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The Perfect, Red, Savory Letter A

“Come! Mrs. Bellingery promises she will give us extra credit for helping her.” Rowan scurried along the hallway, picking up a couple students from Mrs. Bellingery’s period 7 biology honors class.

“Extra credit? I don’t expect anyone in our class to go. We all have A’s,” I mentioned, putting my lunchbag away after stuffing the last two large strawberries from the container into my mouth.

“Yeah—well, I promise you that A will not last after we get the results for Thursday’s test on molecular biology,” Rowan responded, finishing the chocolate milk carton from his hot lunch and throwing away his plate in the garbage can. “Plus, I need that extra credit to redeem my grades. I’m just doing you a favor by telling you about this opportunity.”

Immediately as we filed into the classroom, about two dozen pairs of eyeballs looked in our direction. Forget about just our period 7 class, everyone who was taking biology was crowded up in the room.

“I was... not expecting this many students to come in. Surely most of you are not in need of an extra credit,” Mrs. Bellingery was sitting on her chair, thinking about how she should approach this. “Okay. I want all of you to grab a piece of paper from the table, and cut the dotted lines. You will receive one extra credit for each paper cut.”

Without hesitation, the horde of students launched themselves at the table. Never in my life did I think that I would experience something like this. No one was pushing or getting hurt, but people started flying around enthusiastically. Mrs. Bellingery was all for it! She smiled at the chaos.

My natural instinct was to rush to the table so I could manage to get any amount of paper before it was all gone. My seat was at the back of the classroom, so I had to pray that there was

enough for us. I didn't have to wait for long because my friend already scooped up some paper and handed some to me.

We immediately started to stack the paper and cut them all at the same time. We were making extra credit out of thin air!

Extra credit flew around the entire room. It reminded me of that one time I went inside a cash cube in an arcade and miserably failed at grabbing the money. Or maybe the open outcry trading floors where everyone is constantly shouting.

"Hurry up and cut it already!" Rowan was already on his second batch. Looking back at the table there was no more paper left, it was too late for seconds.

We left the classroom almost as quickly as we entered. I know I didn't get a lot of extra credit, but I'm just glad I heard about the opportunity.

"How many extra credit points do you think you got?" I asked.

"If I did my math right, maybe 20," Rowan responded. We walked over to our friend Beccy who had been peacefully eating lunch. "Beccy! Why were you not there? We got so much extra credit for biology!"

Beccy looked up from her lunch. "What? Where? Are you telling me she was giving us extra credit?"

"Yeah, but it's too late now. Finally, I'm one step closer to that perfect, red, savory letter A," said Rowan, in a very relieved and promising tone. Beccy rolled her eyes.

"Sure, but... school is not just about that A," Beccy reluctantly said, not wanting to undermine the enthusiasm of Rowan. "You may not always have extra credit opportunities, why don't you just study more?"

"Study more? You're acting like I haven't tried that! Anyways, you're just salty you missed out on that easy EC." Rowan complained.

I analyzed their conversation as they continued talking, but I didn't know who to agree with. Beccy was right in that extra credit may not always be there to save the day, but surely

there must be more effective studying methods Rowan could use to get a higher grade. Isn't the average grade a B?

"Wait! Before we get too upset at each other, isn't Rowan in the school's Robotics and Science Olympiad team?

"Look, grades do matter... but only to a certain extent. If grades were the only thing going for you, chances are that you would be missing out on a lot of things that make school- school."

After hearing what I had to say they simmered down for a bit and talked about their recent math test. I wasn't in their class but it was always funny to hear them talk about the uselessness of proofs in geometry.

Brrring! The bell rang and we hesitantly waited for period 7 biology. Everyone who had taken the test remained nervous as the period approached. Eventually the bell rang again and we walked to our classroom on the 800 wing. I've had better Mondays.

"Welcome everybody!" Mrs. Bellingery greeted us as usual. We were ready to get this over with. I know we all did terribly on Thursday's test.

Mrs. Bellingery frowned. "It's time to receive your tests back. Feel free to ask me any questions. It took a while to grade and I tried not to rush them.

"Actually, before I hand them out, I have something to tell all of you. I have seen that a lot of students are stressing out about their grades in school, particularly my biology class. And yes, my tests are hard, but they are hard on purpose.

"Your grades are also my grades, and they tell me about my ability to teach. But regardless of whether they are good or not so good, I will continue to find ways to teach and inspire my students."

She handed out the tests one by one starting from the other end of the classroom. Rowan and I looked at her in anticipation. She came to our table and directly handed us our test, facedown so as to not reveal our grade.

"You first." Rowan said, looking at my paper. I did not care enough to argue, so I flipped it over.

High school feels like such a different place than middle school. There is a lot of stress about grades and a lot less care about the silly things that go on in the world.

In 7th grade, my English teacher was the most laid back and silliest teacher to exist! He told us wild stories of his experiences being a magician, courier, author, and hot dog stand owner. He preferred these types of inspirational lessons rather than drilling our brains with appropriate, yet forgettable information.

Some middle school teachers were far from laid back. They took the responsibility of teaching us core skills far more seriously. I may have had to work a lot to keep up, but I felt that my effort fell into a meaningful cause.

Now, all that people care about are the numbers on our gradebook. It almost makes me want to forgive gamblers who give away their entire life savings in search of the big jackpot. Students are chasing after that same jackpot, that same dream, that perfect, red, savory letter A.

Names changed for anonymity