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ONE

It's possible that there are more irrational, irritating parents on the planet than mine, but if you ask me what the probability of that is at this particular moment, I'd say it's zero.

My friend Margo's dad scored tickets for an all-ages Einstein's Encounter show at the Bowery Ballroom in two weeks because his company does accounting for someone or something. My parents said I can't go because there's no parental chaperone.

Never mind that I'm sixteen, taking my driving test in three weeks, and have gotten practically straight As (only three A-minuses and a B-plus) since I started high school. I'm like a poster child for responsibility.

"Why not?" I ask them.

"Because it's dangerous," my mom says. "Didn't you hear about those kids who died at Electric Zoo?"

"Ugh. But that was electronic music," I reply. My parents

look at me blankly. Clearly they don't get it. I point out that those kids were going for the drugs *and* the music, and I'm just going for the music. And what I don't say is: also, because I'm in love with the lead singer, Davy Linklater. The fact that he's already married is a minor detail.

"I'm sure they told their parents they were going for the music, too," my dad says.

Apparently, my parents think I'm a lying druggie, despite the fact that I've never given them any evidence for that. So they refused to let me go unless a parent comes along. But Margo's dad only got us three tickets. Ugghhhhhhhhh!

"So what you're saying is that you don't trust me," I say to them. God, even I can hear how much a cliché I sound like. But seriously?

And then my mom actually utters these words in reply: "We *do* trust you, Sammy. It's everyone else we don't trust."

What does that even *mean*? Am I supposed to live in a bubble for the rest of my life because they don't trust everyone else?

"I'm going to college the year after next. Are you planning to send me to college with a chaperone, too?" I ask, exasperated.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sammy!" my mom snaps.

"*I'm* the one being ridiculous?"

Then my dad steps in and says, "Stop being rude to your mother," before sending me to my room.

Another fun night at Casa Wallach.

“But you *have* to come!” Margo says at lunch the next day, flicking her red-gold hair off her shoulders. “It’s going to be *epic*.”

“Tell me something I *don’t* know,” I groan.

“Tell them you’re having a sleepover at my house,” suggests Rosa, my best friend since first grade.

“My parents might be totally unreasonable, but they aren’t *stupid*,” I remind her. “I ask to go to a concert, they say no, and then I say I’m having a sleepover at your house? Helene will be on the phone to your mom before I finish the sentence.”

Both Rosa and Margo have to admit that I have a point there. They know what freaks Dick and Helene can be.

I sit in miserable contemplative silence, playing with my dark-chocolate-covered raisins. There’s got to be a solution. I want to go so badly I can taste it.

“What about . . . if you said you were having a study sleepover . . . for APs or something,” Rosa says slowly, fixing her dark brown eyes on me, thoughtfully. “At someone’s house that they don’t know that well?”

“Yeah, but really you could come to the concert and sleep over at my house!” Margo exclaims.

My parents are so obsessed with me doing well on APs, they might actually buy that. I feel a tiny flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, this could work.

“I’ll ask Mom before SAT prep tonight,” I say.

“She has to say yes,” Rosa says. “*Las tres amigas* need to go to this concert together!”

As I head to AP Stats, I see Jamie Moss standing at the end of the hall, leaning up against a locker, looking totally hot, as usual. His dark hair hangs below his collar because it’s lacrosse season and he’s got to have the right lax flow. (His words, not mine. But hard to disagree.) Meanwhile, his muscles are set off to perfection by his Brooklawne Blue Devils T-shirt.

Unfortunately, he’s talking to Geneva Grady, who according to popular opinion is considered to be pretty hot. I guess she is if you like blond-haired, blue-eyed, super-skinny girls who hang on your every word if you’re a guy, but ignore you if you’re a girl.

I will seriously die if he likes *her*.

It’s no secret that Geneva likes *him*. She keeps touching his arm every thirty seconds, like she owns him, when they’re not even dating. I would have heard.

Plus, the minute he sees me, he pulls his oh-so-hot body off the locker and says, “Hey, Sammy, what’s up?” with the cutest grin.

Forget solar panels. His smile is a legit alternative energy source.

