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A Blessing or A Curse

by Brittany Burkes

(English 1101)

There I was, just a pen scribble from a life changing decision. I was in a Navy recruiter's office, a couple of months away from my high school graduation, trying to decide on whether to join the Navy or to attend college. I was already signed up for Grand Valley State University, a college in Michigan, where I had a track scholarship. I kept asking myself if I was ready to trade in my maroon cap and gown for a camouflage uniform and black combat boots. As my heart beat as hard as the strongest person in a drum line, I signed my life away on a soulless piece of paper. I signed up to be the Navy's personal slave for five years. At that time, I wasn't sure if that was the smartest thing for me to do because of the war that was going on. Because I was a high honor roll student, no one in my family wanted me to join because they felt that I was too smart for the military.

I didn't care about what they thought; I knew I wasn't ready for college. I was only seventeen when I graduated and I felt that I would get into too much trouble if I left home that early. So on August 12, 2004, I hopped in my recruiter's high glossed black luxury car, leaving my sobbing mother behind. Through the mirrors I could see her heart breaking more with every foot that we drove. But little did she know mine was breaking along with hers. After only serving for three and a half years, I got out with a medical discharge due to a terrible thirty foot fall injury.

Late May of 2008, I moved back to Illinois from sunny California, where I stayed with my mom for awhile. With my new skills and determination, I felt that I was ready for college this time around. With that in mind I decided to attend the College of Dupage, the same college that my mother went to. At that time, I felt like that was the least I could do for her after taking her little girl away from her for so many long years. On a bright, cool, and crisp summer day, we went to check out the college. I fell in love with it as soon as I saw the magnificent glass covered campus. After meeting an advisor early in the day I was back home, where I was once again a step away from signing my life away. Well, it was more like a mouse click away from signing my life away. As my sweat drenched index finger touched the frost bitten mouse to my mom's computer, I quickly clicked the registration button. With a quick flash of the screen, I was certain this was a good decision. After looking at my new school website, I came across some of the most terrifying information I could have ever seen, the placement exams. I had been out of school for about four years and I was almost certain that all my high school knowledge had been squeezed out of my head by the military and their terms.

As I completed my tests, I was certain that the test grader was going to laugh me out of the school, telling me to go back to high school and start all over. As the printer printed out my tests with no sign of remorse, I could hear that familiar drum beat sound again. The grader then told me I did well on the reading, but I didn't pass the grammar or the math. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It had to be some type of mistake; I loved math and math loved me. The grader reassured me by telling me I had another chance at the tests. After hearing that I rushed across the street to my apartment and crammed my brain like I never crammed before, from commas placement to algebraic equations.

With some hope in my heart, I went back to face those dreaded tests again. Slowly reading every mind-boggling word, trying not to second guess myself, I completed the tests in a couple of hours. I slowly pushed in my chair and went back to face that horrid printer, just to find out that I had failed again. This time the grader said I could go and do the writing test in the computer lab as many

times I wanted until I passed. Days went by and I fell into a terrible slump. I questioned if going into the military was a curse. On the day of the orientation, my new advisor looked over my test scores and saw that I missed passing the grammar test by a couple of points and wondered if I could improve that score. I just laughed at him and told him I lost everything that I had learned in high school and I had no chance of passing it. He told me that I was lucky for being in the military because I would have plenty of life experiences and stories to write about. I just looked at him with a pair of hopeless brown eyes and thanked him for his time. I spent all summer trying to pass that awful test, every time just a few points away.

That fall I attended English 0492. I was so upset because I knew I didn't belong in that class. Every chance I got, I proved myself by handing in A papers about my military life and the many lessons I had learned. One day about midterm of the year during counseling with my teacher, she told me that she felt that I was ready for English 1101 and I could take the placement test for it. At this time, I had been taking the exam every other week just to have my score bounced back from English 0492 to English 0491. I couldn't understand what was going on. Tired and frustrated I went to my teacher for guidance; she looked at my writing tests and was shocked. The last test I wrote, she felt, was good enough for me to be accepted into English 1101. She was puzzled and wasn't sure why I didn't get in. She then told me she would do her best to find out what the problem was.

A couple of days came and went, when she finally stopped me in a crowded hallway with the joyous news that my test passed and I could finally be in the English class I have longed for. Hearing this news I wanted to give her the biggest bear hug in the world, but I knew that would be inappropriate, so I just settled for giving her the big thank you and a big hope filled smile. I guess my advisor was right after all, if I didn't join the military I wouldn't have so many wonderful stories to tell. Without those stories, I wouldn't have had something to write about to get me into that English class.