

Zareena Zaidi

*Battles*

Thirteen. What an age to be alive. Emotions pulsating through you like rivers, emptying out into the scary, unknown sea of self-development, the meeting point a murky estuary of confusion. Indignant, stubborn and outspoken, I went swimming through puberty like a seal in shark infested waters.

One of the best things about Junior Lifeguards, my beach summer camp, was that I was surrounded by shirtless boys. One of the worst things about my beach summer camp, was that I was surrounded by shirtless, immature boys.

His name was Daniel. He was the ringleader. Pre-pubescently short, lanky, with the ego of a lion and the brain size of a pea, he radiated life and adventure wherever he went, his presence demanding to be noticed. Then there was Hunter. He was the cute one. Stormy blue eyes, dimples, and a soft demeanor ordained him a ladykiller. Justin and Chance were about as inseparable as Pip and Merry on their quest to Mordor. Both fun, down-to-earth guys who had been best friends since childhood. Then there was Sophia, my best friend. I don't know how or why we ended up friends with this bunch, but somehow we were stuck with them and so we helped each other on our roller coaster through puberty, crashing and burning as we may.

"Rape!" Daniel yelled excitedly as he jumped onto his lackey, Hunter. Something unsettling burned in my stomach and bubbled to the surface. Already ripe with a strong sense of social justice and a restless defiance characteristic of that age, I automatically retorted "Don't joke about rape. It's not funny. You don't know who you could be offending."

"Oh yea? Well you're just a girl, what are you gonna do about it?" he snickered. The other guys laughed, backing up their king clown. His piercing blue eyes fixed on me, taunting me, as if to say, you don't threaten me, stupid girl. Heat rushed up to my cheeks in red anger, my

fists automatically clenched. “*Excuse me?! You wanna see what this girl can do about it?*” I yelled, my voice rising, another quick wave of nauseous fire crashing through me, about to spill me over the lid. “Is someone on their period?” Daniel cooed, “God why are girls so damn emotional?!” He laughed, the other guys laughed, and as soon as it started it was over. Daniel continued his show - this next act, a string of “that’s what she said” jokes. I sat there, dumbfounded, feeling an angry powerlessness engulf me. What bothered me the most was how easily the other guys supported him. I knew Daniel was a dick, but I actually had respect for the other guys. I felt like shrinking into myself, I felt like exploding. I knew I was right, but Daniel had won. I bottled up my anger, keeping it slowly burning until my mom picked me up, and I recounted the story, vivid and exasperated.

“Sweetie,” she said, “You just have to learn to pick your battles.”

Learning how to pick your battles was hard. Especially when the immature boys always seemed to freaking win.

My summer with the boys eventually ended, but my battles did not. We were learning about prejudice in school. Black and white segregation in the United States, The Holocaust, Californian Japanese Internment camps, and most explosively, prejudice against Middle Easterners after 9/11. We even took a field trip to the Holocaust museum. Here’s a tip: Don’t like someone? You want them to cry? Send them to the Holocaust Museum. Trust me, it’ll do the trick.

Teaching about prejudice, hate crimes, and genocide in a fairly conservative school was not an easy task, but our teacher, Ms. Bennett was an old gypsy soul. Her leathery, sun-kissed skin radiated with a sort of aged vitality, her speckled straw blonde hair cascaded down her back.

“We’ve spent a lot of time studying prejudice. To wrap up this unit each of you are going to present on a group that has faced prejudice, so partner up!” Ms. Bennett announced. The class erupted into a sound boom of chaos. The popularity game began as friends scrambled to

each other like lost baby chicks trying to find their way back home. I glanced over to my friend Alex, and in one look we silently agreed to be partners. Alex was a nice kid. He had a big heart, but he also had a big belly, which was cause for bullying. He owned a pair of thick-rimmed glasses which he kept plastered on his face, right above his cheesy grin.

Unfortunately, there was no shortage of Daniels at my school. Two of them sauntered over, exuding a superficial confidence. “Alex your shirt is so gay” one of them smugly sneered.

“Yea, really shows off your man boobs!” The other one snickered.

“Where’d you get that, Victoria Secret?”

“Hey, knock it off,” I snapped.

“What? He’s a fag” Daniel #1 blurted matter-of-factly.

“Don’t use that word, it’s offensive,” I chastised.

“Why do I care? Fag, fag, faggity, fag!”

This, mom, is why I hate middle school. You force me out of my cozy, fuzzy, warm bed so I can listen to idiots like these two buffoons all day.

The absurdity of all of this was that half of my class was still homophobic, even though they openly condemned all forms of prejudice. Which was exactly why I proposed our presentation topic to be about prejudice against homosexuals/LGBTQ individuals. The year was 2009 - Proposition 8 (banning same-sex marriage) had recently passed. “Don’t ask don’t tell” was still a thing, and in a neighboring town just a year earlier, an eight-grader shot a homosexual student dead during class. So, I was on a mission to educate the Daniels of the world— I was going to open their eyes to the prejudice and hate they didn’t even realize they were perpetuating.

Operation Educate-the-Nincompoops came to a screeching halt. The day before our presentation, Ms. Bennett called Alex and I over to her desk. She looked at us with remorseful exasperation, sighed, adjusted her glasses. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to present in front of

the class tomorrow,” she began “you both are going to have to come in during your lunch period and present to me in private.”

“Wait, what?!” I protested. “But why?”

“Principal’s orders. I’m sorry. Some things are just too controversial to be talked about right now,” she insisted, sympathy oozing from her voice.

I tried to face a living prejudice that no one wanted to acknowledge. Once again, I found myself powerless. Even though we were learning about the dangers of prejudice, it wasn’t enough to calm the beast of it. There was prejudice, rearing its ugly head right in front of me and I couldn’t even talk about it.

I was no stranger to witnessing prejudice. Growing up with a Pakistani father in the post 9/11 era made sure of that. I remember my 6th birthday. I was boundless and fearless - I knew both nothing and everything about the world at the same time. I did not know how to tie my shoes but I knew that every cool birthday party needed balloons. Ensuring I had the best princess perfect party ever, my dad drove us to Party City where we made our way to the register. The store-clerk looked like a vulture to my young eyes. Her nose was long like a beak, her eyes beady, her sharp long pink nails were talons. She was endlessly chatting away with a friend over the counter. We stood patiently, waiting to be helped, but bird-lady wouldn’t shut up. “Excuse me,” my father finally chimed “We’d like to buy some balloons for my daughter’s birthday.”

Bird-lady rotated her head, glassy eyes glaring my father down. “Why don’t you go back to Iraq where you came from?” she spat out. My father’s face reddened to a dark crimson. He looked like a pressure cooker: you could see the tension bottled up he was trying so hard to constrain. I thought his head was going to pop off and float up and up, like the balloons. But it never did: his face flushed to rose pink and settled back to deep walnut, the tension dissolving out of him like a hot air balloon in descent. He took in a deep breath of the stale store air and

calmly stated “I’m not from Iraq. I would like to speak to your manager.” I think he was picking his battles too.