If looks could kill, however, I’d be six feet under after the one Geneva just shot me.

“Nothing much,” I say, flashing Jamie my brightest smile, which admittedly is many lumens dimmer than his.

“Hey, Geneva, I’ll see you in class,” he tells her, in obvious dismissal.

She doesn’t take it well, turning on her heel and marching away, with a parting death glare at me.

Too bad. I’m basking in Jamie’s undivided attention, which wraps me in a cocoon of warmth and reassurance. At least until he asks: “So, Sammy, do you have last night’s homework? The lacrosse game ran late and I didn’t get to finish it.”

It’s at times like this I worry that Jamie only likes me for my brains, which is ironic because I’m supposed to want him to do that, right? But I want him to like me for being a girl, too. I can’t see him inviting me to the prom solely on the basis of my amazing math skills.

Reluctantly, I take my homework out of my backpack and hand it to him so he can copy my answers.

“Did you win?” I ask.

“What?” He’s busy copying all my hard-figured problems onto his blank paper. He didn’t even start his homework, much less not finish.

“Did you win the game?”

“Oh yeah,” he says, copying furiously. “We killed them, five to one.”

He actually stops for a moment and looks at me. His

eyes. They're like gazing into a midsummer sky on a perfect beach day.

"You should have come to the game," he says. "It was at home."

"I couldn't . . ." I have to look away because I'm embarrassed, suddenly, by how nerdy what I'm going to say next will sound. "I had a Lighthouse Book Club meeting."

"I can't believe you go to a club to read more books," he says, going back to copying. "I can barely get through the ones I have to read for school."

"But these are fun books," I say. "And it's not like we have to analyze them to death for symbolism or write five-page essays like for class."

"Come to the game next time," he says. "Where's your school spirit?"

I swallow the question that nearly escapes: *Where's the rule that says my school spirit is defined by attendance at sporting events?*

I have a funny feeling that's not the kind of speech that will encourage a date to the prom.

Instead, I mutter, "Maybe. Let me know when you've got another home game."

Jamie flashes me one more adorable grin and hands me back my homework. "Sure thing," he says. "And thanks. I get kicked off the team if I don't keep my grades up."

So why don't you do your homework? I wonder, as we walk into class together.

But the strange, smug feeling I get from the annoyed look on Geneva Grady's face pushes that thought from my mind.

I bring up the sleepover idea to Mom as we're getting in the car to go to SAT prep after school. The sleepover host was carefully chosen—Kate Pierce, a girl in my AP Gov class who I've mentioned several times in conversation. Her name is familiar to my parents, but not so familiar that they know her parents well enough to call them.

"We're going to study and then watch a movie for a break," I tell her. "But we can quiz each other on the questions."

"Okay," Mom says, buckling her seat belt. "Did you adjust your mirrors?"

There's a 100 percent probability that my mom wasn't fully listening to what I just said. But who cares. She said okay.

I check the mirrors, start the car, and put it in drive. It's so much more relaxing to practice driving with Dad because he's checking his phone half the time. Mom is a hypervigilant driving hawk. Just feeling her tension makes me more nervous.

Switching on the radio to help me relax, I pull out of the driveway.

"I didn't see you look in both directions," Mom says.

I totally did. My mom has apparently forgotten that humans have peripheral vision. But I don't want to start this joyride off with a fight.

When I get to the stop sign at the end of the street, I turn my head so exaggeratedly to make Mom happy that I end up giving myself a crick in the right side of my neck. That'll teach me.

"Dad's going to be home late again tonight." Mom sighs. "It's those protesters again."

My dad is the CEO of New Territories Bank Corporation, which has been targeted by protesters for the last two weeks. They're upset about the bank's role in the mortgage crisis and housing slump or something, so they've set up camp outside my dad's office in New York City.

Meanwhile, their protest is leading to *more* protests from the local residents and businesses who are annoyed by the disruption. It's giving Dad headaches galore. The fact that it's all that he talks about at the moment gives *me* headaches galore.

"He's home late all the time," I point out. "Why is tonight different from all other nights?"

My mom ignores my question. "I'm starting to feel like a single parent," she says. "I have a job, too, in case anyone's forgotten."

