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2015

“Ivy League”

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For Ashley Vazquez, life was anything but normal in the city of Reading, Pennsylvania. Every day she would walk to Reading Senior High School with the determination of becoming the greatest kid she could ever be. She would stare at the green pine trees and townhome-style buildings and wondered if Reading was truly the best place for her. As each day had passed, it seemed as if her education would secure her future, but she continued to wonder whether her brains would be enough to save her from her own destruction.

Reading was the city Ashley always knew as home. It was a large city right in between Harrisburg and Philadelphia with a population just shy of eighty thousand. It was one of those cities where everybody knew everybody and former generations were somehow all connected. At Reading Senior High School, the cafeteria was where the vast majority of students met around noon to socialize and gossip. The hottest girls dressed in tight shirts and shorts that were short enough to practically be underwear. Guys, on the other hand, were just guys. The fire alarm was pulled nearly every week. It was something the kids seemed to have gotten used to after a while. Through it all, Ashley believed the possibilities for her were still within reach.

In May of 2005, Ashley sat in the front row of her American Government class as her teacher lectured on the last day of the school year.

“The constitution grants us equal rights and opportunities for all. It’s what makes us truly the greatest country on earth. Many of you are going to go on to great universities and start your careers. You each have an opportunity to make a difference. If there’s something you don’t like, you have the ability to change it, and I wish you all the very best.”

Ashley sat in her small desk where her knees uncomfortably hit the bottom of the desk while her seat was as hard as a cinder block. She wrote down notes extensively with the hope that one day she, too, would make a difference. The bookrack above her seat didn’t seem big enough for her notes.

After class, Ashley made her way to the cafeteria where she would meet with her best friend, Noelle Quiñones. Ashley and Noelle knew each other since they were practically in diapers and told each other everything. She was the only real friend Ashley could count on. The cafeteria was usually packed, and the food, in Ashley’s mind, was horrible.

“You getting something to eat?” Noelle asked.

“No, girl. You know I don’t like the food here,” Ashley replied.

“Yeah, it’s pretty nasty. At the universities, they have way better options. I can’t wait to graduate and get out of here.”

“I know. I’m still not too sure where I want to go just yet, to be honest.”

“I was thinking Penn State or U.P. Wherever I get accepted to, really.”

“Those are both good choices. I might apply out of state.”

“Don’t you have like a 4.0 GPA? You’ll probably get accepted anywhere, girl.”

“I hope so. Let’s see.”

Ashley sat at the table with her fingers laced and took a look at the ceiling while Noelle continued to eat a sandwich she brought from home. Ashley was taller than average at five feet, seven inches making her stand out among other girls in the cafeteria. Her vanilla-colored skin, brown eyes, and long, brown, wavy hair gave her the sense of beauty, although she may not have always felt it. As she sat at the table, still with her backpack on, two girls, Mikayla Rogers and Neisha Leo, approached her.

“Why on earth do you still have your backpack on?” Mikayla asked.

“Umm, because I want to. Why do you care?” Ashley replied.

“It looks weird. You are extremely weird.”

“Honestly, I could care less what you think. Now go away.”

Mikayla and Neisha gave Ashley a rude smirk and walked off.

“Ugh, these girls are so annoying. Do they seriously have nothing better to do?” Ashley asked.

“You’re better than them, and you always will be, girl. Remember that,” Noelle replied. “You’ll do anything you set your mind to as long as you believe in yourself and keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Awe, thanks. See, this is why I love you,” Ashley said. “Since 1991.”

Ashley and Noelle continued their conversation until the bell rang for the next period to begin indicating that lunch was over. Ashley stood up and walked her way to her next class when, in the distance, she saw her principal, Dr. Patricia Lewis, coming toward her.

“Hey, Ashley. How are you?” Dr. Lewis asked.

“Hi. I’m good. Thanks for asking,” Ashley replied.

“By any chance, I was wondering if you could stop by my office after school. I have something I’d like to speak with you about.”

“Yeah, sure. Am I in trouble?”

“Oh, no. You’re not. You’re thinking a little too far ahead. Just come see me.”

“Alright, I will.”

Ashley had no idea what that could possibly have meant. She wondered if there was anything recent she had done to cause anyone harm. She asked herself if perhaps the girls at the cafeteria told Dr. Lewis something with the intent of getting Ashley in trouble. Just the thought of trouble struck her with fear as any little thing could have jeopardized her future. After school, she made her way to Dr. Lewis’s office where she fidgeted in anticipation of the worst possible outcome.

