

Westerville, Kansas

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Monday

It's hard being a mad scientist when you're eleven years old.

Katie-Sue McCaffery knew this all too well. She reflected on it as she walked to school in Westerville Kansas. She walked to school every day, even when it was drizzling. If it was raining, she usually convinced one of her parents to take her to school, if it was coming down hard enough. But since the sun was coming up on her left in a clear sky as big and as wide as anything out of one of those westerns her grandpa insisted on watching, it was a moot point.

Katie-Sue spent a lot of time thinking about science and engineering and math. Katie-Sue was a genius. She'd taken an IQ test once and scored perfectly. Since she thought the test was easy, she assumed that meant her score was higher than it had said. Since she was six years old at the time, she likewise assumed she was even smarter now.

Katie-Sue spent a lot of time specifically thinking about using science to get at her enemies. She had a lot of enemies. So many enemies. So many enemies that she had to keep a list of them in her bedroom, in her unicorn notebook. She was enemies with the lunch lady. She was enemies with the vampire at the end of her cul-de-sac. She was enemies with her older brother (well, only sometimes). And she was enemies with Lizzie Ransom.

Lizzie Ransom was the second-smartest person in Westerville Kansas, though it pained Katie-Sue to acknowledge that. Lizzie was in the same grade as Katie-Sue. She was taller than Katie-Sue and she dressed nicer than Katie-Sue but she didn't have a lightning god living in her attic, so they were kind of even.

As Katie-Sue rounded the last block before the school, one of the giant cows in the adjacent pasture mooed at her. "Hello, stupid cow," she told it. She was in a bad mood, like most mornings. She was an eleven-year-old scientist in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere with enemies. So many enemies. Was it any wonder that she was mad?

The giant cow, almost twenty feet tall, came pondering over to her. It stretched its head down and lowered its massive snout to her. Twice the height of an elephant, the cow was white with a few spots of brown and black over its body. It sniffed at Katie-Sue and nuzzled

her with its giant, slobber-covered nose. "Yes, stupid cow," she told it, patting it between the nostrils. "I know I'm supposed to smile. Dad tells me all the time I should smile." The cow mooed at her. "Well I don't like smiling." She patted its nose and resumed walking. The massive cow turned and walked away, the bell around its neck clanging with each ground-shaking step.

Katie-Sue joined a small crowd of other kids entering the school. Most were her age, or near to it. Older elementary students all the way to high school freshmen. The entire town of Westerville Kansas had only one school: elementary, middle, and high school all rolled into one. At night, they even held evening classes for the community college system. Katie-Sue wanted to be in college but her parents wouldn't let her. 'Stay with kids your own age' they said. 'Go at your own pace' they said. Easy for them to say. They weren't geniuses.

The school was a large three-story building. It was built out of orange bricks and looked as new as the saplings planted on the front lawn that lined the horseshoe-shaped drop-off lane. The national, state, and county flags all flew in front of the doors leading inside. Big windows dotted the building, making it look more like a corporate office park than an institute of learning.

Entering from the side, Katie-Sue took the side door towards the gymnasium at the back of the school. It was where all the middle school students waited before the first bell rang. The halls were lined with metal locker doors between the classrooms. Windows lined the lockers, helping light the classrooms. Some classrooms were open, with teachers either planning or preparing or goofing off not unlike their students. The checkered floors and hanging lights overhead felt modern and new.

In the gymnasium, Katie-Sue's teacher's assistant stood on one of the basketball courts and held up a sign that said 'Mr Kimball', which was Katie-Sue's homeroom teacher. Katie-Sue didn't understand the purpose of homeroom but she'd given up on trying to understand the so-called logic of the school.

She lined up behind Vincent Rogers. Vincent was a nice boy who usually brought Legos with him. He was a little immature but very polite. Except when Katie-Sue asked if she could play with some of his Legos. She'd built a laser with his Legos and set a towel on fire. The fire spread onto the school stage. It was why the school only had one curtain in the auditorium now. Vincent didn't let her play with his Legos after that.

Katie-Sue laid her backpack down and was fishing out for her portable chair when she glanced three classroom lines over and saw Lizzie Ransom. Lizzie had her hair tied in pigtails with red ribbons and was wearing a pink flowery dress. She had on bicycle tights beneath that and knee-high boots. Katie-Sue's mom wouldn't let her get knee-high boots. She insisted boots couldn't be taller in inches than one's grade.

Lizzie saw Katie-Sue at the same time. The two girls locked eyes and scowled at one another. Lizzie drew a line across her neck with her finger. Katie-Sue mimed hanging the other girl. Lizzie mimed loading rounds into a gun and shooting her. Katie-Sue mimed taking an axe to Lizzie and drinking from her skull. Lizzie started to mime putting a reactor core into a giant mech so that she could stomp on Katie-Sue's house but she had to shuffle forward because the assistant-teacher said they needed to make room for more students. The line condensed as more of their classmates arrived in the gymnasium. They tried to renew their face-making, but Vincent was talking to Keith, interrupting their line-of-sight.