Mom also used to be in banking, but after she had my

brother, RJ, she decided to start her own consulting business helping small businesses so she could be around more. Or that's what she thought, anyway. Basically, she just works a lot more hours at home instead of having to commute into the city.

"We haven't forgotten," I say. "What's up with that new ice-cream store?"

"Lickety Splits," she says. "The grand opening is on Sunday."

"Cool. Are they giving out free ice cream?"

"Move left!" Mom says sharply, clutching the door handle. "You almost took off that wing mirror!"

I turn the wheel toward the center line.

"SAMMY! Stay in your lane!"

"Make up your mind," I mutter, edging the wheel slightly back to the right.

"Are you even paying attention to what you're doing?" Mom says, switching off the radio.

"Why'd you turn off the radio?" I complain. "Music helps keep me relaxed."

"You're a little *too* relaxed," Mom snaps. "You need to stay focused."

When Mom's in the car with me, I'm more frazzled than focused. I need music to distract me from the nervous tension that emits from her like nuclear radiation. Now that she's turned off the radio, I'm zapped with the full force of it. I end

up gripping the steering wheel so tight it makes my knuckles white, even though my driving instructor told me specifically I shouldn't do that.

"So what about Dad?" I ask, trying to get her off the topic of my driving.

"It seems like things are heating up and—STOP SIGN!"

"I KNOW!" I shout back. "I was braking, in case you didn't notice, which obviously you didn't because you were too busy YELLING AT ME."

"You weren't braking hard enough," Mom says. "You have to stop at the white line, not over it."

I look out the window. I'm maybe one inch over the white line, if that.

"Seriously? That's margin of error."

"Is that what you're going to tell the DMV examiner when you fail your road test?" Mom demands.

The car behind me honks. I've been so busy arguing with Mom that I forgot to go.

Flustered, I put my foot down on the gas a little too hard and the car accelerates with a screech of burning rubber.

"Slow down!" Mom yelps. "You're supposed to be driving, not drag racing."

I'm desperate to get my license, but I'm beginning to wonder if having my mom criticize me the entire way to SAT prep is worth it. Like I'm not stressed out enough about having to take the SAT in just over a month, on top of worrying about

passing my driving test, taking four AP exams, and wondering if Jamie Moss will ask me to prom.

But driving means freedom. It means that this summer, when all the Very Important Tests are over, I might actually be able to get a job *and* have a social life, without being dependent on my parents' willingness to take me from point A to point B. Without having to listen to their awful music, lectures, or corny jokes while trapped in a moving box on wheels.

Not to mention their constant criticism.

"Sammy, you haven't looked in your rearview mirror once since the stop sign. They put them in cars for a reason, you know."

"I was making sure I stayed in my lane and didn't take off any wing mirrors," I retort.

"You have to be able to multitask," Mom says.

"You just told me I had to be focused. Now you're telling me to multitask. Make up your mind!"

"I don't have to let you get your license, young lady."

"Fine. Then you'll be stuck driving me everywhere all the time."

Mom opens her mouth to say something to me, but shouts, "Watch that truck pulling out!"

I slam on the brakes and narrowly miss hitting a King John's Port-O-Potties truck that totally appeared from nowhere, even though I have the right-of-way. Hitting that would really stink. Literally.

“I had the right-of-way,” I protest. “I’m on the major thoroughfare, not him. It would have been his fault if we had an accident.”

He doesn’t seem to think so. He gives me the finger and pulls out in front of me.

“So you’ll be happy that it was his fault if you end up paralyzed from the neck down?” Mom says.

And everyone says teenage girls are the drama queens.

“Of course not!” I say, following behind the truck, making sure to keep a safe stopping distance so that Mom doesn’t have anything else to get on my case about. “But that’s not going to happen.”

“No one thinks it’s going to happen,” Mom says. “Even if you’re the best driver in the world, you still have to look out for other drivers.”

I’ve heard my dad say the same thing a zillion times, but somehow he manages to do it without implying I’m the worst driver. He’s always pushing me to do things I’m afraid to do, like parallel parking. The problem with Dad is he gets frustrated if I don’t do it perfectly on the first or second try.

