

The Impossible Clue

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I WAS TRYING to prove Goldbach's Conjecture, but I wasn't getting very far. Maybe it was the fact that it hadn't been cracked by some of the greatest mathematical brains in history. Then again, maybe it was the steady stream of spitballs hitting the side of my head that was stopping me.

"Do you mind?" I turned in my seat and glared across the aisle.

Kevin Jordan smiled, the straw still clenched in the side of his mouth. "What?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"You know what."

"No I don't."

I knew I should have stayed in bed that morning. Kevin Jordan had a face like one of those angels Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel. He had the personality of a fungal rash.

I took a breath and counted up in prime numbers until the urge to throw my pencil at his face subsided. I got to 101.

Mrs. Wright had moved Kevin to the desk next to mine because I was supposed to be a good influence. Like my smart would rub off on him. Unfortunately, Kevin had spent the entire year making it his mission to stay stupid. After 180 school days of systematic mental torture, I was ready to see the end of him.

I was determined to ignore Kevin and make some progress on a conjecture people had been trying to prove since 1742. What can I say? I like a challenge.

Kevin let off one more shot, but when I didn't react, he refocused his attentions on a trio of girls at the back of the classroom. He leaned his head back, calculating the arc the little paper missiles would have to take to clear the four rows of desks between him and his target and the force he'd have to put behind them.

Then he blew.

For someone who got straight Ds in math, he seemed to understand the practical applications of a parabola just fine. Squeals and screams erupted from the back of the room as the spitballs rained down. He must have loaded the straw with about a dozen of the things.

"Mr. Jordan." Mrs. Wright stood up from her desk. Her

curly hair was frazzled beyond recognition in the damp heat and it made her look more than a bit deranged.

Kevin smiled like an angel. You could practically see the halo of innocence over his blond curls. But Mrs. Wright was immune.

“You know the drill.” She pointed to the door.

Mrs. Wright watched him saunter out of the classroom, on his way to the wooden bench outside the principal’s office. When he graduated (*if* he graduated) they’d have to put up a brass plate naming that bench in his honor. The door closed behind him, and Mrs. Wright turned her gaze on me. She shook her head in that weary way adults do, like somehow Kevin Jordan shooting spitballs was all my fault. I just gritted my teeth and got back to the conjecture.

I didn’t get far.

Sitting on top of my notebook was a perfectly folded triangle of blue-lined notebook paper. I looked around quickly. I’m not the kind of girl people pass notes to.

Two desks back and one desk over, Sammy Delgado Jr. gave me a small wave. Sammy was a small kid with dark hair and matching smudges beneath his eyes. Before Christmas, I don’t think Sammy and I had ever really spoken. I’m not exactly a people person. But everyone at school knows, when it comes to figuring things out, I’m your girl.