Katie-Sue decided ignoring her enemies was a sound strategy. She turned away from Lizzie and threw her hair back demonstratively. Unfortunately, her eyes fell on Zelda Rabsher. Zelda was the prettiest girl in school. In the 8th grade, she was two years older than Katie-Sue. She'd modeled for the mall's Fall Fashion flyer last year. Her brother ran an unboxing channel online which she did videos for, which had her parents talking to a talent scout. Zelda wasn't the most popular girl in school but she was close. Her pretty eyes and long hair, rich skin and exquisite fashion sense had made Katie-Sue lament she hadn't hit Zelda with the laser that one time.

Katie-Sue glanced back towards Lizzie, not sure which one irked her more. Lizzie was glaring at Zelda too. The two geniuses saw one another and rolled their eyes collective, momentarily agreeing that at least they weren't like the vapid, pretty girl.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, pouting. She didn't like history class. Who cared about what people did ages ago, before there was science? If she wanted to know what life was like in the year 1492, she'd just build a time machine and go back to the year 1492. History was dumb.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, pouting. She didn't like literature class. Who cared what Robert Frost meant when he wrote 'The Road Not Taken'. If she wanted to know what he meant, she'd just build a spectral communicator and ask his ghost. Literature class was dumb.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, pouting. She didn't like art class. Who cared about painting when she had access to a full-spectrum photo-manipulating software that would allow her to project whatever she wanted into a digital image in under five seconds? Besides, crayons weren't as messy as paint. Art class was dumb.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, pouting. She didn't like music class. Who cared about woodwinds and strings? If she wanted to make music, she'd use simulation software to produce the tones she wanted, not learn how to handle an antiquated machine to fluctuate air vibrations. Music class was dumb.

With the clatter of a plastic top, Katie-Sue laid out her lunch box. Inside was her lunch: turkey sandwich (without the crust), a small bag of chips, an apple, and a bag of fruit snacks. In her thermos was apple juice. She sighed with joy, enjoying the simple things. She looked up and spotted Lizzie Ransom crossing the cafeteria. Lizzie spotted her and the two glared at one another.

As they glared, people walked between them. "Hey!" Katie-Sue protested, just before Zelda Rabsher sat down.

"Hey, Katie, can we sit with you?" asked Zelda as she and two other popular girls sat down. They were all dressed in fashionable pastels, with bright, cheery designs that exuded optimism. Zelda was wearing a bright yellow sundress and had her long hair pulled back and tied in a ribbon. Maliq had shaved her head again and was wearing a dress that resembled Okoye from Black Panther. Nora was wearing pants a button-up shirt, almost like she was dressed for an office job instead of the school day. They all sat before Zelda had even finished asking.

Katie sneered and looked away glumly. "Fine."

"Thanks," Zelda said before she resumed her prattling about combs and makeup and celebrities. Maliq had a crush on that boy from that movie. Nora thought another boy was cuter. Zelda had to referee, insisting that they were both cute in different ways. Back and forth, back and forth, in rapid succession. It was dizzying.

Katie-Sue took out her sandwich and took a bite. The lettuce was crisp but the tomatoes were a bit runny. She sneered at the sandwich and sighed glumly.

The squeal of reverb echoed through the cafeteria. Up on the makeshift stage, the principal stepped forward. "Good afternoon, students," said the bookish little man. "I have the announcements for this week. The schedule for lunches next week are now posted on the school's site. You can check them by logging into W-W-W-period..."

Katie-Sue kept eating, the din of the cafeteria only halfway drowning him out. It was the usual things. Upcoming sports games. Raffle tickets to raise money for a dance. Wrapping paper fundraiser. And then, she almost missed it but she heard the two words she most wanted to hear.

"Science Project."

Like a bolt, Katie-Sue sat upright. She looked at the principal on the platform, ears open and eyes wide to drink in every last detail. "This year, the school science fair will be on the theme of public health." He said that dramatically, like he expected all the kids to lose their minds over the notion. The room half-full of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders were hardly enthused. The principal looked disappointed at their apathy. "All projects will be due this Friday, turned in before the school day begins so that grading can be completed before lunch. The winner will receive..." Katie-Sue didn't care what she would win. It was science. That was reward enough.

"Oh my gosh, public health," gasped Nora, turning to Zelda and Maliq. "Is that, like, if everybody in the country is stressed out?"

"No, it's shots and stuff," Maliq told her.

Zelda turned to Katie-Sue, about to ask her, when she saw her hands balled into tight fists as she internally squealed with delight. Zelda grinned. "Are you going to enter something? I bet yours will be all smart and stuff."

Katie-Sue started to answer, stopped, and froze. She blushed, unused to the attention. The other girls were smiling, as if encouraged by Katie-Sue's enthusiasm. She just averted her eyes. In looking away, she happened to glance across the Cafeteria at Lizzie and saw her eagerness as well. She would enter the contest too. The chance to show-up her arch-rival? So much the better!

Katie-Sue was dragging her feet as she walked home.