I’m not sure whose sigh of relief is louder when I pull into the parking lot of Stratospheric Scores. Luckily, there’s a big parking space for me to pull into, which I do with only a hissed intake of breath from my mother. I grab my SAT book from the backseat and make my escape.

“Later, Mom!” I call as I walk away from the car.

“Don’t leave the car door open when you get out!” Mom yells at my retreating back. “It might scratch the paint on the car next to us!”

I pretend not to hear her and keep walking. Selective deafness to Mom’s voice is a necessary survival trait.

“Hey, Sammy! Nice parking job.”

Noah Woods, who’s in my AP English class and Lighthouse Book Club, watched me pull in. He got his license in January. I’m so jealous.

“Are you serious or are you being sarcastic?” I ask, tilting my head.

“Serious,” he says.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“After being in the car with my mom, I’m usually convinced that I’m an Agent of Death on wheels.”

Noah laughs.

“Ah yes, I remember those days well. I’m surprised my mom didn’t rip the handle off the passenger door, she was clutching it so hard the entire time I was driving,” he says. “It gets better when you pass your test. Trust me.”

“I can’t wait,” I say. “I just wish I didn’t have so many *other* tests to think about at the same time.”

“Yeah, this year is brutal,” Noah says. “Only two and a half more months to go.”

“Two and a half more months with all those Very Important Tests.” I sigh.

“Hang in there,” Noah says. “We’ll get through it.”

Over Noah’s shoulder, I spot Rosa and her wavy chocolate-colored bob waiting for me in the lobby, waving at me to hurry and join her.

“See you inside,” I tell Noah, and despite feeling a little rude, I run on ahead.

“So? What happened?” Rosa asks.

“She said yes. Well, to the AP sleepover, not the concert.”

“But that means you can come to the concert, right?”

“If we can figure out the carpool situation, yeah.”

“Yes!” Rosa says, high-fiving me. “This is going to be awesome! Have you told Margo yet?”

“Not yet. I was *driving*. With *Helene*. You know how that stresses me out.”

“Gotcha. *No problema, mi hermana*. I’ll do it.”

She sends a group text to Margo and me, and instructs Margo to try to figure out the transport stuff.

Knowing I’ve got the concert to look forward to gets me through the mind-numbing boringness of an hour and a half of SAT prep. I’m starting to feel like a trained test monkey. I half expect a treat to come out of the computer when I get the right answer and an electric shock when I get a wrong one. I get so fed up and bored with being on the hamster wheel of testing that sometimes I just want to pick any old answer so I can get it over with and move on to the things I really care about.

But that would be committing suicide with my future—or so I’m told at every possible opportunity. I have to do well on all these tests or I won’t get into a good college. And if I don’t get into a good college, then I won’t get a good job, and if I don’t get a good job, then I’ll end up asking, “Do you want fries with that?” or “Can I supersize you?” or worse, living on the streets in a cardboard box with all of my worldly possessions in a shopping cart that I stole from Walmart.

So I sit at the computer trying to focus, even though I hate every minute.

The problem is that Margo keeps texting Rosa and me in the group chat about the Einstein’s Encounter concert.

soooooooooo excited. did you listen to the new single they released today? it’s awesome.

I guess Rosa is trying to focus, too, because five minutes later, there’s another.

hello? are you alive?

are you guys mad at me? why aren’t you answering?

HELLO?!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I get so tired of my phone buzzing that I finally text back.

no, i’m not mad and yes, i’m dead.

Rosa writes:

me too, from boredom, at SAT prep. later.

Of course, Margo has to text again to tell us she got the text and she’ll talk to us when we get out, instead of you know, just stopping.

Back to stupid SAT math word problems: *Of the 80 students in class, 25 are studying Chinese, 15 French, and 13 Spanish. 3 are studying Chinese and French; 4 are studying French and Spanish; 2 are studying Chinese and Spanish; and none is studying all 3 languages at the same time. How many students are not studying any of the 3 languages?*

First of all, can you imagine the PTA freaking out if we had classes of eighty students? They'd be camping out in front of the school board, just like the protesters are doing outside my dad's job, except the PTA of our school would have designer tents with luxury King John's Port-O-Potties and takeout deliveries from expensive restaurants for dinner. Second of all, how come no one is studying Italian, or German, or Japanese? Italian sounds so romantic. And all the Anime Club kids want to learn Japanese.

