

The halls reeked of sweat and deodorant combined into one horrific mixture as students scrambled from one classroom to the next. Adrian had barely passed his seventh grade classes with an average D, and he prayed that he wouldn't have to endure everyday one-on-one awkward teaching sessions that almost always resulted in another failure on a test. But as usual, God wasn't listening and Adrian was back on the tutoring trail, and despising every second of it.

"Hey, watch where you're going, greek-boy," a hefty male who was twice his size said as he pushed past Adrian and into the middle school crowd. One glare from Adrian wouldn't silence him. "Dude, I'm only kidding. Take it easy. Love the accent, by the way." he added sarcastically before he slipped away into the clique. The arrogance in that comment infuriated Adrian even more. Didn't people understand that foreign accents were a sign of courage, a sign that someone was brave enough to come all the way from another country? His parents immigrated to America and left behind the financially troubled economy of Greece in search for a better life. Adrian's mother always told him to never disrespect or mock others who were from other countries, and he never did. Irrate and disappointed at the ignorance of the boy, Adrian shook his head and reluctantly headed towards his math class.

Sitting in a class being taught by your tutor is never a good thing. In other words, it was uncomfortable, tense, and involved a considerable amount of pressure. The teacher/tutor expected that their student exceeded their expectations and could answer every single question thrown at them, or else, their extra time spent on educating him/her was wasted. Such thoughts drifted into Adrian's mind the minute he entered the classroom, as they did almost everyday.

"Class, as you know, the Chapter 8 quiz you took yesterday was a difficult one. Some of you scored exceptionally well, while others..." Ms. Collins trailed off, enhancing the dramatic effect. "will receive further help from me after school." she refused to look towards Adrian's direction. He sighed. It was not his fault he wasn't as intellectually talented as other prodigies; it wasn't like there was anyone to help him out at home. His mother never graduated high school since her household needed an extra family member to help out around the house, and his father worked late at the factory. Adrian's only reliable source was Ms. Collins, who offered to tutor him in all subjects ranging from math to history.

A packet of papers was placed facedown on the wooden desk. Using shaky and clammy

hands, Adrian turned it over and met the solid F. The ink seemed especially bloodred against the white of the paper, and as Adrian was admiring it, a familiar female voice called him from the front of the room.

“Adrian, please see me.”

He did as he was told and tried to decide whether the smile plastered on his teacher’s face was genuine or spurious. “Look, I know I didn’t do that well on the quiz, but can you just give me one more chance? I promise I’ll try to do better on the next one.”

Ms. Collins looked skeptical. “Are you sure? Is there anyone at home who can help you?” Noticing his uncomfortable gaze at the mention of his parents, she apologized. “I don’t mean to interfere, I’m just wondering if you are okay. What’s wrong?”

“My, uh, parents work late.”

Ms. Collins’ face fell. “Adrian, I know what it’s like, and I’ve been in this situation before, so I just want you to know that if you change your mind and want some more tutoring, just send me an email.” The boy nodded and trudged out of the room. Ms. Collins let out a sigh. She knew how hard Adrian was struggling, judging by the weary look always present on his face whenever he walked into the classroom. The thing was, she just couldn’t find a way to help him. Adrian’s presence always brought her back to the same recollection. She was in the 11th grade, and her best friend Maria had just gotten her placement test scores for college back. Ms. Collins’ could still picture her face as she received the scores. Maria had immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. when she was in the fourth grade, and her lack of English proficiency came back to haunt her one last time. Maria had blinked several times, closed her eyes, and breathed very deeply after realizing any hopes of going to college were demolished. Her expression existed in Adrian, too, and Ms. Collins knew that she couldn’t let that crushing feeling discourage anyone. She had to do something.

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The truth was that Adrian felt ashamed at the mere thought of having to receive extra help a countless number of times. What did the other students have that made them so intelligent? Why couldn’t Adrian be like them? As far as he knew, he was the only kid in the grade who needed to see his teacher outside of school. His whole world made him feel so alone and isolated, and instead of

making Adrian feel better, Ms. Collins' tutoring sessions worsened his dilemma. If only someone could understand.