Apparently, after sitting together in lunch, Zelda had gotten some impression that she and Katie-Sue were friends. The pair were walking together down the sidewalk, heading away from school. Giant cows were grazing in the nearby field while the occasional car went passing by.

"Hi stupid cow," Katie-Sue told the giant beast not far from the fence. It turned its head, the bell around its neck clanging. It mooed at her, then resumed grazing on grass.

"And then, Tammy said that Lita said that Carl told her that Rodrigo was totally into her," Zelda was explaining to Katie-Sue. Katie-Sue just wanted the world to end. The thought of building and detonating a device that would do just that made her smile.

As she considered between a chrome frame or something more earthly, a car went speeding past. Katie-Sue and Zelda both looked up as Lizzie leaned out the passenger-side window. She stuck her tongue out and pulled down her eyelid as she zoomed off into the distance.

"God I hate her," Katie-Sue griped.

"Yeah, she's got issues," Zelda agreed. Her eyes lit up and she turned to her new friend. "Maybe she needs a make-over."

"A what?" asked Katie-Sue.

"A make-over!" squealed Zelda. "It's where you and your friends all get together and you figure out a whole new look for you." She beamed at the prospect. Katie-Sue dry-heaved at the prospect. "We should take her to the mall and get her some new makeup."

"You have fun with that," said Katie-Sue and she resumed walking.

Zelda ran up next to her, grabbed her up, and practically jumped up and down. "We'll get all her friends and it'll be so much fun."

It was a long walk home.

Katie-Sue pushed open her front door and announced, "I'm home." As she shut the door, her mom came speed-walking through the foyer of the suburban house. Wearing camo pants and a tank top, she was speaking into a blu-tooth headset. "No, Doug, the shipment is tracking across Alaska." She knelt down and hugged her daughter, smelling of exercise and gardening. "It left on-schedule; the problem is that it's off-course." She kept walking. When she was on business calls, she paced through the first-floor of the house. Usually, she paced clockwise if it was bad news and counterclockwise if it was good news.

Katie-Sue entered the kitchen and stood up on the step-stool so she could wash out her thermos at the sink. Across the kitchen island, she saw her father at the wooden dinner table. "Dad?" she asked, surprised. "What are you doing home?"

"Randy's Barbeque is having their semi-annual free biscuit sale," he said as he looked over a spreadsheet on his laptop. "We were sent home early to help cut down on the traffic."

"I wish we'd gotten sent home," Katie-Sue complained. She set her thermos into the dishwasher as her brother entered through the sliding door from the backyard. Dripping with sweat, he had a basketball under his arm. "Hey, Mike."

"Hey, genius," he said. Her big brother could make even praise sound like an insult. "Think fast!" He tossed the ball to her without force. Katie-Sue caught it and tried to throw it back, but the throw went wide and Mike had to dive for it. He landed and slid right out of the kitchen on the hardwood floors. "I'm okay!" he called.

"Sorry," Katie-Sue winced. She got down off the stool to check on her brother, but he was already collecting himself. With a residual bit of grump, she headed passed her still-circling mother and up the gray carpeted stairs to the top of the house. She ascended the steps to the second floor, wallpapered baby bird blue, then up the hastily-made steps to the attic itself. Up there, sat Raiden.

Standing over six feet tall, Raiden was the tallest Asian man Katie-Sue had ever met. Living in Kansas, he was also one of the only Asian men she'd ever met. He was rather skinny, though, with a long flowing beard and a matching mustache. He was balding on the top of his head and he was prone to sitting for hours on end and staring out the window of the attic, just looking at the world with disapproval.

"Hi Raiden," said Katie-Sue.

"Child," acknowledged the ancient god with a thick Japanese accent. "What troubles you?" Raiden had a high voice but a deep echo to his words, like thunder rolling behind each syllable.

"We've got a science project this week and I need to come up with something that'll blow Lizzie Ransom's socks off," Katie-Sue said as she sat down on one of the boxes of Christmas decorations.

"Bother me not with these mundane matters," declared Raiden. He looked out the window at the world. "This world has forgotten the ancient gods. It must be shown the path back to the old ways."

"I was thinking about doing something with lasers," Katie-Sue speculated.

"Lasers," repeated Raiden. "Yes. Lasers are good." He turned to the little girl. "I approve of this plan."

"But how do I do lasers?" asked Katie-Sue. "It's got to be public health-themed."

"Shoot this miscreant you disdain. Credit her removal from the living as a benefit to all," proposed Raiden, turning to her, his hands behind his back. He then glanced to the side. "Citing accredited sources might be a problem, however."

"They use lasers to treat cancer," Katie-Sue brainstormed.

"Lightning can cure many ills," Raiden said, taking pride as if he had invented such treatment. He even buffed his nails on his chest.

"That's it!" declared Katie-Sue. "I'll do my project on how lasers affect DNA."

"Excellent, child," Raiden encouraged. "Do that." He turned back to the window. "And I shall plot my return to this world."