“Ah, Ashley, have a seat,” Dr. Lewis said.

Ashley took a seat and looked around Dr. Lewis’s office where there were family portraits, paintings, and a diploma showing Dr. Lewis’s degree. Ashley wondered what getting a doctorate would be like and if it would even be worth the investment. At eighteen years old, a doctorate degree seemed a lifetime away.

“It’s the last day of school. You must be very excited,” Dr. Lewis said.

“It does feel great. I’m not going to lie,” Ashley replied.

“Great. So, Ashley, I know we haven’t really talked much, but I wanted to tell you that I’m very proud of you.”

“You’re proud of me?”

Dr. Lewis pulled out a book of reports where she reviewed students’ files and left the book on the desk.

“Yes, ma’am. After careful consideration and after reviewing your records, it seems that you have perfect attendance and are doing really well in our school. You’re actually in the top one percent in your class.”

“Wow, thank you. It means a lot. I try my best.”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do after graduation?”

“Well, I’m not too sure where I want to go to college just yet, but I like law and government.”

“That’s remarkable...” Dr. Lewis paused for a moment. “Ashley, how would you like to be our school’s valedictorian for this year’s graduating class?”

At that very moment, Ashley’s heart sank, as she could not believe what she was just asked. She knew that everything she had ever worked hard for up to that point was worth it despite any negativity that came her way.

“Oh, my God. Are you serious?” Ashley asked.

“I am serious,” Dr. Lewis replied.

Ashley cupped the sides of her head with her hands while her mouth was open in disbelief.

“Absolutely. That would be amazing. It would be an honor. Thank you so much.”

“No problem. You deserve it, sweetie. Keep doing what you’re doing. Within the next couple of weeks, you’ll need to have a speech ready for the graduation ceremony.”

“I definitely will. Thank you again.”

Ashley exited Dr. Lewis’s office with the biggest smile she had on her face in years. It was a newfound hope for her future, and she could only have waited for what

was to come. She made her way home as she walked in and out of traffic where she awaited her mom and grandmother to arrive home from work.

The townhome she lived in had a shabby look with deteriorating wood-cracked steps and deteriorating red paint with streaks of paint peeling off showing the wood. As she made her way up the steps, she heard the creak of floorboard as she stepped foot on the patio. The townhome itself was small in size having only two bedrooms with the neighbor so close he could practically be heard brushing his teeth. Once inside, Ashley was confined to the small space between her living room and kitchen where there was an old, brown couch with the smell of dust, two plastic chairs, and a raggedy ceiling fan with loose screws placed above the square, wood kitchen table. Scattered throughout the living room were newspapers and empty bottles of Gatorade. She sat at a chair where her back was uncomfortable by the harshness of the metal from the chair.

She went up to her room, which was filled with books on government, dirty clothes, posters of *Harry Potter*, *Batman*, and *The Notebook*, and school papers scattered all throughout where she laid down for a moment to reflect on her years of studying. *I want to be the greatest kid in the world*, she thought. *And I will be.*

From her room upstairs, Ashley heard her sister's loud mouth as her sister, her mom, and her grandmother approached the front door. Yoraliz Vazquez was Ashley's younger sister. They grew up together and shared rooms, toys, clothes, and everything one could imagine. Yoraliz, who was two years younger than Ashley, was a spitting image of Ashley's mom while Ashley was a spitting image of her dad. Though they had petty, childhood fights, Ashley was there for Yoraliz no matter what, whether it was to cheer her on, encourage her, or help her become better.

Ashley dreamed of a life far greater than their current one. She dreamed of a life where their hard work was valued by more than just a school principal. She dreamed of a future that was secure for the both of them where a path to happiness would be evident. As the upcoming valedictorian for Reading Senior High School, that path seemed to have emerged.

Ashley heard the front door of the house unlock before Yaraliz, her mom, and her grandmother entered. Yaraliz's conversation with her mom and grandmother became louder as she came in. This time, it was about one of her coworkers explaining how he cheated on his girlfriend. *Oh, no. Not again*, Ashley thought.

"I can't believe Jim actually has the nerve to cheat on Brenda. That's crazy," Yaraliz said.

