

If I Fail

Relax. Deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out.

It's only the most important week of your life. No big deal. If you fail epically, it's not the end of the world. You'll just wind up miserable, poor, alone, unhappy, and probably diseased.

What's so horrible about that?

Oh God, this meditation thing *isn't* working.

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling. How do those Tibetan monks do this all day long? How do they not drive themselves crazy with what-if questions?

What if the issue isn't good enough?

What if we don't win the award for the record-breaking fourth year in a row?

What if I totally bomb my admissions interview?

What if I don't get into *any* college and I have to spend my life scrubbing chewed gum off the underside of desks?

What if . . .

"Oh, what a beautiful morning!" My dad opens my bedroom door and glides in, spreading his arms wide and singing totally off-key at the top of his lungs. "Oh, what a beautiful day!"

He's been waking me up the same way since kindergarten. Thankfully it's not always the *same* song. He has a whole repertoire of morning hymns, most of them originating from musicals that had their heyday decades before I was born.

"I can't do it," I say with a groan. "I can't handle the pressure. Just sign me up for janitor school now and get it over with."

My dad laughs and opens the vertical blinds. I pull the pillow over my head to block the light. "Did anyone ever tell you that you worry too much?"

"Yeah, you. Daily."

He removes the pillow from my face. "Well, you should listen to me. I'm a very wise man." He pulls the covers off me and yanks on my dead arm. "C'mon. Let's go. Up and at 'em, soldier. If I can face today, then *you* can face today."

The realization hits me like a punch in the gut.

Oh God. That's right. It's my dad's big night. I totally forgot.

I suddenly feel guilty for lying here lamenting about my own stress when my dad is dealing with a major career turning point of his own. Tonight is his first big gallery show. He's been trying to make it as a photographer since pretty much before I was born and this show could change everything. It doesn't really help that the subject matter of his photos are a little on the unusual side. I mean, we all think he's talented, but it's taken a while for the rest of the world to catch up.

"Crap," I swear, jumping out of bed. "Dad, I'm so sorry. I forgot. I'm a terrible daughter. Are you ready? Are you excited? Are you nervous?"

He shrugs and shakes his head. "Nope. Not nervous at all."

Always the cool cucumber, my dad.

That must be a recessive gene because I certainly didn't get it. Frankie, my little brother, on the other hand, he's pretty much my dad's mini-me. Well, if you replace a photography obsession with a theoretical physics obsession.

"How do you do it?" I ask. "How do you stay so calm?"

He shrugs again. "I don't know. I guess I have faith that whatever happens was meant to happen. Oh, and of course I have faith in Magnum."

Magnum is the name of Dad's favorite camera. He named it after Thomas Sullivan Magnum IV, the main character of the eighties TV show *Magnum, P.I.*, about a private investigator played by Tom Selleck. He chose the name because Magnum always sees the truth. Just like his camera.

Magnum is one of those fancy models with a bunch of letters and numbers in the name. I can never remember *which* numbers or letters, though, which is why I'm grateful he calls it Magnum. Dad has loads of cameras, but Magnum is like his best friend. He never leaves the house without it. It's basically an extra appendage.

I sigh. Okay, I can totally do this. I can be chill and relaxed and have faith. I can trust that . . .

Dang it! I forgot to tell the printer that we're testing out a brand-new layout in this month's issue. They'll need to double-check all the new margins. I have to email Eric again.

I grab for my phone and open my inbox.

Dad laughs and walks out of the room, kissing me on the top of my head as he passes. "Breakfast in ten." Then he closes the door.

I tap out the email in a flurry and hastily press Send just as I realize I misspelled my own name at the bottom. The email zoomed off so fast I couldn't really see, but I'm pretty sure I signed it from Jennefry. Instead of Kennedy.

I sigh and compose a new email. Eric is going to hate me. If he doesn't already.

Hi Eric. That last email was from Kennedy. Not Jennefry. Just in case you got confused and thought some evil nemesis named Jennefry staged a coup and took over as editor in chief of the paper. Nope. It's still me. Thanks.

I press Send and take a deep breath, glancing up at the wall above my desk, at the three framed issues of the *Southwest Star* that I hung there. Like every morning, the sight of them instantly gives me strength and calms my nerves.

I exhale and return my attention to my phone, opening my SnipPic app and scrolling through my notifications. I got seven likes on my latest picture. One from Laney, my best friend since freshman year. One from Austin, my boyfriend. And a few from members of the newspaper staff, including Mia Graham, my features editor, who is in line to take over as editor in chief of the paper when I graduate in May.

The picture is one Laney took of me in the newspaper office last night. We had to stay until eleven o'clock and the issue is *still* not finished.

