

MATH PANIC

by Bradley Walton

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MATH PANIC*A Comedic Monologue***by Bradley Walton**

SYNOPSIS: An incredibly hard math test becomes exponentially more difficult when an earthquake hits, and the teacher expects everyone to keep working. Now, one of the students is wondering—would failing really be such a bad thing? And what kind of a teacher expects students to finish a test during an earthquake, anyway?

CAST OF CHARACTERS*(1 either)*

NARRATOR (m/f) A high school student.

TIME: Present day.

SETTING: A classroom.

SET: Bare stage.

COSTUME: Typical school clothes.

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AT START: *The NARRATOR, dressed for school, on a bare stage.*

NARRATOR: I hate this class. The equation in front of me might as well be written in Sanskrit. Just for the record, I can't read Sanskrit. I wouldn't know it if I saw it, but I think it's an actual language. I heard somebody mention it in a movie or something once.

I tap my pencil anxiously, hoping maybe the answer will just miraculously fall out onto the paper, but no luck.

It's probably worth mentioning that this is just the first problem. I've been stuck on it for fifteen minutes. Normally, I'd just skip ahead, but I've skimmed over the whole math test and I'm pretty sure this one is the easiest.

My teacher, Mrs. Munroe, sits at her desk and shifts her eyes back and forth across the room, chuckling in her head at our helplessness in the face of her Sanskrit math. Her gaze falls on me, and I desperately want to look away, but if I do, she'll sense my fear. She'll savor it. That's what teachers do. I can't give her the satisfaction. We make eye contact. She smiles and nods encouragingly, as if to say, "I want you to think I'm encouraging you and I believe you can do this, but really I just want to sit here and laugh at you silently while I soak in your fear, which is intoxicating, by the way. It smells like pineapple upside down cake. I can't wait to fail you so I can have you in my class again next semester."

I blink. I hope she interprets this to mean, "I will never back down, and even if you teach me again next semester, I will learn to control my fear so that it smells like cabbage," even though what the blink really means is, "my eyes were getting dry."

Teachers are scary. Because they know things. You might think that a teacher's job is to pass on their knowledge, and that's true. But no teacher will teach you everything they know. There are parts of their lives that are private, and that knowledge is off-limits. There's nothing wrong with that, but it makes you wonder if what they're teaching is filtered through what they don't want you to know

about themselves. Like, if my history teacher was the reincarnation of some sadistic, perverted Roman emperor, would she teach me a sanitized version of her life story? Because if she did, then I wouldn't know that I need to run for my life if I happen to see her out in public. So as a precaution, whenever I see a teacher out in public, I run for my life.

The math problem is laughing at me now, too. I can't hear it, but I can feel it. The test paper is practically vibrating with mocking animosity. So much that it's making the desk vibrate as well. And the desk next to me. And the floor. This is like, the worst math problem, ever.

But then it occurs to me... maybe it's not the math problem. Maybe there's a different reason that everyone in the room, including the teacher, is looking around with alarmed expressions on their faces.

Then Mrs. Munroe says, "Everyone, please get under your desks." Her voice is calm, but tinged with concern and uncertainty. Everyone gets under their desks. Someone shouts, "Is this an earthquake?" and Mrs. Munroe says, "I think it might be."

Even though screaming erupts around the room, this is the best news I've had all day, because it means we're off the hook for the test. No teacher would ever expect their students to finish a math test during an earthquake. That would be ridiculous.

An announcement comes over the intercom echoing Mrs. Munroe's instruction for everyone to get under their desks. The room vibrates again. More students scream. Several people around me pull out their phones and start tapping the screens.

Mrs. Munroe pokes her head up from behind her desk and shouts, "Class! That's enough! Screaming and texting won't help your grade. You have a perfectly good floor to write on, so I suggest you get back to work on your test!"

The screaming comes to an abrupt stop. Everyone exchanges confused looks with each other under their desks. Finally, someone says, "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not kidding," Mrs. Munroe's voice calls out. "Why would I be kidding?"

There is a hint of warning in her voice. Clearly, this question is not meant to invite answers. A wave of panic washes through my insides. I thought this nightmare test was behind me, or at least postponed.

There is a moment of dead silence in the room, and then someone bravely speaks out from back in the corner.

"Because we're having an earthquake?" The voice belongs to Alan Hargreaves. He's class president and has perfect teeth. If anyone can talk sense into Mrs. Munroe, it's Alan. Maybe he can save us all.

But Mrs. Munroe simply replies, "So?"

Another moment of silence drags by, and then I hear Alan's voice again: "It's hard to concentrate when you think you might die?"

"Have you ever seen a movie," says Mrs. Munroe, "where someone has to calculate extremely complex mathematics under immense psychological pressure in a short period of time to prevent themselves from blowing up?"

"Yes," says Alan.

"Think of it like that," says Mrs. Munroe.

"But finishing this test won't stop the earthquake."

"Consider it practice in case you ever have to prevent yourself from blowing up. You all need to learn to think calmly under pressure.

It's an important life skill, and this is a golden opportunity. Don't let it pass you by."

"What if it does pass us by?" I ask timidly.

"Then I guess you'll fail," says Mrs. Munroe.

"What if we die first?" I ask.

"Then you'll be a dead failure, so I suggest you get to work," says Mrs. Munroe.

The building shakes again as if in agreement. I jerk my head up to verify that the ceiling is still there and bump my head on my desk, but the bump isn't as jarring as I would've expected. After looking again to make sure the ceiling is intact, I examine the underside of the desk. Not surprisingly, it's covered in gum. Actually, I think I may have stuck a piece under here yesterday.

A terrible thought occurs to me. Slowly, I reach up and feel around the back of my head, and my fears are confirmed: There's gum in my hair. Could this day possibly get any worse?

Then the room shakes harder and a window cracks.

So yes, the day could definitely get worse. I could be a dead failure with gum in my hair.

I look back at my paper. The math problem is still there. I have no idea what to do with it. And then I wonder, is being a dead failure really so bad?

If I'm dead, I won't care I'm a failure, although other people might think bad thoughts about me. But aren't we taught to be our own selves? That the opinions of others should not define us? That we shouldn't give in to social pressure? Because that's exactly what this is... social pressure. And I'm just a teenager. So—actually, social pressure is a pretty good motivator.

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