

Mary and the Mammoth

by
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Chapter 1

Tuesday, February 18th, 6:03 AM

“MOM!” I wake up screaming. Another nightmare. My hair is stuck to my face. I sweat through my pajamas again. *What is wrong with me?* My alarm is set to go off in two minutes; guess I’m up for the day.

I wish I could skip the next few hours. Just take a nap and wake up in History class. Not only do I have to trek through the frozen tundra for 10 minutes to get Dad and another 20 to get to the airport, I *then* have to spend over an hour with Lucy... Why can’t Liam date a chill girl? A smart girl. A girl without TikTok. There’s got to be one out there somewhere.

I step out of the Airbnb into the freezing white landscape that is Tahoe City and make my way to the lab. My hair is protesting the day with tall, static-fueled spikes. Pretty gross, I know. But, if I had showered, the water molecules in my hair would expand, causing the hair shafts to

swell which would cause the strands to break off at the teeniest exposure to wind! Plus, I was too tired.

My breath is hot against the freezing air, slapping back in my face with unbrushed pungency. I just plain forgot, so... That's on me.

BUZZ. I use my sleeve to protect my finger from the frost.

No answer.

I do a little rat-a-tat against the steel door. Ouch. Why does everything hurt more when it's cold? I should know that.

Still no answer.

I walk back about ten feet, brace myself, and then bolt toward the entrance.

SMASH.

That didn't work. Obvi. I'm half lying down on the stoop, my butt pressed against the compact snow, digging around in my backpack for my phone when—

“Mary. What a surprise. Don't you have school today?” It's Dad's research assistant walking up to the door, keys in hand. I'm way too cold to chat and Doug is an arrogant a-hole, so I spout out an obligatory, “Thanks!” as he opens the door, and then dart inside.

My sneakers squeak as I sprint. Somehow I manage not to slip weaving my way down the halls. It is an accomplishment in this place—the number of lefts and rights you have to make to get to the office is outrageous. At least it's warm in here.

The first thing I see when I get close is Dad, leaning over his desk, carefully signing a giant pile of documents while two men in suits look on blankly.

“DAD!” I yell, with what little breath I have left, “Flight’s in an hour. Time to go.”

But before I can open the glass door, one of the suits turns the lock. He presents me with a fake smile. I give him a look of, “Are you serious?” Before slumping my shoulders.

At least two minutes pass.

I’m starting to regret pulling an (almost) all-nighter. I can feel the weight of my eyelids, and it’s taking all the strength I can muster to keep them open. I didn’t mean to stay up so late, but I wasn’t planning on being here another night and I had work to do. I stopped by the pet store and luckily they had feeder mice—the baby ones that are frozen without being euthanized first. They’re so much easier to work with. Without the lab, I can only do so much, but I was able to get a bunch of measurements which is helpful. Plus, since we aren’t flying commercial anymore, I can bring them back with me. Win-win.

I blink awake. I fell asleep? I was trying so hard. I don’t know how much time has passed, but we better get out of here if we want to fly home for free. God knows we don’t have any money to spare on real tickets.

“Hey, scuse me!” I shout.

I see one of the suits turn toward me.

“He’s just going to tell me when we get outside!” I call out.

I see the man narrow his gaze and then turn to whisper something to my father. What are they doing in there? They’re acting like this is some sort of top-secret spy situation. Hello! He’s a paleontologist, as in, a professional dirt hoarder. Hardly super-spy material.

Finally, he looks up from the papers, pushes those horn-rimmed glasses—gag me—up to the bridge of his nose and gives me a wave. *Yes, hi Dad. Now come on, we gotta go!* I give him the ol' wrist watch signal. He dusts off his signature unintentionally-oversized Eddie Bauer flannel before handing back the pen and shaking hands with both of the suits. One quick glance at his watch and he realizes how long he has been in there. I swear, this man needs constant supervision. If he didn't have me overseeing the schedule, we'd be here til March.

Miraculously, we get to the airport by 7:45. Once we get down to the tarmac, I can see Lucy through the giant windshield looking very serious as she flips all the switches and lights and...and...whatever else pilots do in the cockpit before takeoff. If I had gotten more sleep, I might be impressed by my brother's fancy British girlfriend. Meh, let's be real. It's too early to be impressed by anything.

As we approach, Liam walks down the wobbly plane stairs shouting, "What took you so long? We should be at 20,000 feet by now!" He's smiling, but Dad doesn't get his humor, so he starts apologizing, trying to explain where we have been.

"Don't worry about it, Dr. Timothy! We're fine," Liam says, gripping our father's sinewy shoulders before ushering him into the Cessna with a pat on the back.

"What up, Sis?!"

I hate when he calls me that.

