

# **RACE AGAINST ACE**

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# 1

## THE EXPERIMENT

**S**hadows at the far end of the corridor half-obsured the dark green door. I had always jogged past it, but today I knew that once I reached it, I would stop. My heart pounded beneath my school blazer as I drew closer, and sweat beaded my forehead and nose. It would be easy to walk on by, as I had done a thousand times before. Not today though. Today, I would knock.

I grasped the handle of the strange, silver sword-shaped knocker fixed to the centre of the door. I pulled it back, breathing hard, before allowing it to fall gently back into place. Silence greeted me. I let the knocker fall again, hoping for a response. Nothing. With cautious determination, I turned the handle and pushed against the door. I'd made up my mind. It was time to make my grand entrance.

"Hi. I'm Billy Gronbeck," I blurted out to the figure in the room beyond the doorway.

She jumped up from behind her desk, knocking papers to the floor. "Billy Gronbeck! I'm Miss Toffee," the woman responded with a wavering voice. I had clearly startled her. To regain her composure, she took a sip from her teacup and bent to collect the fallen items.

I closed the heavy wooden door behind me and took a moment to absorb the surroundings. There was a choice of seating in the school counsellor's office, from beanbags to couches. Some were brightly coloured, others pastel, making a rainbow gradient. A chaise couch sat in the corner, surrounded by comfy cushions. Motivational quotes and posters covered the walls, offering encouragement and guidance to anyone who entered. One poster in particular caught my eye. It read 'Control the Reachables', and each letter was a different colour. A large window overlooked the school quadrangle. The room was more welcoming than I had imagined.

"Where shall I sit?"

"Anywhere you like," Miss Toffee replied, still slightly surprised at my arrival. Although I didn't have an appointment, Principal Herman had told me I was welcome to visit the counsellor whenever I wanted, and I had been encouraged to do so.

Miss Toffee grabbed her mobile phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found the right person.

"I just wanted to let you know I'll be running a bit late to the meeting," she whispered into the phone. "Billy has finally arrived."

This indicated to me that she knew exactly who I was and that no further explanation was necessary on my behalf. I scanned the seating in the room, a red velvet chair drawing my attention. As I flopped down onto the wide seat, I resisted the urge to curl up like a butterfly in its cocoon. I wondered how many other students had sat in it before me, and what they had talked about. The warm breeze from the small fan heater in the corner of the room washed over me and the lavender scent from Miss Toffee's oil diffuser steadied my unsettled breaths.

Miss Toffee moved from the desk, grabbing a pen, clipboard and blank paper from the printer tray. She picked up her



cup of tea and sat on the chaise opposite me. She seemed a lot younger up close.

"It's lovely to meet you, Billy. How can I help you today?" The inquisitive expression on her face made me feel that she had a million questions she wanted to ask me all at once.

"What I tell you is private, right?"

"I will keep your confidentiality. I have a legal obligation to do so," Miss Toffee said in a comforting manner.

"But what if I share something private? Like *really* private?" I asked.

"I assure you that our discussion will remain confidential. The only time I would share what we discuss is if you raised a potential risk to you or someone else. Otherwise, I am committed to maintaining the privacy of our conversations, Billy." Miss Toffee's calm, soft voice set my mind at rest.

A painfully awkward silence followed. I didn't know what to expect. What would it be like to talk to a stranger about my problems? It had been four months since 'the incident'. I'd tried hard to block everything out, to move forward and live life as normally as possible, but it was useless. I felt distracted, unable to concentrate on anything. It was time to talk. Today, I wanted to share my side of the story with Miss Toffee. With a surname like that, I hoped she was sweet. She'd only been at the school for a month. I felt more comfortable with the idea of talking to someone new – I'd been relieved when the last counsellor had retired.

A year ago, I was a normal thirteen-year-old kid. I enjoyed attending school. I guess that wasn't the norm for most kids, but for me, it was my retreat. I thrived on soaking up new infor-

also found studying distracted me from other problems – it was my escape.

And then, last October, my life changed. I still remember the day so vividly. I was walking to school, feeling excited. The sun was shining on my back, the cool breeze taking the weight of what I was about to be involved in off my shoulders. My best friend George always met me at our local bus stop. Neither of us spoke about what we were about to do, but no matter how hard we tried to pretend everything was normal, we knew it wasn't.

"I'm not ready to share everything just yet, but I can make a start," I told Miss Toffee.

"Of course." Miss Toffee seemed relieved that I had finally spoken. She poised her pen over the clipboard, ready to start taking notes.

My heart pounded, and my voice cracked as I let the words fall out of my mouth.

"I felt like I was trapped on a rollercoaster and couldn't unbuckle my seatbelt. I was just in it for the ride."