"Kay!" Katie-Sue said joyously as she ran back down the steps. Just down the stairs from the attic, Katie-Sue was stopped by her phone ringing. She answered it immediately with, "Katie-Sue McCaffrey's phone."

"Don't even think about entering the Science Fair," came a shrill, accusatory voice.

"Lizzie Ransom," Katie-Sue said with heavy disdain. "Gotta try to work up the courage to do some research?" she asked in a haughty, certain tone.

"Just trying to save you the trouble of being embarrassed by more than your face," Lizzie cast at her over the phone.

"I'm going to smite you!" Katie-Sue yelled into the phone. "I'm going to do the best presentation this town or anybody in the whole world has ever seen!" She had to step to the side so her brother could get by in the narrow upstairs hall. "You'll rue the day you ever tried to match wits with me, you worthless toad!"

"Big talk, small fry," Lizzie told her before hanging up.

Katie-Sue scowled at the world. With twice the motivation and four times the hate, she rushed into her room to get started.

Katie-Sue's mother knocked on the door and yelled, "Dinner!" She pushed the door open amidst flashing lights. Inside Katie-Sue's room, on the carpet between a hand-made doll house and her white four-post bed, was a large metal stand. Katie-Sue stood before it, welding mask over her face, as she spot-welded metal sheets. "Dinner!" her mother yelled again, louder.

Katie-Sue removed the arc and turned, lifting up her mask. "Mom!" she groaned. "I'm working on this! Lizzie Ransom called and said she was entering the science project too. When she realizes I'm better, she's going to do something to throw off my research, so I'm building a missile defense system in case she launches a pre-emptive strike!"

"You can keep working on it after dinner," her mother insisted firmly as she crossed the room and opened the window that looked out over the backyard. She waved her hand at the smoke, trying to guide it out.

"I have a ventilation system," Katie-Sue pouted as she unhooked her welding torch from the gas cannisters secured between her bookcases.

"I'm sure it's fine," her mom said as she walked out. "Now go wash your hands and come downstairs." In a huff, Katie-Sue unclipped the welding machine from the metal. "And use soap this time!" her mother yelled after her.

Downstairs, Katie-Sue was the last to join the family. Raiden sat at the head of the table, opposite Katie-Sue's mother. Katie-Sue sat with her brother, while their father sat across from them. He stirred the pot of chicken soup and spooned out a serving to his wife.

"A-hem," Raiden said, insulted. "I am a god."

Katie-Sue's father looked at him, then at his wife, then back to Raiden. "Yeah, but she's my wife."

Raiden considered it for a moment, and then acknowledged the correctness of the action. He was served next, then the kids. Once Katie-Sue's bowl was filled, she took a sip. She was always irritated at how good her parents could cook. Nothing ruined a perfectly bad mood like a delicious meal.

"Excellent meal, Marcus," Raiden deemed the soup to be. Of all the members of the family around the table, his table manners were the worst. At least he didn't slurp too loudly.

"Thanks," said Katie-Sue's father. He looked at his kids and asked, "So how was school today?"

"They announced the Science Fair," Katie-Sue declared. "And I'm going to win it."

"Of course you are," said her mother between sips of her soup. "What are you going to do it on?"

Katie-Sue's enthusiasm darkened a bit. "I haven't quite decided."

"What's the topic?" asked Mark, her father.

"Public health," said Mike.

"Are you going to enter?" asked his mom.

"Probably not," he said. "It's a lot of work and all you get is a ribbon."

Katie-Sue scowled at him. She ate quickly, enjoying her dinner against her will. As the family tried to convey to Mike the benefits and rewards of extra-curricular work, she thought through various epidemiological studies she could read for citation in a week's time. Meanwhile, Raiden ate very little and said very little. He just sat there and listened, as if he was silently judging the family on their chewing techniques.

Katie-Sue was on her phone when her mom pushed open the bedroom door. "Baby?" she asked. "You okay?"

"Yeah," said Katie-Sue. "I'm trying to order some Illudium Q-38." She scowled at her phone. "Stupid eBay snipers."

"Well, you can try again tomorrow," said her mom as she took the phone from Katie-Sue's hands. "It's past your bedtime."

"But mom!" Katie-Sue protested. "I'm not tired!" she said with a yawn.

"To bed, baby-girl," she insisted.

Katie-Sue kicked off her shoes and climbed into bed. "You're going to sleep in your clothes?" asked her mom as she pulled the horse-patterned blanket over her daughter. Katie-Sue nodded with another yawn. "Okay," she said, kissing her forehead. "Sweet dreams."

"Good night, Mom," Katie whispered.

TUESDAY

“And so I called Glamor Shots at the mall, but they don’t have an opening until next Wednesday,” Zelda told Katie-Sue as they walked together towards school. “But I said that I’d be willing to pay for a supreme package if we could get Lizzie in before then.”

Katie-Sue walked on with a sulk, her shoulders hanging low. She contemplated lasers, explosions, and other violent things. Zelda kept prattling on happily to her new friend.