"I have a name, you know," I say stomping my way up the steps.

"Oh, yes that's right," he stretches his arms out for a very theatrical embrace, "Cynthia! My Cynthia."

I duck under his arms and enter the surprisingly spacious little plane, "No."

He swings around putting a hand to his chin. “Roberta?”

“Nope.”

“Eleanore?”

“No!”

“I’ve got it this time. Kimberly,” he smiles with satisfaction.

“Dad!” I whine.

Before Dad can intervene, Liam blurts, “OK, OK, OK! I’m done. Just tryin’ to have a little fun, but I can be serious. Look, this is my serious face,” he says pouting, “I’m very serious. Seriously. Very serious.” He’s miming reading a paper and smoking a pipe. I burst out laughing.

“I hate you, you know,” I tease, putting on my seat belt.

“Lucy,” my father begins, “This plane is absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much for having us. I can’t even begin to thank you. Isn’t this cool, Mare?”

The plane seems very cool; but again, it’s too early to appreciate anything other than the cushiness of my seat. I play my part though, so we can get the heck out of here, “Yeah! Lucy, this is great! Thank you. I cannot wait to get out of the cold.”

My god that took a lot of energy.

“I really do apologize,” Dad continues. “This meeting, you know, it came up so suddenly, and I really couldn’t miss it. And switching flights! Well, it’s damn near impossible these days! First they make you check-in 24 hours in advance, then expect you to remember to do that or you don’t get seats next to each other, and then expect you to pay 15 dollars for one ounce of Jack Daniels? Are you kidding me? It’s criminal!” His face is red and it looks like he is going to pass out from sheer disgruntlement. He takes a deep breath before remembering one tiny little detail,

“Oh, God. Not your airline. I mean, your father’s airline. I haven’t taken Lightning Air in years! More of a Spirit kind of family, if you know what I mean.”

Lucy chuckles. “No problem at all, Tim. Yes, the airline is my father’s but this little six-seater is all mine. Been flying it for...going on three years now, and I’ve *never* made *anyone* check-in 24 hours in advance. That’s absolute rubbish, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, Dad,” says Liam, “It’s not a problem at all. We’re sick of skiing. Lucy wanted to check out Abbot Kinney anyway, right Babe?”

“Yes!” Says Lucy, “I’ve got to at least check it out if I ever want to call myself an Angelino, right?”

Dad and I exchange a look. Is she moving here for good?

Liam responds almost immediately, “Right.”

Side note: when has Liam ever been to Abbot Kinney other than that one year he went to the art walk because he knew someone working in the beer garden who could sneak him in?

Lucy continues, “I follow this little shop on Instagram that makes these really lovely hats from strictly plant-based fabrics and do almost all of the sewing in-house. It’s really rather fantastic.”

“So, just no wool then? Oof. Buh-mer,” I say mockingly.

“Mary,” Liam quietly scolds. “Dad,” he continues, changing the subject, “What would you like to drink?” He dances over to a little cupboard, “No Jack Daniels I’m afraid, but we’ve got scotch and... Oooo, I see some tequiiiiiiiilaaaa.” He pulls out a bottle of clear liquid and a bottle of brown liquid, shaking them back and forth like maracas. My brother, the entertainer.

Dad points to the brown one and Liam pours some into a glass. He takes a sip. “Hm. Yep, it’s not poisoned. Here you go,” and he hands the glass to Dad who takes it, rolling his eyes.

“That will be 20 dollars,” he jokes.

Dad gives him a pity laugh and a fake punch in the gut. “Lucy,” he calls, “does your father know about your boyfriend’s illegal alcohol consumption?”

She grins. “Um, no, I don’t think so. Does your wife know about your 8am scotch?” She laughs.

Uh oh.

I see my father turn to look out the window. I can tell he is both embarrassed and sad. Lucy looks back, wondering why no one is laughing. She and Liam have only been dating a few months, but still, you’d think he would have told her. Especially since she’s so... Well, rude. She doesn’t mean to be; she’s just British, and apparently, British people have no filter, according to Liam. He says it’s called being “direct” and he thinks it is refreshing. It doesn’t make her any less rude. Last time I saw her, she told me that I needed to start wearing a bigger size jeans because she could see my stomach “pugging out a bit.” I mean, she wasn’t wrong, but still. It was not nice. Plus, it was in front of Eggo who now cannot stop giving me compliments on my body as some sort of...reassurance? It is so annoying.

Liam raises the bottle of clear liquid again along with something green, trying to change the subject. “Mary? Salt or no salt?”

“Got any ginger ale?” I ask. He nods, and with a toss, I’ve got my in-flight service.

