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AADAM
BLACK
MYSTERY

Justin

HEARTBREAK

AT

ALAYSHA

HAMSTER

KIEAYLAH

HOTEL

ARTSMART

Mr. Torres was the first person at Berkeley Middle School every morning.

He was very reliable. Every single morning he came in with his grande black coffee from Starbucks and his extra loud flowered shirt from his enormous ugly shirt collection. He had so many colorful shirts that when you opened the door to his closet—*Kaboom!*—you were blinded by the brightness.

This morning when he arrived at the door to his classroom he noticed the door was wide open. Hmm, he thought. That's odd. He stroked his gray beard. Mr. Torres was a creature of habit and he always was sure to close and lock the door at the end of each day. Someone must have been in there. He assumed it was no big deal—maybe it was Jeffrey the janitor doing some early morning sweeping.

Jeffrey was a tall, slim, quiet man who never smiled. He was the human equivalent of the “meh” emoji. If Mr. Torres was an emoji, you'd have to say he was the monocle guy. Classy.



Just to be sure that nothing was missing, Mr. Torres did a quick inventory of Room 408. The computers were still there. The projector was still secured to the ceiling. Not a book was out of place. Even his favorite pencil was still standing to attention in the “World's Best Teacher” mug on his desk.

Mr. Torres zombie-walked across the room with an apprehensive feeling in his stomach. Like it was meatloaf day in the cafeteria. He was almost afraid to look. The first thing he saw out of place was a small puddle of water shining on the linoleum floor. Maybe Jeff missed a spot, he thought hopefully.

Mr. Jeffrey was a very reliable janitor so it wasn't likely, but still it was so much better than the alternative... Then he saw a small pile of what looked like sliced almonds on the floor. But Mr. Torres knew they weren't almonds. It was a pile of wood shavings spilled across the floor. It looked like a tiny lumberjack went insane and forgot to clean up.

Mr. Torres' palms got sweaty and his heart dropped faster than a roller coaster. Something was very wrong. He couldn't bear to look. He closed his eyes tightly. Then he took a deep breath and slowly opened them. The final clue was right there in front of him. A trail as clear as, well, as clear as hamster poop on a gleaming tile floor. Mr. Torres followed it with his eyes. The trail led under the cabinet where the Hamster Hotel rested. (The students always called it "Hamster Hotel" because they didn't like "hamster cage.")



Mr. Torres allowed himself to feel a little bit of hope. Maybe Bubbles was just hiding out under the hotel. He knelt down, his aching knees squishing unfortunately into some stray hamster poop. And these are his lucky trousers! Well they were. Before today. At least his fancy shirt remained unstained.

But that was the only bit of good news. Because under the Hamster Hotel was nothing but dust. You'd call it a dust bunny, but "dust hamster" seems more accurate. Point is: no Bubbles. Bubbles was indeed missing.

Just then, a voice from the doorway called out. "Torres! Did you get that report... Wait, what are you doing down there? Why are you on the ground? Pray on your own time."

"I'm not praying, Boss Lady, although maybe I should start."

"What are you talking about, Torres? And I told you I don't like it when you call me 'Boss Lady.' It's Principal Jansen to you, peasant! Wait, are you crying? Dude, I'm just kidding."

Mr. Torres took a big sniff and pinched his nose. He fanned himself to stop the tears. He smoothed the wrinkles in his Hawaiian shirt. His bottom lip was quivering like a bowl of jelly in an earthquake. "I'm not crying, you're crying," he said.

"Torres," Principal Jansen said. "What is going on? Do I need to call Nurse Bliven?"

"Only if he knows anything about hamsters. Or grand pet larceny."

"Torres, you're still not making sense," she said. "And stop crying. The students will be here shortly and you're a hot mess."

"Can you blame me?" Mr. Torres cried. "Bubbles is missing."

"Yes I can blame you, and who the heck is Bubbles?"

Mr. Torres gasped with wide eyes. "You don't know who Bubbles is? Only the best thing to ever come out of my classroom. Including Georgina Kramer and she went to Harvard!"

"Mr. Torres, I think you're being overly dramatic. How far could a hamster go? They only have tiny legs. It's not like it got in a car and drove away."

"First of all, Bubbles is a lady. And second of all, I just heard on NPR on the way in that they're teaching apes to drive now."

"Why would anyone do that? Apes drive like maniacs! Aren't there other things scientists could spend their time on?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Mr. Torres said. "We'd like to return to the moon or go to Mars or Venus. But I suppose this is what the scientists want to do, so teaching apes to drive is what they do!"