"Let's go on this ride together and start from the beginning, Billy," Miss Toffee tried to guide me. Little did she realise, she was about to hear more than she could imagine.



## **October 8**

The day had finally arrived. I couldn't believe it. I stood in the science lab with the rest of my class, anticipation buzzing in the air. Professor Bristow stood by his desk, laptop balanced on his right palm, ready to take attendance with his left finger poised on the keyboard.

"All present today, with six students about to embark on a life-changing science experiment," he exclaimed with enthusiasm as he swiftly checked off names on his screen. His attire was as usual: stained denim overalls, a well-worn white lab coat, and protective glasses perched on top of his head.

Miss Tobin, his lab assistant, was usually never more than a metre away from him. Today, however, she stood outside the science room, keeping guard.

Lips were being chewed, hands clenched, and fingers crossed as students put on their lab coats and safety glasses before forming a circle around a giant pot beside Professor Bristow's desk. It was the same colour and height as an elephant. Adjacent to it stood an A-frame ladder, its twelve steps leading to the pot's rim.

I stood between my best friends George and Preet. Professor Bristow placed his laptop on his desk and then positioned himself by the ladder, ready to watch each student place their allocated ingredient into the specifically designed science experiment pot.

George went first. He hesitated at the top of the ladder, staring into the steaming water before throwing his ingredient in: a pig's heart. Rita, Kevin and Marshall went next, and then it was Preet's turn. She cautiously made her journey up the ladder and began throwing kidney beans, one at a time, into the mixture – thirty, in total.

I chewed my gum and shoved my hands deep into my pockets. I didn't want anyone to see how much I was shaking.

Professor Bristow screeched out my name. The long hair growing out of a mole on his upper lip shook. I paused, closing my eyes and counting to ten before stepping forward. My heart



raced faster than I thought possible. I'd broken out in a cold sweat, and my muscles tensed.

I was still trying to remember how to breathe when Preet carefully made her way down the ladder and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Billy. Hey, Billy. You okay?"

Her soothing voice always put me at ease. We had been friends since the first grade. Few words were needed to know how the other was feeling.

"I'm nervous," I whispered.

"Don't worry, Billy. Everyone is." She smiled.

Every student in the room had raised eyebrows, open mouths, sweat on their brows, and trembling legs.

A clock rested beside the ladder. I picked it up, clutching it tightly, knowing its importance. Most students in the class had wanted to be assigned the clock as their ingredient to add to the pot. It was the final component – the most important piece of the puzzle.

It didn't win me any favours with the class when Professor Bristow announced I'd be the one adding the clock. He followed this statement with, "Billy is the most responsible one in the room." Everyone wanted to be Professor Bristow's favourite student, but he would often make it obvious I was his pick. It made me feel uneasy, as I didn't want any added attention on me. I was an A+ student. That was the only reason I was part of the most innovative class at the Royal Academy of Marvellous Adventures – RAMA. The Ace Class picked you, not the other way around. We were known to the school as Year 7A. As a class, though, we'd labelled ourselves 'the Year 7 Aces'.

RAMA mostly enrolled students who had specific talents and gifts. The school challenged learning and pushed science to the limit. Being accepted as a student was an honour, and



those invited to study at the prestigious academy thrived in the intense environment. RAMA didn't follow a standard curriculum. Instead, staff created lessons that had never before been taught.

As I walked towards the ladder, I wanted to turn and run, but it felt like a magnet was drawing me. Instead of running away, I climbed up the steps on shaky legs. I was just tall enough to see over the edge of the pot; liquid bubbled and frothed inside it, smoke stinging my eyes.

"Billy, be careful," Preet cried out as the ladder rocked back and forth and Professor Bristow tried to steady it.

I screamed as I lost my footing, flinging the clock into the air and grabbing the pot's side to steady myself. The more I tried to regain my balance, the more the ladder rocked, and the more tightly I clung to the hot pot. Below me, the students scrambled to help the professor steady the ladder.

The flying clock twisted and turned towards the ceiling, where it stopped for a moment, hovering weightlessly before spinning back down. *Plop. Swish. Gurgle.*

"Billy, did we do it?" Preet whispered from below as a *tick-tock* sound filled the room.

Having regained my balance, I dared to peek into the pot. Professor Bristow and my classmates gawked up at me, their eyes wide in anticipation.

"The clock is in the pot," I said with relief. "All ingredients have now been added."

The class raised their arms into the air in silent celebration. Miss Tobin left her post and came running in the door to join the team.

The waiting game had begun. The brew would need to boil overnight before the class would know if the experiment was successful – and if they had made history by creating the first human being in a school science lab.