

Inky Scar

Alex Fuller

Perfection is a difficult word to define. In simple terms, it means something that is done with little to no errors, completely free from mistakes. However, that definition is different for everyone. Some people will spend loads of time on something to insure it is free from any blemishes. To the annoyance of others, others spend mere minutes to achieve what they deem as “good enough.” A memory that will always stay with me relates to this dilemma.

It was during my fifth grade Math class when I experienced failure for the first time. Had I failed outside of school before? Of course. However, this moment is cemented in my mind to the point of infamy. What horrible deed did I commit? Well, it is the most damning thing the human mind can imagine. Prepare to be shocked: I failed a test. **DUN DUN, DUN!** You are probably thinking, “Dude, this was fifth grade. This isn’t something life changing just because you flubbed a few math questions.” I now agree, but to little Alex who had never gotten below an A on anything before, his whole world collapsed.

I vividly remember staring down at the white paper that was scarred with blood red ink. Who would think a simple letter could convey so much emotion in a young boy? Before I knew it, the bright derogatory mark on my page became lighter from the tears cascading down onto to it. The remaining drops darkened the oblong gray table beneath.

My anxiety manifested like a malicious parrot who would whisper my inner worries to me endlessly. *Everyone knows what you did, scum of the Earth.* Each word tightened its sharp grip on my confidence. *How could you not understand?* Its talons grasped tightly around my neck, making my already unsteady breathing more erratic. *The resources were given to you, you*

just didn't utilize them. I tried calling out to someone, but they seemed to be in cahoots with my imaginary adversary. Whispers and laughter, which were most likely unrelated, pierced me deeper like arrows, each tip poisoned by their implied words.

I needed to leave. I had no right to be in this classroom since I was too stupid to understand basic division. The irony of the situation was that I wanted to divide myself outside of the equation. However, instead of into perfect halves, I was the odd one out, alone in my own ignorance, stupidity and embarrassment of everyone seeing me cry.

With the upper part of my shirt soaked, I hid my face like a vampire as I quickly walked out of the classroom. The hallway became my dungeon as I crumpled into a fetal position and released the floodgates of stored sadness. Onlookers probably thought that I had been punished for something truly heinous. Robbery? Assault and Battery? When looking back on it now, the few other kids that *did* walk by just looked confused rather than trying to peg me as a delinquent. My vision was too blurred to see anything besides my own assumptions of others.

Centuries passed as I waited out my life sentence. It wasn't until the warden appeared that I realized only a few minutes had passed. My teacher was a gentle giant. Even now, I think he would still be a few inches taller than me. His expression was always calm, despite his shirt being fully buttoned. No words were exchanged at first. The only sound was the faint music of "Where is the Love" by The Black Eyed Peas that he would play for us every morning. As I leaned against the hard brick wall, he kneeled onto the equally uncomfortable ground before he spoke.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

I couldn't bring myself to look at him. The whispers were still in my head: *He's disappointed in you. You are a failure. He just came to tell you to go back to 4th grade.* I was frozen, unable to respond to his question. That was when he put his warm hand on my shivering shoulder.

He spoke in a reassuring tone, "Is there something you want to talk about? I am always here to listen."

Sniffing, I turned to face him. His friendly smile convinced me to give an answer. As I spoke, I could see my reflection in his glasses.

"I-I-I failed," I stuttered as my mouth tried to form words, "I d-d-d didn't get a good grade."

"You got a bad grade?"

"Ye-ye-yeah, didn't you see it?"

He took a moment before he spoke again.

"Does that grade mean anything to you?"

Of *course* it meant something to me. Why would he ask me such a stupid question? Before I could answer, he was already speaking.

"In the grand scheme of things, does that *one* grade matter?"

I thought about it for a moment. At the current time, it did matter because it was one of the first tests of the year. The nasty number in the gradebook would bother me. However, would it be the same as more grades were added?

"I guess not," I replied confused, "But, I sti-sti-still failed *that* test." I wiped my nose, "If I can't do that on my first try, what does that make me?"

“A learner,” he replied, “It makes you a learner.”

“A learner?”

“Yes, someone who can make mistakes and learn from them.” He gave a short pause for emphasis, “How would you improve if you always got everything correct?”

I gave a slight nod. I knew deep down that it was impossible to be perfect. The negative association with failure had always been gnawing at the back of my mind. It was only then where all that anxiety had burst out and bared its fangs.

“The most important thing is that you tried,” my teacher said, “As long as you gave your best shot, that is all that matters.” “You may continue to stumble over and over again, but-” he balled up his fist and raised it into the air, “you will eventually succeed!”

With his speech over, he stood up and offered his hand: “Let’s work on it together, shall we?”

I grabbed his hand, and he began to lift me up. As I left the cold ground, it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. The stress to be perfect was exorcised from my being, left to burn in the light of the early fall day. Even though my battle with anxiety was far from over, I now had at least one win under my belt.

As I followed my teacher into the classroom, one thought did cross my mind. The fated battle for the best swing on the playground was soon to commence. Blood would be shed....

After I ate my animal crackers, of course.