Next, Liam does his very best flight attendant impression. He makes us clap before he agrees to hop into the co-pilot seat. He gives us a very cheesy thumbs-up after he buckles. I wonder if I can get a nap in.

* * *

No nap. I am a zombie. Why? “The Entertainer” did not stop talking the entire flight.

Lucy’s going to fly us here, Lucy and I are doing blah blah, can you believe we both grew up in airplane hangars? You know, because Mom and Dad converted one into their lab and Lucy’s dad owns an airline? The universe is so heckin’ incredible! I love you, Baby....blah blah blah gross gross gross.

Yeah, Liam, we get it. You have the perfect life jet-setting with your rich, pilot girlfriend. Now, can we have a little peace and quiet for a change?! If he comes over for dinner tonight and I’m still a zombie, I’m going to attack him. I’ll go after his vocal cords though, he doesn’t have any brains.

* * *

The airport sign says it’s only 54 degrees. What. Is. Happening! It should be at leeeeeeast 60 at SMO! Sure, it’s warmer than Tahoe, but come on, this is LA. It’s supposed to be sunny and 75 year-round!

I would like to formally declare that I, Mary Frances Fitzgerald, will never, ever, for any reason, live in a cold climate.

What about when it gets crazy hot in The Valley? I don’t mind it. We’ve got the grotto. It may not be a pool, but it’s water and it’s nice to sit in when it’s 115 degrees out. Also, pretty

much everywhere has air conditioning, so I'm never far from an oasis should I find myself procuring heat stroke.

It's almost 11am, and I'm supposed to get to school by 3rd period. There are no makeups for quizzes in Ms. Ames' class, and I've already missed two this semester. I really have to make this one, or I'll be looking at a B on my report card. The only problem is that we are just now exiting the Santa Monica Airport parking lot. This means we have less than 33 minutes to get all the way up the 405, hop on the 101, race through Van Nuys and Sherman Oaks, and exit on Laurel Canyon before I can hop out of the car and run to class.

If this were UCLA, where I should be going full-time, there would be no problem. However, the very serious fancy-pants staff at Campbell Hall think it's necessary to treat their students like Amazon Prime packages. I don't know why I thought of that first, but what I mean is like, they have to be stamped and ready to go at precisely the right time in order to be delivered correctly. In my case however, I have to be seated, pencil-in-hand at precisely the right time in order to be tested on things I already know or could look up online in one-thousandth the time. #Bureaucracy.

*I don't exactly know what bureaucracy means. I just heard it on Vamp High when they were talking about how lame school is...

Point is, junior high sucks.

Chapter 2

Well. Big surprise, I did not make it to class on time. I was three minutes late and therefore not allowed to take the quiz. Now I have to go wait in Ms. Abigail's office 'til they're done. Why the school psychologist? Pretty sure it's because she doesn't do anything and her office is always empty.

"Mary! Lovely to see you today. How ya doin'?" Ms. Abigail asks.

Ms. Abigail is the only staff member who has us call her by her first name. She said it has something to do with trust. She's super nice and all, but I don't know if "trustworthy" is the go-to attribute if you're trying to describe her. You see, she's from Colorado or Connecticut or something and while she claims to have moved here to work with one of the best lower grade schools in the country, it is pretty obvious by all of the movie posters on her walls and the audition sides on her desk that this is *not* her first choice of work. I once overheard Eloise say that Ms. Abigail takes acting classes at night with her sister and that she's like not good.

I don't get the whole acting thing. Everyone is obsessed with what actor they saw at Starbucks, who's dad is what character on Shonda Rhymes' latest hit, and even who the heck Shonda Rhymes is (I have no clue). Wouldn't you rather spend your time curing cancer? Or what about inventing an artificial heart for someone low on the transplant list? I don't see any benefit

to society in obsessing over pretty people who play pretend. But what do I know? I'm only the California ScienCenter's "Champion of Genius" 3 years running aaaand UCLA's youngest part-time student...

"Hi, Ms. Abigail," I say with slight distain, "I'm fine. You?"

"I'm great! Did ya miss another quiz?"

"Ugh. Yes. And it wasn't even my fault this time!"

"Boy, that stinks." She says, wrinkling her face sympathetically. "Want to tell me what happened?"

"Sure, I guess. I was flying back from Tahoe and traffic was mad from SMO. We were supposed to leave yesterday but then my Dad agreed to do this stupid meeting with these dumb guys who looked like FBI agents today and so we couldn't leave until after that."

"Your dad is in the FBI?" Ms. Abigail asks.

"Omg, no. He analyzes fossils. I have no idea who those guys were, but they did not look like fellow paleontologists. And *now* I'm going to get a B in History because I missed another ___"

The phone on Ms. Abigail's desk rings. She lifts a finger signaling for me to stop for a minute while she answers.

