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An Impressionable Mind

There is something despicable about the height of library counters. I swear they're all seven feet tall, catering only to the sick-minded Harlem Globetrotters who built them. Imagine a tiny girl – spoiler alert, it's me - sporting thick-lensed glasses and uneven ponytails, standing off in the corner trying to gather the courage to storm the Walls of Jericho. Mix this with the fact that my mother trusted me too much. This meant that I, at the tender age of six, was allowed to go to the library by myself and stay as long as I wanted. Some of the library regulars probably thought I was a homeless orphan, seeking refuge in an expansive collection of books. A man that looked like Santa even gave me a dollar once while I was hiding in the nonfiction section.

I needed a lot of courage - and a ladder - to approach the check-out desk. I hadn't checked anything out in months. The last time I had tried, I was given one of those sickly-sweet smiles by a lady who tried too hard to look seventeen, and was told that I was "too young" to understand the subject matter before me. Her word choice baffled me. I had read the description on the back of the book – how could Harry Potter do anything that I was too young to understand? He seemed like an ordinary kid trying to get through the school year. I stood at the counter, my face turning red from both embarrassment and the effort of standing on my tip-toes like a ballerina, and eventually just had to give in and leave. I felt betrayed by this J.K Rowling person, and put the book back on the shelf in a huff of misguided anger. This firm insistence that I was too young to pursue my interests kept me away from that dreaded check-out desk. I feared

the judgmental look of the head librarian, and found myself reaching for impossibly thin books with lots of pictures to appease her.

I can't say much for my limited talents, but I can say that I have always been a gifted reader. As soon as I learned the alphabet, I could read any word. I absolutely loathed first through third grade, when we were forced to visit with a "grammar specialist" each month in order to assess our learning. She would give us flashcards with words printed on them, ask us to sound out each syllable, and then turn over the card and have us rewrite the word on paper. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with this system, but I was so far beyond words like 'boat' and 'puppy' that I felt nauseated. Once, when given the word 'cat', I wrote 'George Washington' in very aggressive letters on the paper, tearing the paper in half in the process. It was the most rebellious thing I have done to this day. Needless to say, the staff found my advanced reading rather inconvenient. I would finish reading and writing assignments too early, so to take up time I would write five times as much as I was supposed to. The teachers thought I was making more work for them on purpose. The students thought I was a show-off. I was just bored.

Essentially, the two main things I was interested in at the time, reading and writing, were being denied of me in a significant way. I would go to the library and read big books, then I would go to school and be scolded for my ambition. I felt like I was doing something wrong. I felt guilty. I was reading Harry Potter like it was a crime, for Heaven's sake. So, I did what any other self-conscious young'un might do – I dumbed down. I slowed down on assignments, and stopped daydreaming about going to the midnight release of the new Harry Potter book. For so long, I forced myself to believe that I was just like everybody else, and if this is done for long enough, it becomes a reality. I wasn't the show-off anymore. I wasn't the overachiever who complained about the lack of chapters in the reading material. I was just the quiet kid who got

good grades and nothing more. Still, I missed intellectual stimulation, and would sometimes slip away and read *David Copperfield* in a quiet recess of the library. I was held back for so long that I forgot what it was like to be extraordinary.

High school marked my transition from being the big fish in a little pond to being the little fish in a big pond. It was where I realized the mistake I had made in ‘dumbing down’ so many years ago. I went to a high school full of snobby rich kids, and most of my friends graduated with a 4.3 GPA or higher. They had gone to private schools with access to more specialized classes, meaning they had a better idea of what they wanted to do with their lives, and were exceptionally motivated. Last year, while I was applying for various colleges, I couldn’t help but feel horrendously inadequate. I would obsessively browse university websites, looking up the average GPAs of their incoming students and scowling at my own GPA with displeasure. It didn’t matter how many books I read because my peers would always read more. It didn’t matter how much I revised my essays because they would always revise better and more thoroughly. Due to my unhealthy need to compare myself to everyone else, my love for writing slowly shriveled and died, and unfortunately, it has yet to be revived. I found solace – and still do – in books; I could read faster than anyone I knew. I couldn’t help but blame my academic shortcomings on my grade school teachers who refused to see my potential. Of course, by that time in my life it was no longer their fault, but mine. I had played the victim for too long.

One doesn’t have to be a Shakespeare scholar to distinguish this series of events as a tragedy. Was I the next Rain Man, an underappreciated Van Gogh, a savant tortured by my own brilliance? Definitely not. I was just an above-average reader who liked to consider book characters my friends. Since starting college, I feel a lot more confident in my reading and writing capabilities, but I have to wonder where I would be right now if I had had access to a

private school, or a program for advanced readers at an early age. Maybe I'd be the most motivated and ambitious girl on this side of the Mississippi. I might have found the cure for cancer. Or I might be feeling slightly better about myself as I sit in my poorly lit room writing this essay. It's impossible to say, but I am now a very strong advocate for advanced programs for kids like me who were made to feel ashamed of their intelligence. The young mind is an impressionable one, and should hear 'no' as little as possible. Sometimes seeds are denied sun and water for too long, and thus never become plants.