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Writing 1010

7 November, 2016

I walked towards the back of the brightly colored room to where a long table of refreshments stood, surrounded by an array of arcade machines dotted with small blinking lights.

“Looking for some air?” a low voice spoke from my right. I turned to see a boy in a grey sweatshirt opening one of the pizza boxes. He had messy brown hair with dark blue bangs and tanned skin. Zennor Rivera.

“Yeah, I suppose….” I replied nonchalantly over the loud arcade sounds. “It’s nice seeing you here. How long has it been, like five years?” I thought back to when he’d transferred out of our middle school.

“Six actually,” he smiled. “What have you been up to, Ori? Are you still working on your plan for world domination?” I let out a laugh as I remembered that I’d told him about wanting to be a politician someday.

“I’m actually one step closer, now that you mention it. I was elected student body president last year at Montavon.” I said taking a bite out of my pizza.

“Montavon Academy? That’s pretty impressive.” he said. “It seems like you haven’t changed a bit. You cut your hair shorter, but you’re still the same irritating little showoff as always.” I smirked at his comment as I took a strand of my short blonde hair out of my face. Although we were friends we’d also been academic rivals ever since I could remember, and compliments like this didn’t come by often.

“How about you? Is public school as bad as I’ve heard?” I asked, curious about how time might’ve possibly affected him.

“I’ll tell you, but only if you’re up for a game of air hockey.” he said evasively yet challenging.

“You’re on.” I replied firmly, confused by his reaction, but determined to win. We made our way past the small cluster of people at the party towards a bright orange table. With the puck at the center, we both took our paddles prepared to defend our sides. The air quickly started to pour out from the small holes as the machine played an electronic tune, marking the start of the game.

“Alright, so you were saying?” I asked, quickly hitting the puck away from my side.

“Right. Well… it’s been interesting.” He sighed. “I mean, I’ve learned a lot and I’ve been able to meet some great people, but last year was pretty rough.”

“Oh, why is that?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the puck.

“Well my school has a big issue with the dress code.” he said a hint of annoyance in his voice. “Somehow I’ve managed to violate it again and again. I just wish they’d get rid of it.”

“I don’t know if that would really be a good idea.” I said as he hit the puck back towards my side. “Having a dress code can be very beneficial to the students.”

“Oh, right I’d forgotten that your school had uniforms.” he grunted as he looked my way. I was wearing a brown long sleeve shirt with jeans and was surprised that he knew that much about my school. “I really just can’t see the upside.” he continued. “Rules are made for how you’re supposed to look because schools want to avoid distracting others, but in the end they do more harm than good.”

“I don’t really see it that way.” I said. “ I mean, sure, some schools might exaggerate a bit with enforcing the rules but it’s just because they want to prepare us for real world situations. The job market is going to expect us to dress professionally, so having a dress code prepares us for that.” The puck suddenly sounded loudly as I made a point. Zennor quickly put it back and we continued hitting it back and forth, this time with more aggression.

“That’s a huge roadblock for the students though because they won’t be able to express themselves as much through their clothing.” he said, his hazel eyes seeming darker. “Teachers are always telling us about trying to show off our individuality but once they see something that they don’t agree with they feel the need to bash on it.” he shook his head. I wasn’t sure how to respond for a second. It was true, especially with uniforms, that it was harder for people to really express themselves…. But not entirely.

“You know, at my school, even if we are limited to our options we can still express ourselves in other ways.We can wear our hair differently or wear jewelry. We can also just use our personality. Not everything has to be about our clothes.” I said as his puck managed to slip through and score him a point.

“Although I agree with you on that, I still think we should be able to have that freedom to choose what we can wear.” he said. “When rules are broken what is often the case is that the student’s body image will be harmed. For girls it’s an even bigger issue because when you have these types of rules the only thing that’s accomplished is sexualizing them. They are told that they are distractions to male students and that they should leave and miss out on their learning if they don’t look modest.” I had almost agreed with him but he’d hit a nerve as he talked about sexualization, which I’d unfortunately had experience with.

“I can tell you *personally ,*whether or not there is a dress code, girls will end up being sexualized by people who are horrible enough.” I spat. This caused him to lower his guard for a second and I hit the puck hard, scoring another point. There was a sudden silence among us.

“....Orianna, don’t you see?” he said, his voice a bit softer. I glanced up and saw a hint of sympathy on his face, but it was clear I hadn’t changed his mind at all. “Taking down the rules helps prevent those types of things. It’ll help students view each other as equals and that way we can learn to respect each other as well.” The puck shot back into my goal, giving him another point. I couldn’t believe him, he still had the nerve to try and talk me out of it.

“You’re kidding right?” I said through gritted teeth as I placed the puck back onto the table, sending it flying towards his goal with a strong hit. “Taking down the rules won’t change that. In case you’ve forgotten, there are still class differences, so students with wealthier families usually stand out more. That will just make it that much easier for poorer students to be bullied. If you want equality then uniforms are the answer because everyone wears the exact same thing.”

“Have you even stopped to think about how much uniforms cost?” he said an edge in his voice, gripping his paddle. “They can be very expensive, so really I don’t see how that’s any better for families who don’t earn as much.” I realized then that I’d also stepped into a personal issue. One of the reasons he’d left our middle school was because his family couldn’t afford it anymore, so it made sense that he’d be opposed to that as well. I let out a breath, determined to change the conversation.

“You know what? I think it might be better if we change the subject.” I said my voice quiet with frustration. I snuck a glance at him and saw that his gaze was solely on the table. We continued playing like that for a while, tension surrounding us. After a few silent moments our friend, Annie, called us over to eat some cake, leaving our game at a tie.

We both awkwardly made our way towards the noisy group, passing by a couple of girls in the middle of a dance battle on the dark dance floor. I rolled up the sleeves on my shirt and crossed my arms, noticing that Zennor had continued to follow me.

“Hey, Ori, I know we might have different opinions but we’re ok right?” he whispered. I felt a twinge of guilt for a second before turning around and giving him a small nod.

“We’re ok. Let’s just maybe agree to disagree.” I said. A serious expression crossed his face for a second before he smiled back at me reassuringly.

“I’m ok with that.” he said. “Besides, there are a lot more interesting things for us to talk about.” His voice sounded teasing and I looked at him confused.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well... In case you haven’t notice already, you have something stuck in your teeth.” he laughed. I reached my hand up to cover my mouth. Realizing that there actually wasn’t anything there, I shook my head. I fell for Zennor’s trademark joke, *of course*.