History class. While the teacher spoke about how Coca-Cola actually created Santa Claus as a means of repressing the proletariat, Katie-Sue flipped through the history book. She studied from John Snow forward, reading where she could on the history of epidemiology.

Literature class. Katie-Sue wrote a poem for class. She couldn’t find anything that rhymed with metastasis, though.

Art class. Katie-Sue drew a picture of the lungs. Several students protested because her lungs weren’t the same size and no amount of explaining bilobular and trilobular arrangement of the lungs made a difference. But the teacher rewarded her for using such bright colors, so that was something.

Music class. Katie-Sue asked for a bagpipe, hoping that the air sacs would allow her the chance to study lung inflation. The teacher offered a triangle instead.

The library was quiet when Katie-Sue arrived. She pushed through the doors to reveal the circular arrangement of seats around which raised levels held the books themselves. Bright posters extolled the virtues of reading from puppets, cartoons, and celebrities. At the

far end of the grand circular library, opposite from the door, was the circulation desk. There, Mr Howard was sharpening a wooden rod down to a point.

"Hey, Mr Howard," said Katie-Sue as she shuffled inside, banging her backpack against her knees as she walked.

"Hey, KS," said Howard as he looked down the wooden rod. "Why aren't you outside at recess?"

"It's sunny," she said. "I don't like it when it's sunny."

"The slides get too hot," Mr Howard agreed. He set down his whittling knife and the rod. "Looking for a new book? I have a reprint of the Babysitter's Club #694."

"Got anything by Horace Walpole?" Katie-Sue asked eagerly.

Mr Howard made a disbelieving face. "Honey, isn't an author like that a little too grown up for you?"

"No!" Katie-Sue insisted, stamping her foot. The challenge to her maturity reminding her of the task at hand, she turned. "But I should be researching for the science project."

"Oh, you're going to compete?" he grinned, absently pushing his glasses up his nose. "How wonderful? Are you going to do a graph on communicable diseases? Or talk about the importance of washing your hands?"

"I need a book on modern radiation therapy," Katie-Sue said thoughtfully as she surveyed the library stacks. "Something that discusses how tissue damage is minimized and anything that clarifies laser-targeting using a scattershot effect across tissues of varying density."

Mr Howard sighed. "Medical stuff's over there." He resumed whittling his wooden stake.

"Is there anything on hematological issues?" asked Katie-Sue, already jogging up the steps, her backpack banging lightly with each step. "Or did you check it all out again?"

"It was one time!" Mr Howard protested. "And the town was going to be overrun by vampires!"

"They were having a cookout," Katie-Sue asserted from behind the nearest bookshelf.

Mr Howard clarified, "A vampire cookout!"

"Well, yeah," Katie-Sue said, heading into the reference section.

Katie-Sue didn't skip home. She didn't bound home. Those were things happy girls did. Those were things normal girls did. Those were things girls without brains did. And Katie-Sue had a brain, so she wasn't doing them.

However...

However, IF Katie-Sue was the kind of girl who skipped home...IF Katie-Sue was the kind of girl would go bounding down a sidewalk, saying hi to gargantuan, house-sized cows, and grinning ear to ear, then it would have happened on a day like that. But Katie-Sue didn't go skipping home.

...not that anyone saw, anyway.

Watermelon splattered the windshield and a second later, the green light died down. From behind the transparent screen, now covered in watermelon rinds and juice, Katie-Sue and Mike both stood up. "Well, that's one way to do it." They looked at Katie-Sue's laser and the small hole where the watermelon had been placed in the center of the backyard. "Think it's turned up a little bit too high?" asked Mike, stepping out from behind the safety of the windshield. He went into the middle of the yard, into the grassy patch. Their mom hadn't let them do the experiment anywhere near her flowers. Those flowers had gotten her into Suburban Houses & Flowerbeds.

"It works, that's what matters," Katie-Sue insisted. She took out her kitty notebook and scribbled down observations and theoretical adjustments to make. She remarked absently, "If nothing else, I can carve my name in the moon."

Mike developed a look of disbelief. "What kind of chair-faced weirdo would carve their name into the moon?" Katie-Sue just shrugged and set about adjusting the laser. Mike considered the next watermelon but heard a strange whistling coming from above. He

looked into the sky and saw a series of white trails set against the blue sky. "Uh, hey, genius?"

Katie-Sue checked Mike, then looked where he was looking. Seeing the vapor trails, she glowered. "Lizzie." She quickly unfastened the stability track on her laser and turned the focal lens towards the sky. She aimed the laser into the sky, plugging her phone into the base of the device with a USB cable. The phone brought up a tracking system and Katie-Sue targeted six independent missiles, each with a high-yield warhead.

"Uh...?" Mike started to say, just before Katie-Sue fired the laser. The green beam sliced through the missiles, carving through their metal fuselages. The missiles exploded in the air, causing spectacular fireworks, even for the middle of the day.

Katie-Sue took off her safety glasses. "Those were just fooling around." She grabbed her kitty notebook and tossed it aside. She found her unicorn notebook and wrote in there. Her unicorn notebook was for observations about her enemies. Lizzie was at the top of the list.