"Ms. Abigail's office, this is Abigail."

Weird way to answer a phone...

"Oh hi, Mr. Hendricks! No, not at all, tell me everything. Yes, I'm sure."

It must be Ralphy's dad. He's a director. I don't think he's all that famous, but by the way Ms. Abigail is talking, he must be a potential vehicle for her Academy Award-winning dreams. I'm pretty sure he's a terrible human being. But who isn't in this town, right?

"I see," she says, overly sympathetic, "what do you think is the cause?"

I look at the posters on her walls while I wait. It's a mix bag of movies and inspirational quotes. She's got The Godfather next to Gandhi saying, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Another one of Fight Club next to the golden rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And a few other obscure, inappropriately-rated movie posters. What a hack.

At least 10 minutes pass while she waxes sympathy for Mr. Hendricks. I get out my laptop and start looking through my data from the weekend. Shoot! I left the mice in my suitcase, which is with Dad. If I don't get them in the freezer soon, they're going to thaw and be unusable.

Texting Dad

Me: Dad. I need you to put the brown paper bag that's in my suitcase into the freezer.

Dad: OK. Will do! Did you make it there in time to take the quiz?

Me: 🙄

Dad: 😞 Did you tell them it was my fault?

Me: Doesn't matter. Don't worry about it though. I'll ask her if I can do extra credit. K
bye. Don't forget - freezer. TYSM!

Dad: 🤖👍

That was easy. I love that he didn't ask me what was in the bag.

As I put my phone away, I hear Ms. Abigail on the phone, “Well, if you ever want to come in and talk about it in person, I’m here till four every day. Or you know, I could always meet you *outside* of school if that is better for you.”

Jesus. I can’t take anymore of her BS so I pack up and turn to leave. There’s a poster on the door that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Do your thing, Ms. Abigail. I’m going alone. And trust me, I’m going fast *and* far.

I hear the bell. History is getting out right now. This means it’s time for Literature.

Mr. McCarthy is tall and handsome. He is, unlike Ms. Abigail, a real actor. Or, at least he does stunt driving. But on like legit. big budget movies. One of the movies was a racing movie, so he was basically in more of the shots than the lead actor. I’d say that tops Ms. Abigail’s community theater workshops.

Oh, Mr. McCarthy is also in a mouthwash commercial. How could I forget? It comes on before SciTekTV videos on YouTube all the time. God, I love SciTekTV. They show you actual science rather than a like dumbed down version that “appeals to the masses” or whatever. Anyway, mouthwash. He does these really funny faces while he swishes the stuff around in his mouth, which is like the whole commercial. We make him do it all the time when we get bored of Kafka or Maya Angelou or whoever we’re reading that day. It’s hilarious.

The girls in class think he’s so hot. I guess he’s cute, but he’s like 30. Speaking of. I don’t see the big deal in boys either! I mean, I think guys are cute, but Ruby and Samantha are constantly talking about them. *Constantly*. And they get all high pitched and squealy which is so annoying. Again—why is no one spending their time contributing to society?

“OK class,” Mr. McCarthy says, “welcome. Happy Tuesday. Did everyone have a nice long weekend?”

There is an eruption of storytelling, none of which is distinguishable because everyone is talking at once. Mr. McCarthy chuckles at the chaos. He’s always in a good mood. But he’s in like an actual good mood, not a fake good mood like Ms. Abigail. I should stop throwing her under the bus, but it's true! She’s totally fake and she doesn't care about anyone but herself.

“OK OK, one at a time. Raise a hand, will ya? Yes, Samantha, tell us about your weekend.”

Samantha leans over her desk, revealing a lacy tank top undershirt. I think she’s doing this on purpose, trying to show Mr. McCarthy. “My family and I went to Martha’s Vineyard, you know, on the east coast. Our house there was really dirty though. Like the housekeeper didn’t come before we arrived. So, my mom called her, yelling, like, ‘Maria, why am I paying you if you’re not going to do your job.’ And then she totally just fired her right over the phone.” She lets out a little chuckle.

Some other kids laugh, but mostly it’s just awkward. Her mom sounds a lot like an older version of Samantha.

”Okaaay,” Mr. McCarthy jumps in, eager to move on, “Who’s next? Johnny B! Great.” He continues, under his breath, “Let’s hope your weekend was better than poor Maria’s...”

“It was pretty lame. I went to SkyJumpers with my manny, Eric. That was fun, but mostly it was super boring. I just watched all four seasons of Vampire High on Netflix and played my Dad’s vintage Nintendo 64. Mario Cart? Have you heard of it?”

Mr. McCarthy smiles, “Yes, I know that game, but I used to play it on my brother’s Nintendo. Like, the OG Nintendo.”