The day the Chapter 8 test was handed out came far too soon. *Didn't I just take the quiz? I haven't studied enough!* Adrian had actually attempted to make use of time and studied as hard as he could, which he knew, was actually meager compared to how much time other students spent. However, panic flooded his brain as he remembered his promise to his teacher. Everything depended on this test; failing it would be Ms. Collins' last straw, failing it would determine whether or not he would be placed in ESL. Shuddering, Adrian looked down at his test, saw the first question, and felt his world melt away as he could not recall the answer.

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C+. A remarkable C+, written in dark green ink, was etched onto the test paper. There was no smiley face next to it, no comment, but the sight of a C, C+ actually, made Adrian smile. *How in the world?* His studying efforts must have paid off! Adrian caught his teacher's eyes, and she hesitantly smiled. *Congrats*, she mouthed. For a second, he didn't have a care in the world. He was above average! Even if it was just by a couple of points, he was above average! He was just some points away from a B! He grinned, knowing that someone must have been listening today.

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The rumors started the next day. It began with the girl sitting beside him, a straight-A student. Ana had told her friend, the biggest gossip in school. By day two, the rumors about Adrian's test had proliferated around the grade.

"I told you there was no way he was ever gonna get higher than a D! I SAW his test, Lucy, we both had different answers on like five problems, and the teacher marked both of ours right! Of course I know mine are right, I checked them in the book!"

"Did you hear, Adrian didn't actually get a C+, Ms. Collins gave it out of pity. Can you believe it? What a horrible teacher! If I was the principal, I'd fire her. You can't just give students good grades just 'cause you feel bad for them."

Everywhere Adrian looked, there always seemed to be someone pointing at him or whispering. *Don't mind them; it's just how middle schoolers crave attention*, he thought, *Just*

stupid, stupid,

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kids.

When the echoes of the gossiping kids started sneaking into his dreams, Adrian decided to end the rumors and confront Ms. Collins. She would inform Jefferson Junior High that it was a pure score and that there was no lying to it.

“Ms. Collins, can I ask you a question?” Adrian said the following day. Ms. Collins stiffened, her nicely ironed pencil skirt suddenly wrinkled.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been hearing some rumors going on--” Adrian was immediately cut off by the harsh sound of the PA system.

“Miranda Collins, please report to the main office.”

The rosy pink cheeks of his teacher were drained of color in a fraction of a second. “I’m sorry, Adrian, I have to go.” With that, she dusted off her skirt, straightened herself, and vanished out of the classroom, leaving Adrian wondering what in the world would make his teacher so visibly upset.

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Days became weeks and weeks became months, but there was still no sign of Ms. Collins. Adrian finally mustered up enough courage to ask the girl who sat beside him, Ana. He had pretended to know the reason of Ms. Collins’ absence, because during the first few weeks after her disappearance, all of his classmates had just stared at him like he was a stranger.

“You don’t know? She was suspended for a term because of YOU.”

Adrian could only stare back, gawking.

“She had to leave because of grading YOUR papers. The principal eventually found out and had to punish her. It’s your fault, you know. Why can’t you just study?”

Out of all the reasons Adrian made up in his head, he would’ve never imagined this scenario. Was it his fault, really, or was it another nasty rumor? Why were there so many lies? He closed his stinging eyes, uninterested in the substitute’s lesson.

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Months passed before Ms. Collins returned to Jefferson Junior High. Pushing past the

crowd of students that had already gathered around her, Adrian smiled and said, "Thank you. You have pushed

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me to work harder, and what you might view as a mistake was actually a benefit for me and for you. The truth about the test score angered me at first, but I then realized that the very first joyous moments I had after seeing it were an indication of what making progress would feel like. Thank you for motivating me."