I scroll through my feed, skimming past the various photos of people I follow, mostly fellow newspaper staffers, until I find

the one I'm looking for. It's the latest selfie from CoyCoy55. She's standing in front of the amazing grand brick staircase of the Windsor Academy Prep School, dressed in her pristine blue Windsor Academy blazer with a pressed white-collared shirt underneath. Her gorgeous auburn hair is blowing in the early November breeze and she's smiling that perfect, pink-lipped, white-toothed smile.

She already has fifty-two likes and her caption reads:

Another beautiful day at W.A.! Can't wait to hear our guest lecturer this morning! He's a state senator!

#LoveMyLife #WindsorAcademy

A state senator!? Seriously? Who's next? The president?

The other week, they had an astronaut as a guest lecturer, and last year Daphne Wu, my all-time favorite author, came to speak. I came this close to sneaking into their famous amphitheater-style "Lauditorium" just to catch a few words. *We never* get guest lecturers at Southwest High. Besides, where would they even speak? In our crummy cafeteria where all the tables and chairs squeak? In our pathetic excuse for a theater that smells like dirty socks because it's right next door to the boys' locker room?

With a sigh, I close the SnipPic app and toss my phone on the bed. I bet CoyCoy55 doesn't have to worry about newspaper issues and print shops and impressing alumni interviewers. I bet she doesn't have to worry about anything! Everyone knows that when you go to the Windsor Academy, colleges simply roll out the red carpet for you. You probably don't even have to fill out an application. Every top college in the country probably just

hand delivers you an acceptance letter via some white-gloved messenger service.

Meanwhile, across town at Southwest High, we're all grappling for the measly handful of spots the Ivy League colleges reserve for public school kids.

I close my eyes. *Relax. Deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out.*

You can do this. You've got this. Everything is going to be . . .

Crap.

I forgot to tell the printer we need a hundred extra copies for the award committee members. They're going to have to order more paper.

My eyes flash open. I grab for my phone again and start tapping out another email, praying this won't be the excuse Eric uses to finally add my address to his spam filter.

If the Universe Smelled

*Sometimes I wish I went to the Windsor Academy just for the uniforms. I mean, I practically wear the same thing to school every day anyway—jeans, T-shirt, boots, and an old leather jacket that used to belong to my dad back when he was in his “edgy phase,” as he likes to call it—but it would be nice to have an *excuse* to wear the same thing every day and not feel like you’re doing it out of basic laziness and a severe allergic reaction to shopping.*

My hair goes straight into a side braid, and my books go into my camo-green messenger bag. I grab my interview study guide from my nightstand, where I tossed it last night after I’d stared at the pages for so long the words started to look like they were growing arms and legs.

I check my phone to see if Horace, our design editor at the newspaper, has written me back about the fifteen graphics he still hasn’t gotten around to designing for this month’s issue, but there’s nothing. Typical Horace.

Looks like I’m going to have to spend my entire free period

making graphics. Just what I need today: to go to battle with Adobe Illustrator.

There's also been no word from the school's IT guy about the error I was getting last night when I tried to upload our files to the school server.

I groan, slip my phone into my bag, and head downstairs where I'm greeted by the delicious smell of chocolate chip waffles. Dad always puts chocolate chips in the waffles on a big day. He thinks it brings good luck. "Nothing bad ever happens when chocolate is in the equation" is his entire theory about life.

I pull out the stool next to Frankie and sit down at the kitchen counter in front of my pile of newspapers. I subscribe to five national papers that I usually skim each morning over breakfast. As editor in chief of the *Southwest Star*, I think it's important to keep up to date on what the big-name presses are doing. But today I have to study for my alumni interview, so I push the stack aside as I ask, "Where's Mom?"

Dad pulls a perfectly formed work of art out of the waffle iron and plops it onto a plate. "She had to go into work early so she could be home in time for the show tonight."

It's not unusual for Mom to be gone by the time I get downstairs. She's a partner at a top law firm, which basically means she works crazy hours making sure large corporations pay for their screwups. Dad has always been the stay-at-home parent for Frankie and me. He built his photography studio right in the basement so he could work from home. He likes to joke

that his commute is only thirty seconds and there's hardly any traffic.

Dad tops the waffle with maple syrup and whipped cream sculpted into some ambiguous shape and sets the plate down in front of me.

I scrutinize the whipped cream. "Hmm," I say, rotating the plate in a circle. "A giraffe?"

"I was going for 'Darkened Nature of Sorrow.'"

I snap my fingers. "So close."

The truth is, I'm way too anxious to eat, but I don't want to hurt his feelings so I cut a small bite.

Frankie has noise-canceling headphones on over his wild, uncombed hair that's sticking up in a million directions. He's hunched over his board game while he shovels forkfuls of syrupy waffles into his mouth.

My dad reaches over the counter and pulls Frankie's headphones off his ears long enough to remind him to "Chew!"