“I thought 64 was the OG Nintendo,” Johnny B says.

“Oh, Johnny. So much to learn, my young Padawan.”

Johnny B. begins to ask what a Padawan is, but is cut off by Mr. McCarthy asking for another weekend story, “Anyone else? Anyone have a good story? Mary. What about you? What did you do this weekend?”

Ugh. Why did he have to call on me? I wasn’t raising my hand.

“Um, I was in Tahoe,” I say.

“Tahoe! Did you do any skiing?” Mr. McCarthy asks, hoping to get a story that is not about watching TV or yelling at housekeepers.

“No. I don’t ski.”

“Do you snowboard?”

“No,” I say as my eyes dart around the room. I want this little interrogation to be over so bad.

“Well, what were you doing in Tahoe, then?” Mr. McCarthy pries.

“Um, my dad works for the La Brea Tar Pits and they partner with a lab up there. So, sometimes he has to go up to that lab to look at new found fossils and stuff. Uh, so, he was doing that and I mainly worked on—”

My brain flashes to the memory of a dissected feeder mouse hooked up to an IV of homemade hemoglobin antifreeze.

“—Just um, some bio-chemical reanimation theories that I’ve been working on.”

“Bio-reanimation theories?” He sounds really interested, “You mean like, raising things from the dead?”

Why did I say that... I’m too embarrassed to keep talking to everyone, so I just shrug my shoulders. I should not have said ANYTHING.

“So you’re going to be the real Victor Frankenstein, then, huh! Class, do you hear that?!”

Jeremy Little raises his hand, looking really confused, “I don’t think you’re allowed to call a student a monster, Mr. M.”

I shrink in my seat. *Am I really a monster?*

Mr. McCarthy raises a finger high into the air, “Aha! The most common misconception of our day. No, contrary to popular belief, Frankenstein is *not* the monster who comes to life. Frankenstein is the scientist who brings the monster to life!”

I didn’t know that. And from the looks of it, no one else did either.

“Class,” He continues, banging a fist on his podium, “Change of plans. We’re going to pause our Hero’s Journey work for the week, so all of you who have yet to finish your essay on Joseph Campbell, you are in luck! Today, we are going to explore, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. This is a book that you have the option of studying in depth in 12th grade, so should you choose it in 4 years, you’ll have a nice head start!”

I am intrigued.

“Who likes scary stories?” Mr. McCarthy asks.

Everyone raises their hands.

“OK, now who likes telling scary stories?” Mr. McCarthy continues.

Again, everyone raises their hands.

“Well, once upon a time, about 200 years ago, there was this group of friends. Some of whom were just a little older than you—think seniors, except they weren’t in high school because that wasn’t a thing yet. So, these friends took a trip to a remote cabin in the Swiss countryside. They were all writers and they all liked scary stories. One night, one of the friends, a poet named, Lord Byron—”

Johnny B. interrupts, “Lord?”

“Yes Johnny, Lord Byron. His first name was George, but he was an heir to the Baron Byron. Listen, we can go into Great Britain’s Peerage another day. For now, let’s get back to the story. So, Lord Byron, a poet—who was my age actually, at the time,” He adds proudly, “suggested that each of them write a scary ghost story. Why? Well, for one, there was a raging storm outside—winds blowing, lightning striking, everything that gets you all freaked out and ready for a scary story. And also, because they couldn’t go outside and do anything fun. They were cooped up in there until the storm passed.”

I’m fascinated and a little afraid already. I can see that everyone else in class, except Samantha, and Ruby sitting next to her, are just as riveted.

“Johnny, why don’t you come help me hand out copies of the book.” Mr. McCarthy says, walking to the supply closet in the back of the classroom. Johnny hops up, eager to get his hands on a copy himself. Before he starts passing them out, I see him inspecting each copy, making sure to leave the nicest looking one for himself.

I get an old copy. It’s very worn and even has highlighter and pen marks on some of the pages. I don’t mind though; a book is a book. I flip through the beginning pages and try to scan it

quickly to get a feel for how scary it's going to be. The words are very Old English-y and it's kind of hard to understand, but the information is interesting.

"Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries."

Oh my god. I totally agree! If people stopped caring about fame and money, maybe we would have figured out how to raise people from the dead. Sounds like I am quite a bit like Victor Frankenstein. Too bad no one else has shared this sentiment. Maybe then you'd still be alive...

Chapter 3

This salad tastes terrible. It's no wonder. It's from Dominos. I don't think Dad realizes that just because it's labeled salad and it's sort of green, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's good for you. It definitely doesn't make up for the bad stuff that's in pizza. I think, if we're eating bad stuff for dinner anyway, why gag ourselves on disgusting non-healthy lettuce stuff. Let's just eat the good stuff!! (Pizza I mean, not "good stuff" meaning healthy food. No thank you.)

