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Category: Short Story

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## Boogers and Nails

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A raspy voice snakes through the sound of conversations, mingling with the busy scratching of pencils on paper.

“I saw Sasha last weekend and her runny nose was sooo disgusting! Also, can you tell me the answer to question number five again? I forgot.”

“Sasha’s sick? That’s terrible.” I reply, brows furrowing as my eyes scan the algebra worksheet. “Gabby... it’s literally just  $5x + 10 = 200$ .”

Gabby clears her throat. “Ok...so *what’s the answer?*”

I recoil every time she pronounces her elongated, sizzling s’s.

“38,” I sigh.

“38 what?”

“What do you mean, 38 what? X is 38.”

The shrill bell blares through the classroom speakers. My hands shoot to my ears as I slam my elbows on the cold metal desk.

“Alright kids, please carry your belongings to your lockers before we head out to the lunchroom,” my teacher mumbles after the bell, the high-pitched ringing still lingering in my ears.

“Hold my Chromebook for a second,” Gabby says, tossing her computer at me.

“Sure.”

I place her laptop on my table and we both pile our stuff. Gabby eyes the top of my stack.

“Can you give me my Chromebook now?”

“Here,” I heave, holding the heavy laptop with my bony fingers. Gabby snatches it back, the black case leaving white circles on my skin. As I pick up the mountain of school supplies on my desk, the pencil sitting at the peak of my pile rolls off and clatters on the ground.

“Gabby... can you hand me my pencil please?”

Turquoise acrylic nails wrap around the pink pencil.

“Actually... can I borrow it for a few days?”

“Um... I kind of need it for class. And plus, it was a gift from my mom.”

“Ohhh pleeease. Don’t be so stingy. I swear I’ll give it back.”

I idle there, leering at Gabby as I clutch the heap of notebooks and binders; my nails scratch the plastic covers and thin bones pop out of my arms, trembling.

“Fine.”

“Okay, thanks. Now hurry, let’s go to lunch.”

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Plastic plates clatter against steel spoons. Napkins drift from hands, settling on the cool floor like thin white feathers. Aromas of tacos and pizzas waft around the room. Meat sizzles. A stagnant stream of middle-schoolers snakes around the cafeteria, laughing and yelling, squeezing together, leaving no gap in the endless line. Behind me, Gabby runs her fingers along rows of snacks. Her bright turquoise nails scratch the shiny packaging. As I enter my lunch pin beside the cash register, Gabby places her plate next to my arm, the cold, hard plastic pressing my skin white.

“Oh my gosh, I *love* pop-tarts!”, Gabby exclaims.

“Cool.”

“Oh wait...I don’t have any money left in my account...”

Gabby chews on her nails and stares at me, beckoning for me to offer.

“Okay, I’ll buy you one then.”

“Yesss!!”

Gabby squeals, her sharp voice prickling my ear. Grabbing a pop-tart, I pay and wait behind the register for Gabby. In bright white numbers under “account balance”, was a “\$210.” My brows knit and my eyes dart towards Gabby.

“Let’s go sit at that table over there.”

“Sure...”

Gabby pulls me to the tables, her fingernails etching white sickles into my arm. As we walk out of the food section, several ladies pull down steel bars, locking the lunch and utensils away.

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Thunder clashes outside the busy math classroom the next morning. Gabby turns toward Sasha and asks for the fifth time, “What’s the answer to this one?”

“This is easy. Can’t you do it yourself?”

“Ugh, no, I can’t.”

“Fine, let me see what I have.”

I glance at the gray “10” scribbled on Sasha’s paper. She studies her sheet for a moment and then slides her arm over her work.

“I haven’t done it yet,” Sasha says.

“Oh”, Gabby sighs as she props a cheek on her hand and slouches forward. Sasha whips around and looks at me with a smirk spreading across her face. My mouth curves upwards, but the smile doesn’t reach my eyes. I sigh as I watch Gabby, her eyebrows contorted while she gawks at the math problem. Suddenly, the lunch bell rings, piercing through my trance and lifting students off of their seats like an invisible hand. “Come on, we’ll be late,” Sasha urges, suddenly standing beside me.

“K,” I reply.

Plastic cracks beneath my shoe. Pink shards and graphite smear the blue floor.

“Heyyy, I just have one question left. Do you mind...” Gabby trails off as she sees my crushed pencil sprawling on the ground.

“Why is my pencil on the floor?” I ask.

“Sorry...I must’ve dropped it. But what’s the big deal? It’s *just* a pencil.” Gabby says.

“I told you it was a gift.”

“Oh yeah...I forgot I-”

“Like you always do.” I say, my eyes narrowing. My fingernails carve crescent moons into the handle of my lunchbox; I stomp to the door, my ponytail whipping the tip of Gabby’s nose.

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The screaming and yelling of teens across the cafeteria pound my eardrums. A clang echos through the room as the steel rods pummel the floor, barring us from the food. My stomach grumbles while I unzip my bulging lunchbox, the bag threatening to overflow with plastic containers sitting atop a sea of napkins.

“I’m starving,” Gabby announces mopping her runny nose with her sleeve. Her mouth starts to open and close and open and close, each time the gap widening until she sneezes, blasting Sasha’s napkins off the table and sending the white sheets plummeting to the ground. Gabby’s arm flies to her face. Ivory outlines emerge under her hands as she presses her palm over her nose. A green booger sinking in slimy snot sticks out of the crevices between her fingers and on her nails.

“I NEED TISSUES!!” she screeches.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the cash register through the metal bars, and the glaring white “\$210” flashes in my head.

“We don’t have any. Go get some *yourself* Gabby.” I smirk.

A squeak echoes through the room as the steel rods jerk up, revealing a gap beneath it, freeing the trapped snacks. My arm brushes against the stark napkins in my lunchbox. We stare at Gabby scuttling from table to table to table; she’s begging for tissues, leaving a trail of snickering behind her. Gabby’s watery eyes peer at Table Five. Glasses and notebooks scatter the plastic surface. A number 2 pencil perches on a Chromebook. Laughter seeps from the area, luring Gabby closer to it. An elbow jabs the black laptop. The teal pencil plunges to the ground. As Gabby steps towards the table, the pencil rolls under her shoe; she pitches forward, her head sinking under the chairs. Gabby’s booger-smearred fingers smother the polished floor, her acrylic nails crack, the tiny turquoise fragments skittering on cold blue tiles.