"Yeah but can they drive stick?" she asked. Just then the radio on her hip squealed. "Office to Principal Jansen! Office to Principal Jansen! This is a Code Tangerine. Repeat: Code Tangerine."

Principal Jansen gasped. All the blood drained from her face. She sprinted out the door like it was the final bell on the last day of school.

"Where are you going? This is a crisis! Bubbles is missing!"

Mr. Torres said this last part with such volume that he could have been heard all the way down the hall. And the person who overheard him wasn't even that far away. He was, in fact, standing right behind him. It was Aadam Black. Of course it was. There was no way Bubbles' disappearance was staying a secret now. Aadam had the biggest mouth in 7th grade by a long shot. He had a bigger mouth than the industrial-sized trash can behind the cafeteria.

"Mr. Torres, what's wrong? Maybe I can help. I could use some extra credit, you know," Aadam said.

"You could get 100 points of extra credit and still be failing."

"How is that even possible?"

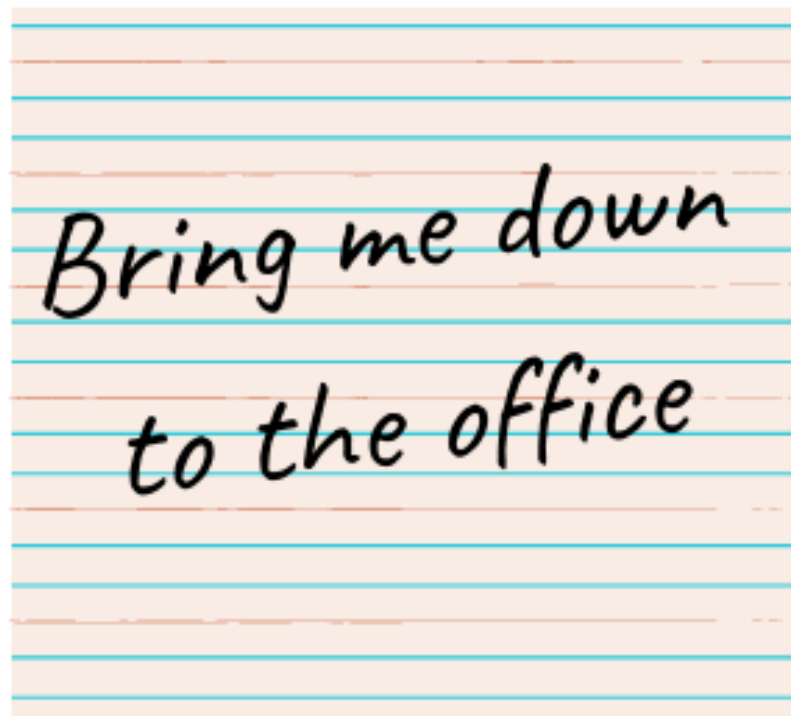
"You never heard of negative numbers?"

"No, I'm failing math too."

"Listen, Aadam, nothing is wrong. Just take your seat. You know what, actually, can you run something down the office for me?" Mr. Torres shoved a blank piece of paper into Aadam's hand. "Here, take this down to the office."

"Uh, Mr. Torres, this piece of paper is blank."

Mr. Torres grabbed a pencil from the desk and scribbled onto the paper. BRING ME DOWN TO THE OFFICE. "There," he said. "Now it's not blank."



Aadam looked with confusion at the paper. Then his eyes drifted across the room over Mr. Torres' shoulder. Straight at the Hamster Hotel.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Where's Bubbles?"

Mr. Torres didn't want to make Aadam sad so he quickly lied. "Bubbles just went on a little vacation. She's upstate at the farm."

Aadam's face fell. He got very still. You couldn't tell if he was alive or not. Then he whispered "The farm?"

"Yeah," Mr. Torres. "Sure. The hamster farm. It's great up there. All the celery you can shake stick at it."

"I know what... 'the farm'... means," Aadam said with his voice trembling. "That's where my parents said my dog Llama went. Only for me to find out some time later that there was no farm! Llama was dead!"

"You know, llamas sometimes play dead. Maybe it was just acting." This questionable fact came straight from the animal expert herself (self-proclaimed) of the seventh grade, Bailey Harvey. She had entered the room and quite an entrance it was.

Bailey Harvey proudly rocked the biggest pair of cherry red eyeglasses that Berkely Middle School had ever seen. She was completely unaware that this accessory gave her the nickname "Goggle Girl." Her brown hair was always in a messy bun at the top of her head. Actually, hold the bun. Her hair was just messy. Braces were common in middle school of course, but Bailey's were very noticeable because she always matched the rubber bands of her braces to her glasses. That's right: cherry red. It always looked like she had just eaten an entire pack of Twizzlers.