I'm eating the salad first so I can enjoy pizza without the looming dread of "greens" before Cinestix. I learned this trick from Liam years ago. It's too bad he's got a girlfriend. Instead of dinner hacks, all I hear about is Lucy this and Lucy that. And he never comes over for dinner! It's not fair.

You know what else isn't fair? Eggo is eating over tonight. Not because anyone invited him, no. Good ol' Diego Vasquez came over because he saw Dad having trouble carrying all his work stuff plus the pizza and offered to help bring things inside.

I wish Dad would just say “no” sometimes. He’s such a pushover, you could literally ask him to drive you off a cliff and he would just go along with it, telling you all about the fossils in the cliff on the way down...

Eggo is currently eggsplaining—that’s what I’ve decided to say when he’s going off about something. Like mansplaining, but it’s Eggo, get it? So, Eggo is currently eggsplaining the imminent demise of the human race “as a result of ever increasing climate change.”

He’s developing an app that allows you to see how much carbon is being emitted in your location. I guess it uses your GPS coordinates and information from some EPA satellite or something? I’m only half-listening. It kind of sounds interesting, but if I get into a discussion, it will just prolong his stay.

“Mary, want to come over and check it out? I’d bring it over, but its on my desktop not my phone yet and I’ve got a few instruments rigged up next to it to compare data from the satellites. Plus you haven’t been over in like ages.”

“Oh, I’ve got a ton of homework,” I lie, looking to Dad for confirmation.

“Mare, this sounds right up your alley. Why don’t you go take a look?” Dad says.

Right up my alley?! When have I ever mentioned climate change to him? Or software development.

“I’d love to but—” I start but am cut off by a very, very excited Eggo.

“Great! Thank you Mr. Fitzgerald. I will take the utmost care of your daughter and have her back at a reasonable hour.”

“Dude, you’re next door. I’ll be back in two minutes.”

Shoot. Why did I say that.

“Okay kids, have fun!” Dad says.

Ever since Eggo started high school, he’s acted like he is so much more mature and it’s like his job to take care of me. It’s so annoying. I’m only 2 years younger and sure, he may be in the Honors Program and taking AP classes, but *I’m* the one who goes to college twice a week!

I throw on my Vans, not bothering to tie the laces, and storm out the door. Eggo follows closely behind.

When I step into Eggo’s, it’s chaos. His little brother and sister are running around with VR glasses shouting army commands at each other.

“Halt!” Carlos says, signaling with his fist at his shoulder. Lydia, the youngest, passes him and smashes into me playfully. I pet her head.

“Hey tiny humans, how’s it goin?”

His little sister looks up at me and, still wearing her glasses, replies, “Are you dating my brother now?”

“What?! No!” I look at Eggo for an explanation and he throws his hands up to his chest defensively.

“Don’t look at me.”

“Just show me the app,” I say, leading the way to his room.

I hear Carlos making loud kissing noises as we walk away so I say, “Shut up Carl or I’ll tell Eggo about that time you stole his limited edition Charizard card and traded it for a Jungle Hatchimal.”

“You did WHAT?!” Says Eggo.

“Mary!” Carlos says angrily before running away to hide from Eggo.

“Whoops.” I say sarcastically.

“That was worth over 300 dollars!” Eggo yells, chasing after him.

“Did I hear Mary Fitzgerald?” Mrs. Vasquez’s voice sings from down the hall.

“Hey, Mrs. Vasquez.”

She comes over, wiping her hands on a fancy apron she’s wearing.

We hug. I melt a little. I forgot how nice her hugs are.

“How are you, Mija?” She asks.

“Good.”

“Yeah? You enjoying school? You graduate this year right? That’s coming up soooon. Are you excited to start high school?”

“Um, yeah. I guess.”

“I can’t believe it. It feels like you kids age a year every minute. Ay. Well, I’m just finishing up a batch of empañadas. I’ll bring you guys a plate unless you want to sit at the table with all of us.”

“Oh, I’m okay, I actually just ate.”

“We’d love a plate, Mama. Gracias!” Eggo says out of breath and on top of my words.

“Mama, I need to kill Carlos. Me lo puedo?”

“Yes, as long as he’s alive again in 5 minutes. Dinner’s almost ready.” She smiles and hugs me again, this time giving me a big kiss on the cheek, “Que Bonita. So good to see you, Mija.” And with that she whirls around and heads back to the kitchen.

I feel like crying, but I don’t know why.

Eggo gives me a pat on the back and gestures for me to continue down the hall. I'm thankful; it snapped me out of whatever that was.