WEDNESDAY

As Katie-Sue walked to school, a massive shadow fell over her. She paused on the sidewalk and looked up. The big slobbery snout of a cow the size of a car hovered above her. "Hello, stupid cow," she told it. It sniffed, causing her blonde hair to flutter straight up. Katie-Sue patted her hair down, to keep from losing any hair clips. Today she was wearing little ribbon hair clips. They made her think of Christmas. Last Christmas she got two dolls, some dresses, and an ionizer for her laser set.

She reached up and patted the giant cow on the nose. It let out a rumble of a moo, then turned. The big copper bell around its neck clanged a bit as it headed back into the meadow. Katie-Sue walked on, her scowl returning.

Katie-Sue slid her tray down the line in the cafeteria. She thought over equations while she noted the similarity between the collision of atomic particles and the kids as they stopped and started, jerked and moved, to get to the next station at the lunch line.

Katie-Sue selected a slice of pepperoni pizza for her entrée. She wasn't sure it was pepperoni, or that it was really pizza. She wasn't entirely sure it was even food, but it tasted good. She opted for asparagus too.

"No, asparagus, honey," said the lunch lady.

Katie-Sue's glower lifted up to the lunch lady. She was a big woman, dreadlocks in a black hairnet, and prison tattoos coming out the hem of her sleeves. She had three tears tattooed under her eye. She locked gazes with Katie-Sue and the little girl glared at her. "Then how will I get my folate, chromium, and vitamin-K?" she asked defiantly.

The Lunch Lady sniffed, indifferent. "Broccoli." She looked at the soup of cheese sauce, stalks of broccoli sticking out through the surface. She glared at Katie-Sue as she used the massive metal ladle to scoop up two stalks of broccoli. She reached without effort under the transparent guard to slop the fibrous green vegetables onto Katie-Sue's tray. All the while, their gazes remained locked.

Katie-Sue's eyes narrowed in hate. "Thank you," she said with a sour expression.

"No problem," said Lunch Lady, eyeballing the little girl.

Katie-Sue resolved to italicize the Lunch Lady on her enemy's list.

With a thud, Katie-Sue's dad let the iron plate fall to the ground. "Honey, are you sure this is safe?" he asked. He straightened his back and rolled his shoulders as his daughter worked in the middle of their cluttered garage.

"Of course," said Katie-Sue. "I already filed the request for the permits with the county."

Her dad did a double-take. "Wait, say what? I thought you were doing a report on radiation treatment for cancer."

"I am," she said as she sprayed the iron plate with cleaner. "But in order to write that report, I need data. In order to get data, I need to make a testing unit that can produce results for comparing IMRT, SBRT, and Brachytherapy modalities. In order to do that," she told him, gesturing to the weight lifting plates he was helping her repurpose, "I need a shield to block the radiation after it's passed through the tissue."

Her dad thought that one through for a second. "Wait, what? Why not just use data that's available?"

"And trust the CDC and their publish-or-perish meritocracy? Yeah, right, Dad," she said with a roll of her eyes. Doing so allowed her to spot motion in the distance. She saw a hot air balloon rising in the distance. Too small to be for personal use, it carried some sort of device just beneath it. "Lizzie," seethed Katie-Sue.

She pulled off her washing gloves and pulled out her phone while her dad turned and saw the balloon. He smiled at the red, yellow, and blue colors of it, not registering the reflective mirror beneath it. "That's clever," Katie-Sue admitted, giving rare praise to her enemy. She typed commands quickly into her phone.

A beam struck the mirror beneath the floating balloon and the entire garage was filled with green light. "Oh!" her dad grinned with delight. "What's that?"

"It's a targeting sensor," Katie-Sue said, before she inputted the final command. False grass from behind Mike's basketball goal opened up and a six-count missile pod rose out of the ground. The hexagonal firing position turned and fixed on its target. It let fly with a single missile. The missile whistled into the distance, almost disappearing before the balloon burst into a fiery conflagration. The garage returned instantly to normal light.

Katie-Sue put her phone aside and started to put her gloves back on. "Lizzie's getting creative." She resumed scrubbing the weight plate. "About time."

Her dad had a petrified look on his face. He turned and walked inside, muttering something about 'having to speak with Lizzie's mother'.

"So lay down," Katie-Sue told her brother. He laid onto the iron plate in the backyard, setting his head upon his hands. "Alright, now try not to move." She pressed a few buttons on her laser and the snake arm moved over him. "Okay, three, two, one." She hit the button and the green laser fired down right onto his chest and arm.

Katie-Sue monitored the beam from behind a shield, using her phone plugged into the laser to control the discharge. As the light blasted Mike's arm in controlled pulses, Raiden watched, unbothered or unworried or unaware of the risk from the radiation. Their neighbor, Mrs. Wilkinson was raking leaves. On the other side of their yard, Aubrey Thomas was playing the violin but the sound of the laser prompted her to shut her bedroom window.