I peer over to study Frankie's latest creation. It looks like he's redrawing the Forest of Relativity again. He's been working on his theoretical physics board game for almost six months now. It's called "What's the Matter?" and he must have tried to explain the rules to me countless times but I still have no idea how to play. The best I can tell, it's like Chutes and Ladders except with wormholes and hadron colliders.

Frankie is not a normal eleven-year-old child.

He catches me watching him and yanks his headphones off, turning the board around so I can see his latest work. He's an

incredible artist. He gets that from my dad. “What do you think?” he asks eagerly.

I give him a thumbs-up and pop the minuscule bite of waffle into my mouth.

“Now when you land on a proton space, you don’t have to get a Nucleus card to bypass the Bridge of Dark Matter. You can just cut through the Forest!”

“Oh, thank God,” I tell him while chewing. “I always get stuck on the Bridge of Dark Matter.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s because you never remember to use your Gravity Eraser card.”

“I’ve had that card?”

“Duh. Everyone starts the game with one.”

I slap my forehead. “Now you tell me.”

Frankie will probably never have to worry about getting into a good college. I’m sure MIT will recruit him by the time he’s fourteen.

I, on the other hand, have to work doubly hard for everything.

“Dad,” I say, sliding my interview crib sheet across the counter. “Quiz me.”

Dad is eating his waffles standing up, like always. He sets his plate down and picks up the page. He clears his throat and pulls his face into a serious expression, putting on the pretense of a snooty professor. “Ms. Rhodes,” he begins in an obnoxiously stuffy accent. “Thank you for your interest in Columbia University’s Undergraduate Journalism Program.”

I stifle a giggle. Frankie looks up from the Forest of Relativity, obviously not wanting to miss this farce.

“My first question for you today is,” Dad goes on, “what is your biggest regret in life?”

I take a breath. I know this one. I’ve studied this particular question the most. You see, I did a bunch of research online and gathered all of the popular questions asked in college admission interviews. This one appeared the most.

“My biggest regret,” I begin my scripted answer, “is probably working too hard and not taking enough time for myself. You see, I’m the editor in chief of my high school newspaper, the *Southwest Star*, and ever since I took over in my freshman year, we’ve managed to win the National Spartan Press Award three years in a row. And although I’m very proud of this accomplishment, success comes at a price and I’m afraid I don’t have a lot of free time to do fun things. But I hear they have this great new invention called television now.”

I let out my rehearsed chuckle at that last part and then exhale in relief. That might have been my best delivery yet. Let’s hope I can do it exactly the same way tomorrow afternoon at the alum’s house.

Dad nods his head approvingly. Even Frankie looks impressed.

“Not bad,” Dad praises, and then remembers his stuffy professor persona and clears his throat again. “I mean, Well said, Ms. Rhodes. Well said, indeed.”

I beam. “I read that you should always take a question that

is meant to focus on a negative and spin it so it focuses on a positive. And you should always put a little humor into each answer.”

Dad slides the paper back to me and transforms into himself again. “You’re going to blow this up. There’s no way you won’t get in.”

“You know,” Frankie begins knowledgeably. “In some other parallel universe, you *already* got in.”

“How is that possible?” I ask. “If I haven’t even had the interview yet.”

Frankie sets his fork down with a clank and I’m immediately sorry I asked. I can tell by the look on his face, he’s about to get all timey-wimey technical with us. I guess with our family’s DNA, it was too much to ask for a *normal* little brother who watches cartoons and puts posters of famous jocks on his wall. No, Frankie’s walls are covered with pictures of Stephen Hawking and Michio Kaku.

I worry about the kid. I do. How is he *ever* going to survive middle school next year in one piece?

“You see,” he begins, with the same flair my father had when pretending to be a snooty professor. The only difference is, Frankie’s isn’t an act. “The multiverse theory states that *all* possible outcomes—infinite potentials—already exist in other dimensions. So when you scheduled the interview for tomorrow, you unknowingly created a parallel universe. Which means that another you could have—and *did*—schedule the interview for last week. So *that* version of you has already had your interview and has already been accepted into Columbia.”

I stare at him in bewilderment. “That doesn’t make any sense. Early decision letters for Columbia don’t arrive until December 15. So even if my interview was last week, I still wouldn’t know if I got in for another month.”

Frankie’s face falls. “Oh.” He bites his lip in deep concentration as he thinks this over. Dad and I share a smile as I take a sip of orange juice.

“What else do you need to do before tonight?” I ask Dad.

He unplugs the waffle iron and starts wiping it down. “Not much. Just some last-minute framing. Oh, and if you have time, there’s one more photo downstairs that needs a caption. Mind taking a stab at it?”

“Not at all,” I say, licking my fork. “I’ll take a look before I go.”

