

JANUARY SUCKS

*In all my sixteen years,
none has been worse than this — even the one
when I had whooping cough.*

Because

not only did I get soaked by a school bus with a Lamborghini alter ego on the way to school, then had to make it through history in wet underwear, but now I need a chemistry tutor. A chemistry force-feeder. A raise-my-fricking-grade-or-I'm-gonna-fail messiah. Which spells emotional, social and spiritual doom. Why can't humans hibernate in winter like bears?

Doom

First thing this morning, Mr. Marchand explained what I already knew: I failed the last chemistry test and my grade is teetering on the edge of a precipice. Much improvement

needed (understatement, considering the family standard is A average). Next report card will have to be discussed with parents if things don't change. The word "tutor" is thrown around. Doom doom doom.

But Maybe . . .

My best friend, Nemiah Hershey, finds me in the hall and is suitably consoling. She gets As in everything, and I've stopped secretly holding it against her. It's not like she's got a good work ethic or anything. The grades are accidental. She can't help it.

"Why can't you tutor me?" I whine.

This is desperation: we both know Nemiah's allergic to being a teacher. She looks sadly at her beautiful new suede boots. "They would never go for it, you know that."

She's right. The Powers That Be are all-knowing. I'm hooped.

The Tooth Fairy

Ninety minutes later, I fumble to open my locker, thinking things couldn't get any worse. I'm turning the lock when I hear the tinkling voice of someone I ordinarily like.

"Gretchen, do you have a minute?"

The tooth fairy. This is what Nemiah and I call our guidance counsellor, Ms Long, whose teeth are bigger than a

horse's — bigger, in fact, than should be crowded into the face of a person so small. She's not that old, maybe thirties, and tinier than most of the grade eights. Her wrists are thinner than the rope we have to climb in gym. I worry about her tripping in the hall and breaking a hip. Nemiah tells me not to worry so much about other people, especially teachers. Ms Long perches beside me as I get my books and close my locker. (She is able to perch while she's standing: this is a mystery.) She asks me about my day so far, my best classes, etcetera. She likes that word. She pronounces it ek-SE-tra.

"I don't have to tell you how well you're doing in English," she says. "Writing, reading, eksetra, those were always my strong suit too." She grins with those huge teeth. I know she understands me — we share a love of poetry. She's my source of haiku. But right now there's something else on her clipboard and I'm waiting for it to pounce.

"Speaking of fun, how's chemistry going?" she asks.

"Love it." Eye roll. "Kill me now."

The hall is almost deserted — the bell will go any second. Not soon enough for me.

We have a mutual agreement, the tooth fairy and I. Straight to the point. No beating around the bush.

"I admire your candour," she says, "but your grade is another thing. Mr. Marchand says he's warned you that it's not looking good. We're going to have to talk with your parents about you getting some help."

“Ugh. I hate help. Can’t I just struggle along and wait for a miracle?”

She gives me a long look, pardon the pun. “Let’s not let this spiral out of control, Gretchen. Do you have a plan for pulling up your grade?”

My stomach turns over a bit. “I’m on it. I already have a tutor lined up.”

“Really? Whom?” she asks.

My mouth hangs open, waiting for me to fill it with a name.

And finally the blessed bell rings. I bolt for the classroom door, giving the tooth fairy a big, stupid thumbs-up.

And now I have to find myself a tutor.

Our Mission at Carver Green High School

Please don’t feel at home; feel like a paranoid loser.
(And there’s something on the back of your shirt they haven’t told you about but keep pointing at.)

Don’t expect school to be hard work academically unless you are a science major or heading for Harvard or Oxford.

Expect school to be hard work socially, personally, spiritually, symbolically, and any other ‘ly’ there is.

Really.