

Neverending Expectations

By Henry Goldberg

It's midnight.

I can hear my parents sleeping upstairs. They think I'm in bed. I should be in my bed, wrapped in a blanket and wandering around in a dream. Instead, I'm in a chair, awake, crossing numbers out on a piece of paper.

The only light on in my house is the small turquoise lamp that is peering over my left shoulder. I look behind me, checking that my door is closed, to prevent the light from seeping out, before continuing the task at hand. I don't want my parents to wake up. In front of me is a brightly colored book with the words "The Official ACT Prep Guide! The #1 Bestselling Guide!" I'm reviewing a math section that I had taken a few minutes ago, wincing as I finish grading.

I missed two.

I could already hear my mom's voice if she saw my score. Another reason why I don't want her awake. "How could you miss something in math?" Her voice would be filled with disdain. "Math and English are the most straightforward sections on the exam! How can you get a 36 if you can't even get those sections right?" Then she would start bringing up names of other Asian kids she knew, thinking that if she brought it up

enough times, I would turn into one of them. There was Sam who received a 36. There was Jake, an eighth grader, who scored a 35. Even Katie, who did nothing besides hang out with her friends, pulled out a 35.

I stare at the two math questions in hatred; both of them are careless errors. How could I solve for “Y” despite the question asking for “X”? And, what kind of fool adds eight and ten wrong? Apparently me.

That night I went to bed at four.

Tired.

When the day of the test arrives, I don’t eat breakfast. My breathing is shaky as I force myself to breathe. An hour goes by and the test begins. I start reading an essay about a man who transformed the film industry, wondering what the sentence should contain: who or whom? I circle A, who, and hope I’m right. My eyes are already on the next question.

Three weeks later, results are out and I’m sitting at the dinner table, silent. My mom is talking — mostly yelling — as she shows me her computer. She jabs her finger at a green number on the screen, leaving behind a faint fingerprint. The number she points at isn’t a 36. Nor is it a 35. And to her, anything below a 35 is the same.

“Did you even try?” My mom snapped. I bite my lip, fidgeting with my fingers under the table. “Because if you did, you would’ve at least gotten a 35!” I stay mute, staring at the table. “You know Jaden?” She doesn’t wait for my response. “He got a 36 this time, and he’s your age. Why can’t you try as hard as him?”

My throat starts to tighten. My vision starts to get blurry as I feel tears threaten to spill. She didn’t know how many hours I spent under my lamp, staring at endless walls of reading passages. She didn’t know I had spent the past two months living off of four to six hours of sleep because I was practicing for the test. She didn’t know anything. Yet, I didn’t mention it. Instead, I mumbled out a few words.

“I’ll try my best next time.”

Because to her, trying meant getting a perfect score.