Dad got the visual photography skills of the family but he’s terrible with the written word. Thankfully, that’s my forte, so we make a good team. I’ve been writing photo captions for him since I was in elementary school. I think I’ve captioned every single piece that’s going to be in tonight’s exhibit.

I stand up and carry my plate to the sink, trying to hide the barely touched waffle from my dad. But his keen photographer eye notices everything.

“You’re not hungry?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Too much on my mind, I think. It was delicious though!” I pull out the trash compactor drawer, dump in the waffle, and put the plate in the dishwasher. Dad hates dishes left in the sink.

He gives me a disapproving look. “Promise me you’ll eat lunch.”

I draw an imaginary X across my chest. “Promise. What time is the show?”

“It starts at eight.”

I wince. It’s Drop Dead night at the paper, which means it’s the last night before the files are due to the printer, so we work and work and work until we basically drop dead. But I can’t miss Dad’s show. I refuse to. So we’ll just have to work extra hard and extra *fast* so I can get out on time.

“I might be a few minutes late, but I’ll be there.”

Dad pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. “You do what you have to do.”

“I’ve got it!” Frankie says suddenly, startling both of us.

“You’ve got what?” I ask.

“In a parallel universe, you were born a year *earlier*, which means you got accepted to Columbia *last* year and are already there right now!” He grins, looking extremely proud of himself.

“But Mom and Dad weren’t married a year earlier,” I point out.

Frankie slumps back on his stool with a frown. “Huh.” Then a moment later, he says, “I know! In a parallel universe—”

“In a parallel universe,” Dad interrupts, “you’ve already finished your breakfast *and* brushed your teeth, *and* done something about that hair.”

Frankie self-consciously pats at his head, pushing down the crazy strands that are sticking up, but they just boing right back.

“I think you’re going to have to take a shower,” Dad tells him.

Frankie groans and stuffs the last bite of waffle into his mouth before pushing off the stool. “In a parallel universe, no one has to take a shower,” he gripes as he trudges up the stairs. “Showers were never even invented!”

“That would be a pretty smelly universe,” I call after him.

“You’re a pretty smelly universe!” he calls back.

I close the dishwasher and am about to kick the trash compactor shut when something under my half-eaten waffle catches my eye. An envelope. It’s covered in sticky syrup and melted whipped cream, but I can still make out the familiar logo in the top left corner.

“*Another* offer?” I ask Dad, nodding toward the letter. “What’d they promise this time? A fully paid time-share on the moon?”

“A company car of my choice.”

Jeffrey and Associates is an advertising firm that’s been trying to recruit my dad for years. Every few months they send another job offer with even *more* zeros at the end. But Dad always turns them down.

“I would never work for those corporate, soul-sucking buffoons,” he likes to say with pride. “Your old man is not a sellout. I refuse to let Magnum be used to hawk laundry detergent and cat food. No way. Nohow.”

I snort and close the trash drawer. “Which photo needs the caption?”

Dad sprays the counter with all-purpose cleaner and wipes it down. “It’s the one that looks eerily like varicose veins.”

“Well, there’s your caption right there. ‘Eerily Like Varicose Veins.’”

He stops cleaning and fakes a stroke of inspiration. “Oh yeah! What on earth do I need you for?”

If My Locker Door Actually Opened

Dad's studio is immaculate. Just like the rest of the house. Everything on his desk is aligned in perfect symmetry, his shelves have labels on them, and you could basically eat off the spotless red rug on the floor. He says he thrives on hyper-organization. I don't have to be a geneticist to know how I turned out the way I did.

Most of the photos for the show tonight are already at the gallery, but there are a few still here. I immediately locate the piece that needs the caption and chuckle when I look at it. He's right. It does look a lot like varicose veins. It also looks a lot like . . .

I tilt my head, getting a sudden idea.

I find a pad of sticky notes on his desk and write down my caption, smiling to myself. He's going to love it.

I stick the paper to the framed photograph, wipe my hands, and hit the last switch on the multi-light panel as I leave.

My work here is done.

When Mom got promoted to partner at her law firm last year, she bought a brand-new Lexus SUV and gave me her old Honda Accord, which I promptly named Woody, after Bob Woodward, the famous journalist.

I love my car. Not because it has any fancy car-things like souped-up wheels or upgraded cup holders or whatever, but because I've made it my own. I found a really cool steering wheel wrap online that looks like newsprint and matches my phone case. I also got a custom license plate frame that says "Keep Calm and Carry a Notebook and Pen." And my sparkly pink car charger was a gift from Laney. It was kind of a private joke between us, a combination of the facts that I hate anything pink and sparkly and that I'm always draining my battery checking emails.