Whatever. Stop thinking, Sammy, and solve the problem.

I'm so glad when class is over. I'm tired and starving, and worst of all, I still have at least three hours' worth of homework to tackle when I get home. But I've got Einstein's Encounter on the horizon. It's only because of that I don't complain when Mom tells me she's driving home because she's on her last nerve and can't cope with being a passenger while I drive. I just say, "Fine, whatever," because I want to spend the drive home texting with Rosa and Margo about concert plans.

"I'm picking up takeout on the way home," Mom says.

"Can we get sushi?"

“No, I already ordered from Mama Lucia’s,” Mom says. “I just want to pick up and go.”

“But we always get Italian,” I say, pouting. “Because that’s the only thing RJ eats.”

“We don’t always get Italian, and please stop whining, Samantha,” Mom snaps. “I’m tired, and I have a headache.”

Really? You’ve *got a headache*, I think as I stare out the window, sulking. The truth is we *do* always order from Mama Lucia’s because it’s RJ’s favorite. And RJ’s in eighth grade and a giant pain, so my mom’s just avoiding a fight with the picky eater. But she doesn’t have three hours of homework to do.

RJ’s playing video games when we get home, with Scruffles, our rescue mutt, curled up on the sofa next to him, at least till I walk in the door. Scruffles leaps off the couch, runs to me, and starts barking and chasing his tail in a circle. Watching him, you’d think I’d been away for a month instead of a few hours.

Just another reason why dogs are awesome, and Scruffles is the most awesome dog of all.

“Yes, I know, pupper, you missed me,” I croon, scratching behind his ears. “But I’m back now!”

“He didn’t realize he missed you till you walked in the door,” RJ says. “Before that, he was perfectly fine.”

My brother doesn’t want me to have any joy in my life.

“You’re not a dog mind reader,” I tell him. “You have no idea what goes on in Scruffles’ head.”

“Neither do you,” RJ says. “And based on the evidence, he was happy.”

Mom’s in the kitchen unloading the food. I head in and put down my backpack. Scruffles trots after me, wagging his tail hopefully.

“Can you get the silverware?” Mom asks. “RJ, turn off the game and come eat.”

I get the knives and forks. Mom’s already put plates on the table. The kitchen smells of garlic knots, which sort of makes up for not getting sushi. I grab one and bite into the buttery, doughy, garlicky goodness.

“Sammy stole a garlic knot!” RJ tattles. Like I said, he’s a human killjoy.

“Can you at least pretend to be civilized and wait till you sit down to eat?” Mom sighs. She pours herself a glass of wine and takes a big slug of it as soon as she slumps into her chair.

“Not really,” I say. “I am undone by the smell of garlic knots.”

RJ reaches across the table with two grabby hands and takes one knot in each.

“Mom!” I exclaim, pointing at my brother. “You call that civilized?”

“One at a time, RJ!” Mom says. “I don’t know where I went wrong . . .” she mutters.

RJ throws one of the garlic knots back onto the plate.

“*Ewww!* Don’t put it back after you’ve touched it with your germy hands!”

“Make up your mind!” RJ complains. “Can I take it or not?”

“Now that you’ve touched it, take it,” Mom says. “But from now on, only take one at a time.”

RJ takes back his germ-infested garlic knot, and Mom serves out the lasagna and passes around the salad. She makes us each take some salad, even though neither of us are big lettuce fans. We get that from Dad, who always used to say, “Lettuce is for rabbits,” until RJ did a report on rabbits in third grade and learned that’s a suburban legend—lettuce can be really bad for a rabbit’s digestive system. After that, Dad had to change his tune, although this knowledge didn’t make any of us like lettuce any more, nor did it stop Mom from trying to force us to eat it.

“How come Dad’s working late again?” RJ asks. “Is it because of the protesters?”

“Yes.” Mom sighs.

“Why are they protesting about company profits? It’s stupid. Making a profit is what companies are supposed to do, isn’t it?” I point out.

