Excerpt From Dinosaur Nerd

[This is an excerpt from my book of personal essays based on true stories]

It all began back in California. I was part of a Military family, so we moved a lot during my childhood. We happened to be stationed in a remote, desert area of central California during my preschool and Kindergarten years.

   I don’t remember much about pre-school other than the fact that for some reason we had a professional photographer come and take pictures of us. It was one of the only times of my life I was actually cute and photogenic. Kindergarten, on the other hand, I remember. It was here that I learned that I wasn’t a stereotypical girl. Back in the day, I would’ve been called a “tomboy.”

   I was different. I wore pink AND blue. I played with dinosaurs. I liked to get my hands dirty (oh, how times have changed). I also had no friends. Ok, maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration. I had, like, two friends. It was complicated. The girls didn’t like me because I played with boy toys, and the boys didn’t like me because I was a girl. I didn’t really care though.

   It was in kindergarten that I began my obsession with Dinosaurs. See, here’s where my obsessive personality comes in. I have no idea how it started, but I fell head over heels for the dead reptiles. I had to know EVERYTHING about them. By the end of the year, I had an entire box full of plastic dinosaurs, seven dinosaur movies, and countless dinosaur books. I could pronounce their names (which was an impressive feat for a five-year-old) and teach the other kids about them. I even remember my favorite: Xenotarsosaurus. I was also confident that I was going to be a Paleontologist when I grew up (sorry, little me).

   This obsession carried on into primary school. By now, my family and I were across the country in Virginia. I had new kids to scare away with my extensive knowledge of Mesozoic life. I kept pretty quiet about it in first grade, but it was second grade that I really got out there. I think it started when I found a dinosaur book in the little classroom library. I called over my teacher to ask her about it.

Teacher: Yes, Jordan? What do you need?

Me: [audibly excited] Are we going to learn about dinosaurs this year?

Teacher: No, I don’t think so.

Me: oh...okay...

Teacher: Maybe later in the year I’ll let you teach us something if you want?

Me: YES!

   Little me really liked to show off. Cut to a half-a-year later, and I’m standing in front of the classroom lecturing my classmates on everything I knew about dinosaurs. They’re raising their hands and asking questions, and my little ego is sky high. I went over everything, from the characteristics of a Pachycephalosaurus, to how a Pterodactyl was not a dinosaur, to the extinction. Out of the corner of my eye, I was pretty sure I saw the teacher recording my speech, but I doubted it was anything. I was just happy to talk about dinosaurs.

   That next week, I was getting off the bus to school, and I was stopped by a fifth grader. Now, as a scrawny little girl in second year, that’s the last thing you want.

Fifth-grader: Are you the Dinosaur girl?

Me: uh...what?

Fifth-grader: Did you do that speech about dinosaurs? You were like this-

He mimicked the dramatic hand motions I had done during my lesson. My cheeks flushed in slight embarrassment knowing full and well that he was definitely talking about me.

Me: oh, yeah...that was me.

Fifth-grader: Haha, I saw the video. You did pretty good.

And with that, we went our separate ways. I never saw that kid again, but to this day I still wonder about that interaction. Did my teacher record the whole thing and post it to some school website? How did this kid find it? Did anyone else see it? Why did he laugh when I told him it was me? Why did he feel the need to ask me about it? Will I ever stop overthinking it? Will I ever realize that he probably had said it in a kind, not demeaning way and that I’m probably just blowing the whole thing way out of proportion?? Who knows.

I think that was the last time I really nerded out like that in school. Over time, my obsession toned down, but deep down I know it’s still there. Every time I go to the Museum of the Rockies and look at the beautiful T-Rex skeleton named Big Mike that roams the front lawn, I can’t help but feel a wave of happiness. Every time I walked into my Paleontology class in Sophomore year of high school, I think of little me, and how she would have been the happiest gal alive. So, thanks, little me, for giving me a nerdy childhood and making me into the nerd I am today. I hope you’re proud of me.