I normally pick Laney up on the way to school since she doesn't have a car, but last night she texted me to tell me she was catching a ride early with her dad so she could work on her final story for the issue. It made me smile. Laney is probably the only other person on staff as dedicated to this newspaper as I am. We should have been co-editors in chief, but she insisted I take the job and she'd be my news editor, which is just so Laney. She's the kind of girl who'd much rather man the spotlight than have it pointed at her.

I don't know what's going to happen next year if I get into Columbia and she gets into UCLA. We'll be light-years apart.

But I can't think about that now. I have too many other things on my mind.

My usual route to school takes me right past the entrance

to the Windsor Academy and, as I approach, I keep my gaze trained on the stoplight in front of me, biting my lip in anticipation.

I preemptively ease my foot off the gas pedal, hovering over the brake.

C'mon. C'mon. Turn red. Turn red.

The light flickers to yellow and I eagerly slam on the brakes, causing someone to honk behind me. They clearly thought I was going to run the yellow. But I wouldn't do that. Because I'm a responsible, law-abiding driver.

As soon as I come to a stop, I glance out the window and take in the famous brick and stone sign that reads "Windsor Preparatory Academy: Grades 7–12." My gaze wanders through the black iron gates and up the beautifully landscaped driveway, until I can just barely make out the parking lot and a hint of Royce Hall, the campus's iconic main building, with its impressive curving brick staircase and white columns. I don't really need to see it, though. I know what it looks like because I've pretty much memorized their website. And I follow the school on SnipPic, where the administration is always posting fabulous pictures of students eating lunch in the state-of-the-art student union, or peering into microscopes in one of their high-tech science labs, or swimming laps in their Olympic-size indoor swimming pool.

Southwest High doesn't even have a SnipPic account. Because honestly, what would they post? A close-up of the stuff they try to pass off as "beef Bolognese" in the cafeteria? A snapshot of that one desk in the AP chemistry classroom that's *always* broken but

that I *always* end up getting stuck sitting in and *always* forget that it tips over when you lean too far to the left?

The Windsor Academy has been ranked one of the best schools in the country. The acceptance rate is in the low single digits. Sure, I applied. Of *course*, I applied. I've wanted to go to Windsor since kindergarten. I filled out an application the second I entered the sixth grade. I checked the mail every day for months, waiting for the letter. And then . . .

Well, it's complicated. And I don't like to dwell on it.

The light turns green and I take one last look at the greener-than-green grass and step on the accelerator.

By the time I get to Southwest High a few minutes later, Austin, my boyfriend, is already parked and waiting for me in front of the school.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says, giving me a peck on the lips. I try to hide my wince at the scent of coffee on his breath—I loathe the taste, smell, and even sight of coffee—but he notices. "Sorry," he says, blowing into his hands and smelling them. "I stopped at Peabody's on the way to school."

"That's okay," I say brightly, trying not to make a big deal of it. "Maybe just keep some breath mints in your car, you know?"

He makes that *tsking* sound with his teeth that drives me bonkers and shoots me with gun fingers. "Good idea."

I let out a sigh and check the inbox on my phone. There are two new emails from Eric at My Friend the Printer, letting me know that he received *my* two new emails, but still nothing from Horace about the graphics or the IT guy about the server issue. I feel my grip tighten around the phone.

I hate thinking about all those files just sitting there on the hard drives. Anything could happen to them. An electromagnetic pulse could wipe out every computer in a five-mile radius. Hard drive pirates could break in and pillage the school. A freak flash flood could . . .

“Rough morning?” Austin asks, interrupting my paranoia spiral.

I pocket my phone and take a deep breath. “Yes.”

“What parallel universe was Frankie in today?” he asks as we walk through the front doors.

I laugh. “One where there are no showers.”

He chuckles. “Classic.”

I can’t help but smile. Austin knows me so well. That’s why we’ve been together for the past three and a half years. Because we’re totally, absolutely, one-hundred-percent in tune with each other.

“So are you coming over tonight?” he asks.

Hub?

I stop midstep in the hallway. Tonight? Did we make plans? I don’t remember making plans. I quickly pull my phone back out and click the calendar app. The only thing on my schedule for today is Drop Dead night at the newspaper and then Dad’s exhibit at the gallery. “What’s tonight?” I ask.

He looks a little hurt. “They’re releasing the new season of *How Is This My Life?* on Netflix, remember? Eight new episodes are releasing at seven!”

I sag in relief. Thank God. It’s only that stupid comedy special he loves so much. To be honest, I really don’t know why. It’s

not even that funny. The comedian, Tom Something-or-other, just makes really lame fart jokes the whole time. I mean, c'mon, fart jokes? For a whole hour? Isn't that a tad bit lazy?

Anyone can write fart jokes.

Frankie can write fart jokes.

Okay, maybe not. Frankie would probably just go off on some tangent about nitrogen and cows raised for beef and global warming.