When we get into his room I see that it's totally different. "Woah, when did you loft your bed?" I ask, impressed. He's got a whole workbench under it with loads of computer parts strewn about, a soldering iron, safety glasses (of course). He still has a cello, but this one looks bigger. And a brand new desk on the other side of the room by the window.

"Lot's changed since you came over for play dates, huh? I'm not the nerdy little boy I used to be," he say, puffing his chest out and flexing a little.

I pick up a Fortnite costume off the floor and smile.

"Shut up," he says playfully annoyed, "That cost a lot of money."

"I'm sure it did." I say laughing at the absurdity.

"Ugh," he fumes, "Just, come over here."

I put on the costume shirt which looks like a suit of armor as I walk up to his new desk. He pulls up the program.

"OK, first check out this logo I just finished," Eggo says.

"Thy magic doth intrigue me," I say.

He turns his head away from the screen and notices my wardrobe change. He busts out laughing and grabs a plastic sword. I chuckle and grab what I think is a sword, but is actually a plastic flute.

"What the heck?!" I say.

"Bahahahahaha," he laughs, "Thats probably Lydia's."

I wield the flute and we duel, making funny clanking noises. We are both giggling as we “whoosh” and “clink!”

Just then, Mrs. V. appears with some delicious smelling empañadas.

“Well, look who's having fun in here! I'm so glad you were able to come over and play.”

“Mom,” Eggo drones.

“Siento Bebe. Hang out? Chill? Si?” She says, pretending to be cool.

“Sure. Whatever.” Eggo says grabbing an empañada.

I grab one too, suddenly hungry again, and we both spout out ‘Gracias’ before chomping into the flakey goodness.

“You're welcome,” Mrs. V. says, heading out of the room, “More in the kitchen when you want it.”

“Moh-kay” Eggo says with his mouth full. Setting the food down, he starts typing on the keyboard of his Mac.

I keep eating while he explains.

“Woah! Check this out. Last night after I finished re-coding a few things, I uploaded it to Sci-Tek's website and already its gotten 34 thousand likes. It's only in beta! Ha! Mary, look at this comment, ‘Undoubtedly the best innovation in climatology since the weather balloon!’ Whaaaaa?! This is crazy.”

“Why would people want to know how much pollution is around them? They all gonna freak out and move away to Montana?” I ask.

“It’s not so they move *away*. How else are we going to get people to stop using cars and other toxic machines? People need to know how much they are destroying the planet no matter where they are.”

“Are you sure it’s not just a natural thing? I mean, the world had ice ages and my dad said once that the Sahara desert used to be a tropical oasis and there are bones of like crocodiles and stuff. Climate change seems like it will happen whether or not we use cars.”

“Mary, Mary, Mary. Allow me to blow your mind. Ready?”

“Um, sure. Why not.” I say, annoyed with his superiority complex, knowing he’s going to tell me whether or not I agree.

“Yes, there is natural climate change, but it doesn't change this fast. Starting with the Industrial Revolution, when we humans made factories, all of the factories emitted loads of carbon which is one of the worst greenhouse gasses because it soaks up heat and just stays hot. So everything around it gets hot. And as we continued to grow as a civilization, we made machines that make machines and now we even have *personal* machines, as you mentioned, called cars which emit an insane amount of carbon. It’s absolutely nuts that driving is legal.”

“What about hybrids?” I say, taking another scrumptious bite of my empañada.

“It’s not lowering the emissions fast enough.”

“So, what’s going to happen? We’re all just going to be hot? That doesn’t sound so bad to me.”

“There are so many different things that will happen. First of all, as the sea gets warmer, the glaciers melt and cause the Polar vortex and the jet stream—

“Wait. You lost me.”

“Air currents basically,” he says, pulling over a piece of scratch paper and a pen. He starts drawing. “The northern Polar Vortex wraps around the earth’s North Pole, like a beanie.”

“Ha, nice.” I say chuckling at the earth with a beanie drawing.

“Thank you. So, along the rim of the beanie is the jet stream which is like really cold wind that goes around the globe right on that border. That beanie used to fluctuate evenly just because of external factors like where we are in earths orbit cycle, equinox cycle, and how much solar radiation is hitting Earth. So like a yarmulke versus a full on snowboarding beanie.”

“Little hat, big hat. Got it.”

“OK, so now, with all of us humans emitting CO2 and methane, the temp has risen to the point that the ice caps are melting. And when those ice caps melt, the pole gets warmer. Water stores more heat than ice does, so it becomes this vicious cycle of ice melting and that melted ice melting more ice.”

“Well that sucks. I think? I don't get how they're related.”

“Right. So our beanie’s rim, the jet stream, goes faster when the temp between the beanie and the rest of the world is big. Really hot and really cold equals fast jet stream. Melting ice caps and warming waters mean that our beanie is warmer and now the temperature difference is less which equals—

“Slower beanie rim stream.”