"I know. Tell me about it. The world we live in is crazy," her grandmother replied. "Next thing you know, the divorce rate's going to be twice as high as it is today."

As they continued their conversation, Ashley made her way downstairs to meet with them. They came with a bag full of groceries that was more than Ashley was used to seeing.

"Wow. You guys got a lot of stuff," Ashley said.

"We did. I won a scratch-off ticket this morning for five hundred dollars! Can you believe that?" Ashley's mom replied.

"Oh my God. That's great! What are you going to do with the rest of the money?"

"I'm going to put it toward the rent, so we're probably not going to have any left over."

"Damn. Well, every little bit helps."

Ashley's mom worked at Twelfth and Marion Elementary School as a school janitor while her grandmother worked at Rock Solid Packaging and Display, a local packaging company. They both worked part-time but made just enough money to get by with the very basics.

"So, guess what. You're not going to believe what happened to me today on the last day of school," Ashley said.

"What? What happened?" her mom replied.

"So I—am going to be—the next valedictorian for Reading Senior High School."

"You're going to be the valedictorian?" Yoraliz asked. "Congratulations, sis. I knew you could do it!"

"I'm so proud of you, honey. I'm very excited. You know what this could mean for your future, right?" Ashley's mom asked.

"It could mean everything," Ashley replied.

"This would look great on your résumé and any college you apply to. You could probably get into any college in the country," Yoraliz said.

"That's what I'm looking forward to. I haven't applied yet, but I might go somewhere out of state—possibly starting next spring. Maybe I'll get into an Ivy League school. Who knows?"

"That would be amazing. Keep it up, sister. I look forward to hearing your speech."

From that day on, Ashley gained a sense of purpose and confidence. She was interested in how the world worked and questioned whether laws seemed to support everybody or only a minority.

“If these laws are in place for our protection, then why do so many still suffer?” she asked herself. “Maybe it’s up to me to change everything.”

Ashley knew, whether she was in the greatest family or not, that education was important. She wanted to figure out how to make the world a better place. She recalled instances back when she was in middle school and early high school of being bullied and being seen as no one special. Other kids called her “lanky,” “nerdy,” and a “braceface” due to having braces throughout her high school years. Through the struggle, she came to realize that as long as she believed in herself, had her family, and had the one true friend she could count on, Noelle, that everything would be okay.

The next morning, Ashley took the long walk to school with a big smile on her face and the thought of preparing her speech in the back of her mind. She still couldn’t come to terms with the honor of her being the valedictorian. She knew she needed to start applying to universities soon. She couldn’t wait to get to school so she could meet with Noelle by the cafeteria, where they would usually meet, and surprise her with the news.

When she finally arrived, everything seemed normal until she saw a few sheriffs’ cars in the front. She didn’t think much of it, so she walked over by the cafeteria as usual, but that time was different. That time, Noelle was nowhere to be seen. She pulled out her cell phone, a Motorola E815 flip phone for Verizon, and called Noelle to no avail. It went straight to voicemail. *That’s really strange*, Ashley thought. *That never happens*.

At that sudden moment, Erica MacFaline, a mutual friend of Ashley and Noelle, came running toward Ashley. She approached with a worried look on her face.

“Hey, girl. What’s going on?” Ashley asked.

“You need to go to the office right away,” Erica replied.

“Why? Is there something wrong?”

“Just go!”

Ashley immediately made her way to the front office where Dr. Lewis stood with three Berks County Sheriff’s detectives.

“Hey,” Ashley said. She looked around the lobby with concern.

“Ashley, we need to ask you a few questions. Come with us,” Dr. Lewis replied.

Ashley’s heart dropped once again but that time not with excitement. She entered the same office where she had just sat the day before. Dr. Lewis, along with the three detectives, sat in silence.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on, please?” Ashley asked.

“Ashley, it’s hard for me to say this... but Noelle’s been kidnapped,” Dr. Lewis replied.

At that very moment, Ashley’s mind went blank, and it seemed as if her world collapsed on her shoulders. She lost focus as the words that Dr. Lewis said resonated in Ashley’s head. After a few seconds, she regained her composure. She slowly lifted her head and looked at Dr. Lewis straight in the eyes.

“Then we need to do everything we can to find her.”

Without Noelle, there was no Ashley. Time was of the essence, and Ashley’s future, along with Noelle’s life, depended on it.

“We will. I assure you of that...”