"Here comes the big one," Austin is saying in his best impression of the comedian. "Here comes the whaaaaammmy!" Then he busts up laughing, even releasing a tiny snort. "God, that guy is good."

"I'm so sorry," I tell him, trying to sound torn up about it. "I can't come."

His face falls in disappointment. "But it's my favorite show. And stand-up comedy is more fun when you watch it with other people!"

"I know," I say, instantly feeling guilty. "But it's Drop Dead and then I have my dad's gallery show tonight."

Okay, so I know this sounds bad, but I'm secretly relieved that I have these big important plans and can't sit around all night watching Tom What's-his-face anthropomorphize bodily functions. It's not that I don't like hanging out with my boyfriend. Obviously I do. It's just that he insists on binge-watching the entire ten-episode season the second it releases. And when you don't find it funny to begin with, eight hours of the same stupid jokes can pretty much make you want to guzzle a bottle of toxic newspaper ink.

When you've been together for as long as we have, it's natural for you to find differing interests. I mean, it's not like we have to agree on *everything*.

"I'm sorry," I tell Austin again, noticing he still looks disappointed. "I would be there if I could!"

This makes him smile. "I know. It's all good."

We arrive at my locker and I dial in the combination and pull on the handle. It doesn't open. It doesn't even budge. Not that this is anything new. It never opens. The lockers at Southwest High are about a million years old and I don't think they've ever been cleaned or repaired. They were probably once a lovely shade of turquoise, but now they're all this ugly sludge/rust color.

I sigh and try the combo again, yanking hard on the lever. Still nothing. I let out a groan. "I hate this stupid thing!"

"You gotta push in, *then* pull up," Austin says, scooting me aside. He dials my combination and tries his technique, to no avail. He sets his backpack on the ground, rolls up his sleeves, and makes another attempt. This time he shakes the lever so hard, the entire row of lockers bangs around. Finally, after he pounds his fist against the metal three times and kicks it twice, the door pops open.

Do I seriously have to do that every time I want to open my locker? I should just risk scoliosis and carry all of my books around in my bag.

The Windsor Academy doesn't even have lockers. They removed them two years ago when they initiated their new high-tech education system called the Windsor Achiever. Everything

is completely digital and synced across all devices. I read about it on their website.

I empty my bag of everything except my notebook for newspaper and the book I need to return to the library.

“Gotta run,” Austin says, leaning in to kiss me, but then he remembers his coffee breath. “Right,” he says, pulling away. “Breath mints. I’m on it.”

I slam my locker door shut. It bounces against the latch and then breaks off entirely, clattering to the floor near my feet. I sigh dramatically and just walk away.

At least it’ll be easier to get my stuff this way.

If I Didn't Have Laney

Laney and I both have first period free. We usually spend it in the newspaper office, which is located on the second floor of the school, next to the display case that features our three Spartan Press Awards. I stop in the library on the way to return the copy of *Moby-Dick* that I checked out three weeks ago. After this I only have one book left on the “25 Books to Read Before College” list. It was published by the *San Francisco Chronicle* ten years ago. I found it online when I was twelve and Googling “How to Get Accepted to the College of Your Dreams.” The only title I have left to read is *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, but I haven’t been able to find it in our school library. The computer says there are three copies on the shelf, but they all seem to have magically disappeared and the librarian insists she doesn’t have enough money in the budget to replace them.

I check the shelf once again before leaving, even wandering from the Ds into the Es and Cs, but there’s still no sign of these alleged three copies.

I guess I’ll have to get it from the public library.

Laney is working hard at her computer station when I bust

through the door of the newspaper office. “I only have two hundred more words to write,” she says without looking up from the screen. “Then I can put this section to bed.”

“Excellent,” I say, taking a deep breath. I love coming into this office. It feels like my second home. The sound of computer keys clacking, the smell of the ink from the small printer we use for our proof pages, our past issues decorating the walls. But I also always feel ten pounds heavier the moment I walk through the door. The stress cloaks me like a wet blanket.

“Did you come up with an idea for your last piece?” Laney asks.

“How about locker doors that fall off when you close them?”

“That’s not news.”

I slide into the computer station next to her, mumbling, “I know. Did Horace create the graphics yet?”

She shakes her head and goes back to typing. “Does Horace ever do anything around here?”

I let out a groan, grab the keyboard, and bring it up to my forehead, banging twice. “Ugh.”

Laney expertly pats me on the back with one hand while the other keeps typing. “It’ll be okay. We’re going to finish this and then, after it’s sent to the printer, we’re going to strap Horace upside down to the flagpole . . . by the balls.”

Despite myself, I let out a laugh.

I don’t know what I’d do without Delaney Patel. She’s my rock. She always knows exactly what to say to make me feel better.

And she loves saying balls.