"It's hot," Mike remarked with curiosity as he looked into the beam.

"Don't move," Katie-Sue reminded him. The laser ceased and the garden was quiet. Katie-Sue removed her safety glasses. "I wish we had a more-secured location, but mom says I can't do science inside anymore."

"Yes, well, your mother was quite cross after you exploded the plumbing in the bathroom," Raiden remarked with a sympathetic nod

of the head. The wind blew through the trees, rustling the grass. A distant bird chirped. Mike's arm was vibrantly red.

"Is it supposed to be that way?" he asked. He touched his skin and yanked his hand back. "It's really hot!"

"Extensive cellular damage," Katie-Sue noted, jotting down the observation. "Will you..." She gestured vaguely at Mike. Standing next to her, Raiden bent down and slapped his foot. Mike's arm immediately returned to normal. "Thanks," she said. She punched in a few more commands on her laser and the arm adjusted just a bit. "We're going to try for half the time at twice the intensity."

"Kay," Mike said, laying back and getting comfortable.

THURSDAY

"But then I said that if we could get some tearless makeup, then maybe Lizzie would say okay," Zelda prattled as the two girls walked down the sidewalk.

Katie-Sue just sighed and kept walking as Zelda continued to expound on her master plan to save the whole world through nicer makeup, and it all started with Lizzie. "Hi stupid cow," Katie-Sue told the massive behemoth at the fence as they walked passed. The cow mooed at her, its bell clanging.

"So anyway," Zelda kept on, brushing her wind-strewn hair from her face. "I think she's more of a winter, but Maliq thinks she's some kind of untapped autumn..."

Katie-Sue crinkled her nose at her painting, her plastic apron protecting jeans and a camisole top. She tilted her head and looked at the canvas and just sighed. Her teacher came up behind her and bent down. With a cheery smile, Ms. Lo appraised the painting quickly. "I like your flower garden, Katie-Sue."

"It's supposed to be a Selenium nucleus," Katie-Sue grumbled.

"Oh?" Ms. Lo beamed. "Is this going to be a visual aid for your science fair project?"

Katie-Sue lowered her brush, a dawning realization hitting her. "I have to have a visual component for my presentation?" She looked up at her teacher. "I thought graphs of raw data would be sufficient."

"A poster is fine, but they usually use a three-sectional display board," the teacher told her. The paint-scented air was churned by silent fans that turned overhead in the bright yellow room. The floor was the color of many years' worth of spilled paint.

"A tryptic?" Katie-Sue said, slight panic hitting her. "With, like, glitter and stuff?" Her teacher grinned and nodded. "Huh."

The car skidded through the intersection, just barely making the light. Katie-Sue was snapped back into her seat by the car's seatbelt, her booster seat keeping her firmly in place. "Why didn't you check to see if we had glitter before today?!" her mom griped, gritting her teeth before she honked violently. "MOVE, JERKWAD!" she yelled out the window.

Katie-Sue swayed back and forth in the backseat as she was rattled inside the car by her mother's violent driving. "I didn't realize we had to--" She fell silent when her mom rocketed through a yellow light, nearly clipping two pedestrians. "--we had to do a display. I thought a typed paper would be sufficient. Maybe with a display poster."

"Honey, you know mommy loves you and wants to support you," her mother said. "But I need a little more of a heads up about materials than the night before the project is due." She glanced back at her daughter and patted her leg between the seats. "It's okay, though. The crafts' store will have everything."

Katie-Sue nodded, quietly hoping her mother would put her eyes back on the road.

Mark ascended the stairs with a plastic tub of laundry. He carried the load passed Katie-Sue's bedroom, pausing to peek inside. He found Katie-Sue on her floor, curled up around a blanket, using her backpack as a pillow. Glitter covered her hands while markers littered the floor. Her fold-out display was set up on the floor, almost complete.

Mark scooped her up in his arms, the middle schooler groaning, "I'm not tired." She didn't even open her eyes. Mark gently carried her over to her bed and laid her down atop the covers. He pulled the comforter at the foot of the bed over her, pulling it up and covering her to her chin.

A loud crash echoed from downstairs, followed by Mike hollering, "I'm fine." Katie-Sue didn't awaken. She only nestled deeper against her pillow, her father watching proudly over her.

FRIDAY

Down the hill came Katie-Sue. She waddled a bit, carrying the large tryptic under her arms with some trouble. Her balance was thrown off, prompting her to walk diagonally down the sidewalk. The wind would spike occasionally, blowing against her and nearly taking her off her feet. The large display acted like a sail, catching the wind seemingly no matter how Katie-Sue held it.

One such time, she was cresting the hill. A powerful burst of spring wind hit her, nearly knocking the tryptic from her hands and throwing her from her feet. She stumbled back, nearly succumbing to gravity, before the soft snout of a giant cow butted her in the back. The big animal pushed her against the wind and kept her on her feet.

"Thanks, stupid cow," Katie-Sue said, regaining her balance. She kept waddling along, the cow clanging its bell with each step as it walked back into the field with the other gigantic bovines.