“Duh!” RJ comments with his mouth full of half-chewed lasagna.

“Can you not talk with your mouth full?” I tell him.

“Making a profit is, indeed, what companies are supposed to do,” Mom says, knocking back the rest of her wine. “But it’s not just about profits. According to the great unwashed camp outside the bank, corporations in general, and banks in

particular, are engaged in a sinister conspiracy to take over the world. They're also responsible for the financial crisis, the decline of Western civilization, wars, poverty, the latest *Star Wars* movie not living up to their expectations, and so on. In short, Banks Are the Devil."

"Which they aren't," RJ says, thankfully without any food in his mouth this time. "Because that's just crazy."

I have to agree with my brother on that. The thought of Dad being involved in a sinister plot of any kind is just laughable. Sure, he can be strict at times, but Dr. Evil? No way.

"Doesn't Dad have a PR department to deal with this stuff?" I ask. "Why does he have to stay late every night?"

"Because he's the CEO," Mom says. "When you're the head of the company, the buck stops with you. Your dad takes his responsibilities very seriously. He's worried about the security and safety of the company and everyone who works there."

"What do you mean security and safety? Could things get violent?" RJ's wide eyes reflect the overhead light fixture and fear for our dad.

"Everything will be fine," Mom says, realizing her mistake a minute too late. She reaches across the table to pat RJ's hand comfortingly, but he pulls it away.

My brother is one of those kids who wakes up in the middle of the night screaming because he's had some crazy dream about an asteroid colliding with Earth and everything being

destroyed, or a plane crashing into our house and killing everyone or a coyote eating Scruffles. You can tell him it was just a dream, but from the way his hair is stuck to his head in a cold dripping sweat, you know to him it was as good as real. When he had the coyote-eating-Scruffles dream, Dad had to let the dog sleep in RJ's bed for the rest of the night, even though at the time he wasn't allowed. That was the end of the No Dogs on the Bed rule.

I'll be falling asleep with my earbuds in tonight so RJ doesn't wake me up if he starts freaking out at some ungodly hour. I can feel a huge zit erupting on my chin, and that means I need my beauty rest even more than usual.

Mom runs her finger around the rim of the empty wine-glass. "Your dad thinks the protesters will get tired of camping out in front of headquarters and leave soon," she says. "And if they don't leave on their own, the city will encourage them to vacate because they're impacting so many other businesses nearby."

"Encourage them?" I ask. "Or force them?"

"Will there be riots?" RJ is really starting to freak now.

Mom gives me an irritated glance. Of course it's my fault for asking a simple question, not RJ's for being hypersensitive about everything.

"I'm sure when and if the time comes, the city will handle things in such a way that the site is cleared without

incident,” Mom says, sounding every inch like the consultant she’s paid to be.

RJ looks only half-convinced. “As long as Dad’s okay,” he says.

I try to imagine what would inspire me to camp out in front of Dad’s building—or, for that matter, anywhere in New York City. It’s not exactly my idea of a good time. I don’t even like camping when it’s in a beautiful forest. There are too many bugs and no bathrooms or cell service. But camping where the street is dirty and smells like pee is even less my thing. Going to concerts and the theater and shopping in cool vintage stores—that’s more my jam.

“He’ll be fine,” Mom assures RJ. “It’s just a stressful time.”

She fills her wineglass all the way to the top. Looks like it’s a stressful time for Mom, too.

After dinner, when I’m up in my room, I take a cute picture of Scruffles, with his big brown puppy eyes.

scruffles misses you, I text to Dad. **so do i**.

Awww. Miss you both, Dad texts back. **Hope I get back before you go to bed. Love, Dad.**

My dad definitely texts like an old person.

you don’t have to write “Love, Dad.” i know it’s you! :P

I take a screenshot and send him a picture of our convo.

see, it says “dad” at the top of the screen! : D

Parents are so quaint.

Putting down my phone, I open my laptop to make a start on my homework. Scruffles jumps on the bed and rests his head on my foot.

“Let’s hope this stupid protest ends soon,” I murmur to him, and the end of his tail flutters in agreement.

There’s enough stress in my life right now.