"We weren't talking about actual llamas, Goggle Girl," Aadam said. "We were talking about my dog named Llama."

"You have a dog named Llama?"

"Had."

"Aww, I'm sorry to hear that, Aadam. Dogs typically are immortal."

"Well not mine. She's dead. Just like Bubbles!"

Mr. Torres realized he had to put a stop to this morbid—not to mention inaccurate—conversation. The fake news about Bubbles' demise would be all over the school before lunch. "Bubbles isn't dead! She's just missing! Focus, people."

The intercom buzzed in. It was the voice of Principal Jansen. "Attention Berkely Middle School: It has come to my attention that several classroom pets have gone missing. Do not panic. But do watch where you step."

Do not panic? Mr. Torres thought. It was far too late for that. He ran through his mental list of the other classroom pets. Did something happen to Jack the Rabbit? Hairy Jerry the tarantula? He looked down at the hamster poop on his knees and the empty place where Bubbles should be. It was going to be a long day, and first period hadn't even started yet.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Torres," Bailey said. "Well, this is my next class, so maybe I can help you. You know I'm an expert in animal behavior. For example, a hamster's favorite food is peanut butter and anchovies."

"I'm not sure that..." Mr. Torres started to say, but then Aadam interrupted.

"Yeah, right, you're going to solve this? And get all the extra credit for yourself, Goggle Girl? If anyone is going to find this hamster it's me!"

"Well at least I'm not a big mouth like you."

"At least my mouth isn't full of metal!"

"At least my mouth isn't full of garbage!"

Before the two came to blows, Mr. Torres slammed his hands down on the desk. The students both jumped. "I can use all the help I can get!" he shouted. "Whoever finds Bubbles gets an A for the quarter."

"Whatever," Bailey said. "I already have an A. An *A plus* actually. An A would be a step down for me. But I'll help just because I love hamsters. They're one of the most intelligent of all the reptiles, you know."

Mr. Torres didn't bother to correct this wildly inaccurate claim. Did Bailey really think hamsters were reptiles? He also didn't bother to correct her claim to an A plus. More like an F plus. Hold the plus. No matter—he needed all the help he could get.

And if his co-detectives in this mystery were going to be the loudmouth Aadam Black and the know-nothing Bailey Harvey, well, sometimes we just have to play the hand we're dealt.

"Okay you two," he said. "You might not exactly be Holmes and Watson, but you're all I got."

"Don't you mean *Dietz* and Watson?" Bailey asked with a self-assured smile. "By the way I'm Dietz. Everyone knows he's the smart one. Right, Watson?"

Bailey turned her head to see where Aadam was and she realized he was gone. He had snuck out to try to get a jump on solving the case! "Get back here, Trashmouth!" she shouted.

"You can't catch me, Goggle Girl!" he said, already half out the door. Mr. Torres sighed. Was it too late to discard and get a new hand? Bailey sprinted towards the door. She really did need the extra credit.

"Wait," Mr. Torres said. "I didn't even tell you what to do yet."

"I'm going to go down the hall, door-to-door, and find out exactly which pets are missing. I'm going to write it all down in my notebook, work up a victim profile, and work backwards from there until we have our suspect pool."

♥ ♥
VICTIMS

#1: Bubbles

#2:

#3:

Mr. Torres blinked. "Yeah," Bailey said. "That's what I was going to say."

"You stay here and do your homework," Aadam said. But it was too late. She already had her notebook out and had written: VICTIMS across the top in bright, red pen. Under that: #1 BUBBLES.

"Fine," Aadam said. "We're a team. But I'm in charge."

"I'm in charge," Bailey whispered at the same time.

Aadam and Bailey made their way down the hall. They knocked on the door next to Mr. Torres' room. It was the room of Ms. Kim. Her door said "KIM KIM" on it, which wasn't a typo. She really had the same first and last name. She was an English teacher so her door also had a portrait of Shakespeare on it. He was saying "Where there's a Will, there's a way!"