I log in and take a deep breath as I wait for the machine to boot up. That meditation book my dad gave me said something about oxygen being Mother Nature's remedy to everything. But I honestly don't think Mother Nature ever had to put out an award-winning school newspaper every month.

I suck in another deep inhale and scowl. I can still taste Austin's coffee on my lips.

No, wait a minute. That's not coming from me.

I sniff at the air. "Do you smell . . . coffee?"

Laney immediately covers her mouth. "Oh, sorry. I went to Peabody's this morning. It must be me."

I look over at her, tapping furiously to finish her story. "That's weird," I say. "Austin went to Peabody's this morning, too."

She stops typing as an unreadable expression blankets her face. "That is weird," she says flatly.

"Did you see him there?"

It takes her a moment to respond, like she's trying to remember. She must be more stressed than I am if she's having trouble remembering the face of a guy she's known for three years. "No," she finally says. "I must have just missed him."

The computer finishes booting up and I click on the file for this month's issue. Thankfully, it opens and all the work we did yesterday on the new layout is still there. I let out the breath I've been holding since last night and stare at the front page. Last night I was happy with it. Now everything looks wrong. What is the story about the new science teacher doing on the front page? That's not front-page news.

I start shuffling things around, but stop when I get the strange

sensation that someone is watching me. I look up to see Laney staring at me from the next terminal. “What?” I ask, smoothing down my hair.

She blinks a few times and shakes her head. “Nothing. Do you want me to email Horace and ask him to come down here after first period?”

I grunt. “No. I’ll make the graphics myself. Like always.”

Laney nods for what feels like a lifetime and then goes back to typing.

“Lanes,” I say, studying her curiously. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” she says, but her voice is unusually high. “Everything’s great. I’m just stressed about the issue.”

I sigh. “I know, me too.”

She rubs my back again. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be good.”

I shake my head. “It can’t be good. It has to be *great*.”

“It’s going to be amazing! First class! Genius! And the balls of every member on the SPA committee are going to fall right off when they read it.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

Laney grins and goes back to working on her story.

Seriously. Thank *God* for Laney. She’s the only person in my life who can keep me sane.

If We Don't Win

Not to brag or anything, but the *Southwest Star* was kind of on its last legs when I took over. I turned this whole paper around. With the help of Laney, obviously.

The truth is, Laney and I weren't even planning to *be* on the newspaper. The whole thing was kind of an accident. We were both looking for the debate club but we ended up walking into the newspaper office instead. It's actually how we met.

The creative writing teacher, Ms. Testerman, had been trying to keep the newspaper afloat for months. They had this sad little online site with the totally uninspired name of "The Southwest News," and no print edition. The school board was about to shut down the club because no one was actually *reading* the paper.

When Laney and I walked into room 212 after school on the first day of freshman year, thinking it was the debate club meeting, Ms. Testerman was trying to rally the five completely lethargic students who called themselves the newspaper staff by asking for story ideas.

I happened to have *just* been complaining to Austin earlier

that day about the disproportionate funds that went to the football program as opposed to the library, so I raised my hand and pitched the story.

Ms. Testerman was positively thrilled and told me to look into it, which I did.

That story ended up winning us our very first Spartan Press Award. It turned out the head football coach was illegally siphoning off funds from other programs in the school. So while the tennis team and the cheerleading squad had to sell lollipops or frozen cheesecakes to be able to go to *their* state finals, the football team always seemed to have plenty of money to do whatever it wanted.

After the story ran, the head coach was fired and the money was returned to the rightful departments. Now I always snicker quietly to myself when a football player comes up to me in the hallway and asks if I want to buy a lollipop.

By my second month as a freshman, I was unanimously voted in as editor in chief. Now, more than three years later, with three award-winning front pages framed and mounted on my bedroom wall, I have the enormous burden of releasing a kick-ass issue every month.

But this issue is more stressful than most. Because this issue is the one we send to the Spartan Press Award for consideration. And once you've won it three years in a row, people kind of *expect* you to win it again.

The issue is due to the committee in two weeks and the winners are notified by email on December 15, which just *happens* to also be the day Columbia early decision letters arrive.

Let's see those Tibetan monks deal with *that* kind of pressure.

After school, once the entire newspaper staff has assembled in the office, I call for everyone's attention. "Okay. I know everyone wants to get out of here at a reasonable hour, so I'll try to make this short. First, I want to thank you all for being here on Drop Dead and giving up whatever you had to give up today. Second, the new layout has been causing some formatting issues with the sections, so please quadruple-check *everything* before saving. I know it's kind of a hassle, but I really think the new layout will impress the judges at the SPA. The old layout was getting stale, and if you want to keep winning you have to keep evolving, right?"

There are a few apathetic echoes of "Right" on top of Laney's overly enthusiastic one. I flash her a grateful smile and she nods back at me.