In the cafeteria before school began, kids were setting up their presentations on desks appropriated for holding the displays. Optimistic of the turnout, most of the desks were still available when Katie-Sue walked in.

She headed over to a desk towards the corner, trusting in the added safety and security of the placement to handle the weight of her multi-page report on the raw data she'd collected. Next to her, Vincent was setting up his display on the importance of the water cycle. "Hey," he said cheerfully. "What'd you do yours on?"

"Radiation types used in oncology treatment," Katie-Sue said. She opened her presentation, revealing artistic flourishes informed more by enthusiasm than skill.

"Uh, 'kay," Vincent said. He looked at Katie-Sue's pink and yellow display for a moment. "I like the kitties," he remarked about her drawing in the corner.

"Animals get cancer too," she told him defensively. She looked around at the corner of the cafeteria where the projects waited. "Nobody's going to mess with these, will they? They'll be under secured monitoring, correct?"

Vincent didn't follow. "I mean, nobody's allowed into the cafeteria unless it's lunch time, so..." He turned and looked around, as if hoping somebody else would come and take the lead in dealing with her.

"And they'll be graded by lunch, right?" Katie-Sue pushed. Vincent just nodded, worrying he'd underestimated the severity of the competition. "Good," Katie-Sue grinned angrily. "Nothing makes a fruit rollup taste better than righteous justification." Vincent looked longways at Katie-Sue, then slunk back, trying to stay out of her field of vision.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, practically vibrating with anticipation. Her history teacher at the front of the room was dressed in a History Channel version of a pirate costume, explaining privateers. Katie-Sue didn't care about early capitalist expansion. She just wanted to get to lunch.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, practically vibrating with anticipation. Her literature teacher was explaining the progression of gothic literature into the 20th century. Katie-Sue didn't care about pre-Edgar Allan Poe novellas. She just wanted to get to lunch.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, practically vibrating with anticipation. The art teacher smelled of cheap weed again, so they were watching a cartoon, told to pay attention to the lines and use of color. Katie-Sue didn't care about cartoon people with smooth heads and pointy heads. She just wanted to get to lunch.

Katie-Sue sat with her arms crossed, practically vibrating with anticipation. The music teacher smelled like cheap weed again, so they were watching a cartoon, told to pay attention to how different instruments in the score represented different characters. Katie-Sue didn't care about some dumb Russian kid going hunting for a wolf. She just wanted to get to lunch.

Lizzie tore the top off of her pudding cup when a hard, plastic lunch box fell down across from her. She looked up through blonde bangs as Katie-Sue sat down across from her. "Hi there, Lizzie," said Katie-Sue, like the girl's name was insult enough. "Looking forward to yet another science fair 2nd place ribbon?"

"Of course," Lizzie responded. "I like how they look on you, short stuff."

"In your dreams, Ransom," Katie-Sue told her as she ripped open her pouch of fruit snacks. The two girls glared at one another as they ate. Around them, the school cafeteria was bustling with excitement. The weekend was mere hours away, the final few classes the sole gatekeepers between freedom and the middle school students who now inhabited the cafeteria.

Amidst the din, the two girls eyeballed one another, glaring as they shared hate-filled silence over sandwiches and snacks. Katie-Sue only looked away twice: once when she read a note from her mom, telling her how proud she was of her big scientist-girl. The other was when Zelda and the popular girls walked by, saying hello to both girls at the table. Katie-Sue and Lizzie both told them 'hi' as they kept glaring across the table at one another.

Just as Katie-Sue was finishing her apple, Lizzie finishing her juice box, the science teachers and the principal stepped out from the project section of the lunch room. Most of the student body didn't seem to notice, but as soon as the principal spoke loudly enough to be heard – saying "Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention" – Katie-Sue and Lizzie both burst out of their seats. Before the next word was finished, both girls shot by the principal, ran among the desks, and raced right to their projects.

Both froze in simultaneous shock.

Both stared in awed disbelief.

Lizzie and Katie-Sue were tied...for second place.

Lizzie's experiments establishing the viability of quantum tunneling as a means to transfer energy without heat dissipation was deemed comparable to Katie-Sue's scatter graph on cellular damage involving various laser treatment for oncogenesis. Next to their 2nd place ribbons were notes, praising their creativity and intelligence, but

giving recommendations on how to use a bit more color and urging the use of larger pictures.

Meanwhile, the principal was at the stage announcing that despite all the many strong candidates, the first-place ribbon went to none other than Zelda Rabsher. Her explanation of memes on the internet was covered in funny cat pictures, against which the 1st place ribbon stood out rather brightly.

Katie-Sue and Lizzie both watched Zelda accept the apathetic applause of the lunch room. She spotted them both and waved happily, like winning was second only to getting to compete in the same competition as her friends.

“Huh,” Lizzie finally said.

“Yeah,” Katie-Sue said. She looked at their respective boards. “I guess they rounded your score up so you at least placed in positive numbers,” she remarked as they returned to their lunch table.

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