**Where
there's a
Will,
there's a
way.**

KIM KIM



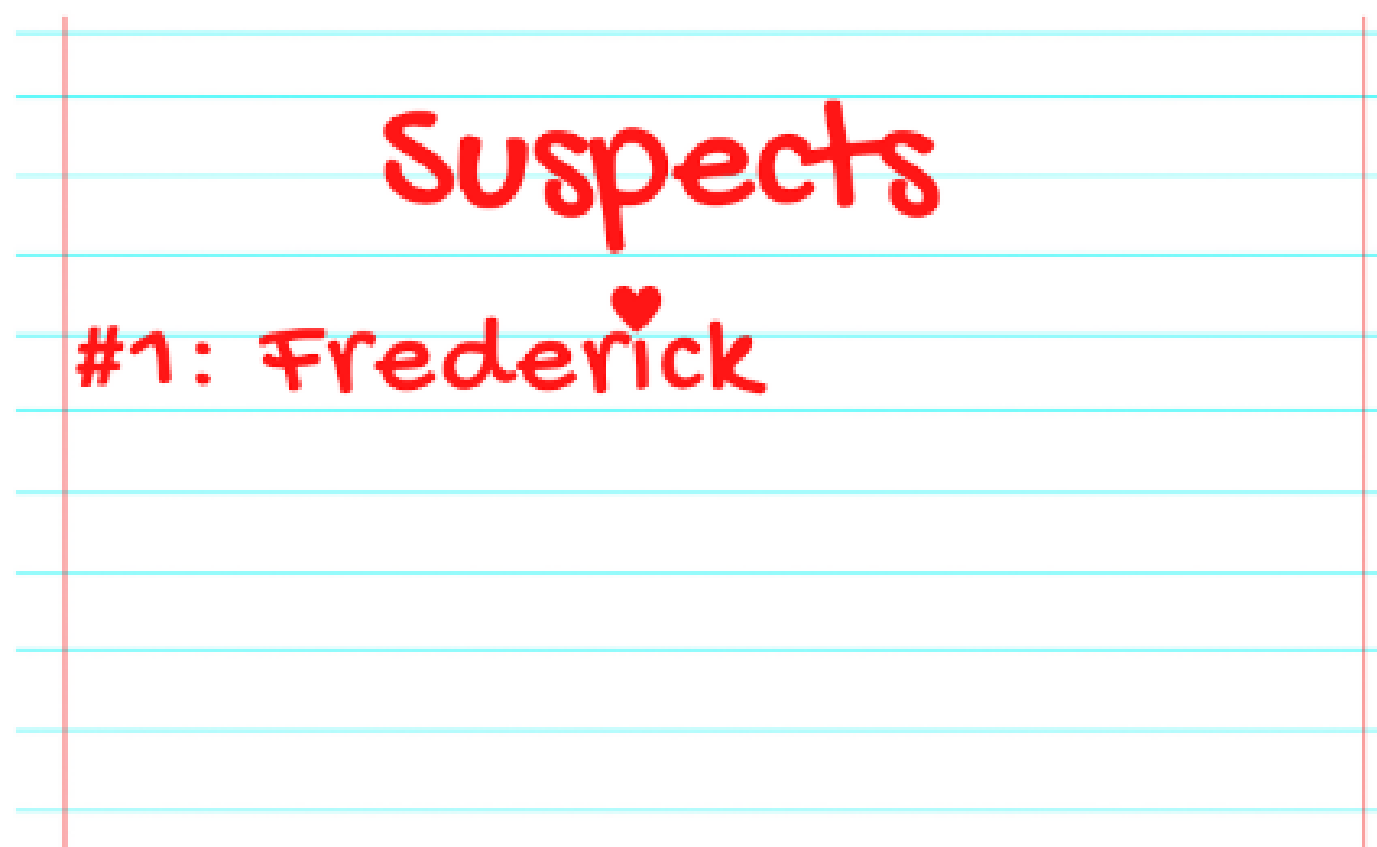
Ms. Kim wasn't known as being exactly the nicest teacher in the school. She once told Terrell Gunner she'd feed him to her python if he kept asking to use the bathroom during her class. Everyone knows what happened to Terrell after that. Let's just say it's a good thing he had a spare pair of pants in his locker.

As Aadam and Bailey entered the room, they saw Ms. Kim sitting on the floor crying. They looked at each other and blinked. It was an odd sight to see such a mean teacher reduced to a puddle of tears. It was like seeing a lion wearing a tutu.

"Frederick is missing!" she said with a gasp.

"Is Frederick one of the sixth graders?" Bailey said. "Should we call his parents?"

"Don't be daft," Aadam said. "Frederick is the python. And we have our first suspect."



The door to Ms. Kim's classroom flew open with a bang. There, panting at the door, was a seventh grader named QWFFX. That's what he told everyone his name was, anyway. His real name was something like Quinn. He was a little odd. He liked to pretend he was an alien robot and he told everyone who would listen that he came from Uranus.