“Exactly.” He says drawing a wiggly line over the beanie rim, “When the jet stream slows down, it gets wobbly like a spinning top, or whatever.”

“Have you recently converted to Judaism?”

“Very funny. These are good visuals, are the not? Stay with me.”

“Ok,” I say, “So the jet wind is slower because the difference in temperature between the head and the hat is less.

“Jet *stream*, but yes. And the wobbly jet stream means cold air sweeping across So Cal and then going up to like middle of Canada and then back down to like Virginia. So instead of having warm weather in LA and Virginia, the warm states would be Montana and North Dakota.”

“That’s why it’s so cold here right now?!”

“Yes. You have the Industrial Revolution to thank. And it’s not going to be cold here all the time, because it’s wobbling, so we’ll have hotter summers. And fire season? When we were born it was only a month or two each year, and now it’s like half the year. And the warmer the North gets from the glaciers melting, the faster the permafrost in the tundras melt which houses the biggest amounts of methane and CO₂.

“Perma-what?”

“Permafrost. It’s the land that is frozen solid under the snow in places like Siberia and Alaska.”

“How did it get methane and CO₂ stuck inside of it? Hasn’t it been frozen since before the Industrial Revolution?” I ask.

“Mary. Come on, think about it! What is underground?”

“Layers of rocks.”

“And what is in those layers of rock?”

“Fossils.”

“Right! And where do fossils come from?”

“Animals and plants. Duh, get to the point.”

“I am! The permafrost is frozen ground containing fossils of plants and animals. Plants give off CO₂ when they decompose and animals give off methane when they decompose. The two worst greenhouse gasses.”

“And there’s a lot of it?”

“Well yeah! Think about the animals who lived in the Tundra. Behemoths like woolly mammoths and giant sloths and stuff.”

“Yeah but do you really think that there are enough giant sloths to ruin the earth with their decaying bodies?”

“Did you ever learn about the poop crisis in New York in the late 1800’s?”

“Ummm, what?!”

“There were so many horses carting people and goods around the city that a layer of poop formed on the ground.”

“Dude. Gross. What does this have to do with—”

Eggo cuts me off, “It’s not gross, it’s fascinating. Horses pooped so much that the entire city of New York had a layer of poop on top of the streets.”

I look down at my almost finished empañada and then back at Eggo. “Well,” I say frowning, “I guess I’m done eating. Forever.”

“Oh, please. Everybody poops, Mary.”

“Not everybody talks about poop when they are trying to eat.”

“Fair. But wait, just listen. Poop has methane. So it’s not just the bodies of giant sloths and mammoths, it’s the poop of giant sloths and mammoths. A horse poops 45.5 pounds of methane in a year and it’s like half the size of a giant sloth.”

“How do you know how much methane is in horse poop?”

“What?”

“What kind of a person knows how much methane is in horse poop, just off the top of their head?”

“A person who is has concern for the environment.”

I give him a doubtful look.

“OK, OK I’m a nerd. I admit it. I’m still that nerdy little boy you used to hang out with every day. Gosh.”

I laugh. “Thank GOD. I’m glad you’re still a nerd. You’ve been acting like such a d-bag since you started going to high school.”

“What do you mean I’ve been acting like a d-bag?” He asks, shocked.

“Like you’re so much better than me because you’re in high school. So mature and responsible and I’m just this dumb little middle schooler that you have to take care of.”

“Are you kidding? I don’t think that at all! You’re way more mature and responsible than me. Well, maybe not responsible,” Eggo says, starting to laugh.

“You’ve got me there,” I say, joining in.

“But in all seriousness,” says Eggo, “I respect you so much. Sorry that I’ve been overbearing.”

“It’s chill. Now please continue with your defecation speech.”

“I feel bad now.”

“Stop it. Just tell me what happens. The snow is going to melt and release all the poop methane and stuff?”

“More or less.”

“So, what are they doing to stop it?”

“Who are *they*?” Eggo asks rhetorically.

“So we’re all just going to die because of this perma-whatever it’s called?”

“Well, there are a few possibilities.”

“Diego!” Mr. V. calls.

“Hold that thought,” Eggo says, “Coming!” He hollers, charging out the door.

I check my phone.

Dad: Hi Honey. U good?

I text him back and quickly take off the fake chainmail shirt.

I walk out of Eggo’s room and head for the front door.

“Bye!” I call, as I slip on my untied shoes.

“Wait!” I can hear Eggo calling, but by the time he gets to the entryway, I’m outside, closing the door. He peeks his head out and says, “Goodbye, Mary.”

“Later, Eggo.”