"I have an idea," Horace interjects, without even looking up from his monitor. I know he's playing his stupid computer game instead of actually working on a story. I can see it reflected in his glasses. "Why don't we write a story about how no one reads newspapers anymore because everything's online?"

I can feel my temperature rising. Laney gives me a look that says, "Just let it go. It's not worth the fight."

Horace is technically our design editor. But all he really does around here is annoy people with his bonehead comments while he plays Excavation Empire.

I've tried to play. Just to see what the fuss is about. And I don't get it. You build things. With bricks. And then you wait for people to tear them down. It's like a digital version of the sandbox when we were four.

I would have fired Horace ages ago if I was actually allowed to fire people. But it's school rules. Since newspaper isn't a sport it's considered a "club," and the rules clearly state that anyone who wants to be in a club is allowed to be.

Trust me, I've read the rules over and over again. Extensively. I even asked my mom, the lawyer, to help me find a loophole, but she claims the document is ironclad and even looked a little impressed when she read it.

So bottom line, Horace is on the newspaper staff whether I like it or not.

"Thank you, Horace," I say tersely. "That was very helpful."

"No problem, chief," he says, before pounding angrily on the keyboard and shouting at his screen, "I hope your city gets bulldozed by the Inferno Dragon!"

"Okay," I say brightly. "Remember to save your files every three minutes so you don't lose any work. As soon as your section is done, message me so I can add it to the final file. Let's try to get out of here before dark."

"I don't know what we'd do without you," Laney says, coming up to me after the staff has dispersed. "You save this paper's balls like every single week."

"We work as a team," I remind her. "But, thanks."

She touches my arm. "I better go proof this article so I can get home in time for *How Is This My Life?*"

I let out a groan. “Oh God. I forgot you watch that thing, too.”

Laney looks practically offended. “Of course I watch it. It’s only the best show on Netflix.” She lowers her voice an octave. “Here comes the big one! Here comes the whaaaaammmy!” Then she laughs so hard, she snorts.

“That show is so stupid! I can’t believe both you and Aus—” I break off, my mind suddenly putting pieces together. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before.

“Laney!” I say urgently, grabbing her arm.

I can feel her stiffen. “What?”

“You *have* to go over to Austin’s and watch it with him!”

She’s silent for a full five seconds before stammering, “W-w-why would I do that?”

God, based on her reaction, you would think she’s secretly hated my boyfriend’s guts for the past three years and was too afraid to tell me.

“Because,” I say, as though it’s obvious. And it *is*. At least to me. “You both *love* that show. And I feel bad because I have my dad’s gallery thing tonight so I can’t watch it with him. But if *you* go over there, then you can watch it *together!*”

It really is one of my finer ideas, if I don’t say so myself.

“No,” Laney says brusquely, picking up a stack of papers off a nearby desk and straightening them like it’s the most important job in the world. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Yes it is!” I insist. “You guys even quote the same stupid line from his bit. You’re clearly *meant* to watch this together.”

Laney lets out a weird chipmunk laugh. “Yeah, right. Me and

Austin? We're not meant to do anything together. We have like *nothing* in common."

Why is she acting so strange? The three of us hang out all the time and she's never acted like this. What's the big deal?

"Um, you have *me* in common. And apparently also this lame comedy show." I grab her hand and tug on it. "Please do it. It would mean so much to me. You're just going to be watching the show tonight anyway, right? Why not watch it with Austin? You know stand-up comedy is more fun to watch with someone else. Please, please, please!"

Laney stares down at my hand. Is it just me or does her breathing look a little erratic?

I tilt my head. "Laney? What's going on?"

She lets out that weird rodent laugh again. "Nothing. Nothing's going on. I'm fine. I'm totally, one-hundred-percent finesies."

Finesies?

"So you'll go?" I confirm.

She gnaws on her bottom lip. "Yeah. Why not? I mean, if it'll make you happy."

I let out a sigh. "Yes. It will make me very happy."

"Great," Laney says, but I hear a hint of uneasiness in her voice. Maybe she really *does* hate Austin. Maybe she's just been too polite to tell me this whole time. Sure, he can be a little weird sometimes and he has a knack for saying and doing the most embarrassing things in the middle of the hallway. And he totally overuses the phrase "for all intents and purposes," except he says, "for all intensive purposes," which is actually *not* the phrase. And he . . .

Well, anyway, the point is, he's my boyfriend and I love him and if Laney has a problem with him, then a few hours of hanging out with him might do some good.

Laney scurries back to her computer and slides into her seat. I stand in the front of the room, watching my team at work.

Relax. Deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out.

The issue is on track. Austin has someone to watch his comedy show with. It looks like I might get out of here in time to make it to Dad's show.

Everything is working out great. All it needed was a little delegation.