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Category: Short Story

Purple Paper

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Off-white dandruff speckles black. Coils of hair clump to each other, clotting greasy balls. Peeking through the matted curls, patches of red scalp ooze and flake, the little pieces spinning into the net of frizzy knots. Brown fingers dig into the strands, scratching, sliding deeper into black, snaking out. Grease and dandruff coat a pair of dark hands.

“...a big final project due Wednesday. One person will work on the red sheet,” Mr. Cooper says, slapping a piece of red paper on my desk, jerking me out of my trance. “And their partner will work on this blue sheet.” He places one on Adanya’s desk. “You *and* your partner will do this purple worksheet. Remember, this is *big* project, which means that if some struggling students-” he glances at me, “-manage to get an A on this, they will pass this class. Now, get started.”

“Ok Holly, I guess you do the red and I’ll do the blue,” Adanya says, her oily fingers rubbing the stark paper and pushing it towards me.

I glance at Adanya and stifle a gag. Clumps of oil-coated hair frame her face and dangle above blue as she gazes at her sheet, pencil dancing, fingers scratching, scratching.

Laughter and chatter swirl around our silent group. Paige’s curly ponytail bobs up and down and up and down as she plops plastic containers of food on our lunch table. Propping herself up with an elbow next to Paige, Chloe sucks on her apple juice. A table away, Adanya spins gooey chicken alfredo onto her fork, her right hand still buried in her hair.

“She is absolutely disgusting,” Chloe sighs.

“Yeah, and I have to sit next to her. For two whole hours.” I whine.

“If I were you I would wear a towel over my head so whatever she has doesn’t spread to me,” Paige eyes her.

“*She’s* the one who’s supposed to be wearing the towel because her dandruff literally *gets all over* the table,” I say,

“It looks like a greasy version of snow.”

Paige grimaces. “Why did you have to say it like that? I’m trying to eat here.”

Adanya fingers pieces of hair, picking at white flakes before admiring them and rubbing them onto the lunch table.

She picks up her fork. Chloe wrinkles her nose as she lifts her elbow off the surface, wiping her arm on her leggings.

I veer my eyes away and stuff my sushi back in my lunchbox.

As I gawk at the mix of meaningless words, numbers, and untouched blanks on red paper, Mr. Cooper’s monotone voice and quiet chatter tickle my ears. Pencils and pens scribble across colored paper. Eyes-- centimeters above desks-- examine questions. Partners converse, their heads nodding up and down. My fingers dig in my hair, condense into fists. I pull and rub at the black strands.

“Are you stuck?” Adanya asks.

I nod, raking my hands through my tangled black hair. Adanya slides my paper towards herself, her dandruff-speckled nails loiter on my sheet while she scans rows of sentences.

“Which questions do you need help with?”

I stare at my paper, “um...everything.”

“Ok...” Adanya slowly bobs her head.

The lunch bell shrieks.

“All right everyone. Your project is due tomorrow, make sure you have *every single one* of your blanks*filled* in.

Like I mentioned yesterday, this is *sixty percent* of your grade and it can determine whether you pass or fail this class.” Mr. Cooper says, surveying each one of his students, his stern stare last landing on me.

I groan, burying my face in the lunch table. “UGHH IT’S DUE *TODAY!* I’m never going to pass Mr. Cooper’s class because I literally don’t know how to answer a single question on the project!”

Oil coats the surface of my soup, suffocating it underneath a layer of yellow bubbles. The steaming, brown water sloshes in its bowl, crawling up the white styrofoam rim, threatening to spill. Chloe and Paige sit across from me, then exchange a glance.

“Well...I mean...it is just history class,” Paige musters.

“-but my parents are going to *kill* me when they see an ‘F’ on my report card!” I groan.

Chloe sighs, “Stress isn’t going to help you so um...let’s play truth or dare.”

“Ok,” Paige looks around, “I dare Holly to spill her soup on Adanya.”

“Dude, the soup’s literally steaming,” I say.

Paige pauses, “Oh yeah...”

Rolling her eyes, Chloe says, “Seriously guys, it’s *just* Adanya. It’s not like she can get any dirtier. Plus, we’re actually helping her because the warm soup will help hide her disgusting hair.”

“I guess Chloe’s right...her hair is the reason why she always sits alone,” Paige says.

At her usual spot two tables away, Adanya scratches her head, the little flakes swirling towards the table as she hunches over, brows furrowed, jotting down answers on purple paper.

“Hollyyy...?” Chloe beckons, her stare prickling me.

“You do it,” I sigh.

Chloe bends over, her stick-straight hair casts sweeping shadows over my soup. Fingers clutching hot styrofoam, she stalks towards Adanya, now a table closer. Setting her pencil on purple paper, Adanya digs in her bag, greasy locks drooping around her face as she pulls out a red sheet of paper. *My* piece of paper. Above her, the steaming soup wobbles in Chloe’s hands.

“CHLOE STOP!!!” I yell.

Chloe whips around, the tips of her hair brushing Adanya’s.

“What?” she mouths, frowning as the soup, pinched in Chloe’s bony fingers, dangles above Adanya’s head.

“Come back!” my arm waves back and forth and back and forth.

Adanya glances left at me, then looks back down, the soup still inches above her hair.

“*Get over here,*” I beckon, my wide eyes staring at the sloshing soup.

Rolling her eyes, Chloe sashays back to our table, spilling the hot brown water on the white floor.

“Seriously!?? I walked *all the way over there,* Holly. Like, what’s even wrong with spilling some stuff on Adanya anyways?” Chloe huffs.

“She’s actually really nice,” I murmur.

Chloe narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, “What? I thought you said she was *disgusting.*”

Paige frowns, “Yeah, you did just say her hair was like...the most disgusting thing in this school.”

Submerged under a tangled mass of black, Adanya’s hand picks at her scalp. Greasy curls sit atop my red worksheet as a pencil glides over blanks.

“I think you should just get to know her first,” I say, walking towards Adanya.

I plop in a seat next to her. White-speckled fingers scratch. A table away, Chloe and Paige gawk at me.

“Need help?” I ask.

“Sure,” Adanya replies, handing me the purple paper.

“You know...I could hear you guys talking about my hair,” Adanya says as she slurps her chicken alfredo.