension level. Do you know what this means?" the principal asked the girl's parents.

They shook their heads no.

"This is like putting a kindergartener in 5th grade and expecting them to do well. It's literally impossible."

"What do we do? This is the second semester of her junior year of high school. It's too late to do much."

The principal agreed. "I'll talk to the superintendent."

The following week, a special meeting was called by the superintendent. All the teachers, the principal, the vice principal, and the girl's father were in attendance.

"We failed her. No one picked up on her learning disability. So, teachers, you will grade all her work on what she turns in. You will NOT fail her. She will graduate with her class. Now, I don't expect to see her on the A and B honor rolls, and I don't expect to even see C's. But D's are acceptable. Cut her some slack."

All the staff agreed: no matter what, pass her anyway.

The girl was never told of this meeting or the decision. Again, it was decades later before she heard about it.

Graduation night.

The girl had her cap and gown on and was lining up to walk into the gym. She saw some empty bleachers at the very top. She pictured all her "tunnel friends," especially Vincent, at the top of those bleachers, smiling with pride.

The girl whispered, "It's been a rough ride. I couldn't have done it without all of you. Thank you!" The girl wiped away a stray tear and smiled. *This is it. After today I won't ever see these classmates again. I also won't need to imagine my friends.*

Epilogue:

This girl got a job at a factory shortly after graduation. Her company gave computer discounts and free AOL internet for two years. She jumped at it.

She never knew how much information there was on the internet. The girl quickly discovered EBay, and was bidding on some Beauty and the Beast items. Her instant manager popped up with: "Hi, I'm Chan. I noticed you're bidding on some Beauty and the Beast items. Would you like to join a group called BBTV?"

The girl freaked out and shut her computer completely down. *Did I get hacked?* After calming down, she contacted Chan.

"I'm Angela. Please, tell me more."

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## THE BEGINNING