"Beep boop bop bop, major malfunction," QWFFX reported. "Jack the Rabbit from the room of Teacher Unit 5 is missing. Might be on the loose. Self-destruct in five, four, three, two, one..." Then QWFFX made an explosion noise. *Boooomssssh.*" He really was a little very odd.

"Did you hear that, Ms. Kim?" Aadam asked.

"Yes," she said. "Quinn always pretends to self-destruct. It's a whole thing."

"MY NAME IS QWFFX—"

The detectives ignored him and focused on the matter at hand. "Frederick is a mass murderer!" Aadam said

Ms. Kim gasped. "He is not! He's a vegetarian."

"Oh yes, many animals are vegetarians by choice," Bailey said. "Some snakes even eat rocks."

"Well we should introduce them to the inside of your head then!" Aadam said. "Beep, boop, zing," QWFFX said.

"That's not true," Aadam said. "Snakes all eat meat. And bunnies and hamsters are made of meat if you didn't know."

"Well not my Frederick," Ms. Kim said. "He only eats cheeseburgers *without* the meat."

"Oh yes, that's a common diet among many pythons," Bailey said.

"So you're telling me that this python eats a roll with cheese and lettuce and onions for dinner every day?" Aadam said.

"Well there's also ketchup," Ms. Kim said. "Don't be daft."

"I'm sorry," Aadam said. "But there's no way that's true. You've been starving this poor python with a vegetarian diet. No wonder he snapped! He clearly snuck out of his tank and has been making his way down the hall snacking on all the other classroom pets!"

"Well if that's true," said Ms. Kim. "Why is he right there?"

Ms. pointed out the open door to the hallway, and there was Jeffrey the janitor, doing his best to tip-toe unnoticed down the hall. It is hard to remain unnoticed, however, with a large python draped over your shoulders, and a rodent rodeo poking out of your pocket. There was even a tarantula in his hair.

Yep, all the missing pets were right there with Jeffrey. He was caught red-handed. Literally because one of the pets apparently bit him so he had a small cut on his hand.

"We caught you red-handed!" Aadam shouted.

"This is paint," Jeffrey said.

"Not the paint—the pets!"

"Apprehend him," QWFFX said. "Activating super speed in three, two, one... VROOM VROOM VROOM!" He was not actually very fast. But neither was Jeffrey. He tripped over QWFFX's feet and all the pets spilled to the ground. Hairy Jerry the tarantula flung onto the floor safely. Jack the Rabbit started to hop away. Bubbles froze in fear. Because two inches from her were the fangs of Frederick the Python. It wasn't just Bubbles—everyone was frozen in fear.

"Frederick! Come over here," Ms. Kim sang. "I have a salad!" Frederick closed his mouth and slithered happily towards his mom. "I told you he's a vegetarian," Ms. Kim said.

At that moment Mr. Torres came sprinting down the hallway. "Bubbles!" he shouted. "You're alive! You're alive!" He scooped up the hamster. Bubbles had a huge smile on her tiny face from ear to furry ear. Mr. Torres leaned in and gave her a kiss on the head. "Extra credit for everyone!" he shouted. "Except for you, Jeffrey. Extra time behind bars for you."

"I don't need the extra credit," Bailey said, flipping her hair. "Just FYI."

Principal Jansen joined the group. "Explain yourself, Jeffrey! I can't believe you would do this!" Her voice echoed off the linoleum.

"Yeah, why would you steal a pet?" Bailey said. "Are you that lonely?"

"You are all such a mess," Jeffrey said. "I had to save these innocent animals from captivity. It was inhumane to have them living here with you lot!"

"That's no excuse," Principal Jansen said. "These animals are part of our family. And you are fired!"

Jeffrey's normally stoic face went from "meh emoji" to "sad emoji." The one with extra tears. He threw his ring of keys to the floor with a clatter and stormed down the hallway.

"You all heard Torres, right?" QWFFX said. "We're getting extra credit."

"You barely even did anything, Quinn!" said Bailey, crossing her arms.

"You know what?" Aadam said. "I don't even want the extra credit. I just want to spend the weekend with a certain cute, cuddly pet."

"I think that can be arranged," Mr. Torres said, gently handing Bubbles to him.

"Ew gross, not a hamster," Aadam said, pushing Bubbles back into Mr. Torres' grasp. "Come here, you," he said, scooping up the tarantula. "It's me and you, Hairy Jerry. Let's get out of this Hamster Hotel once and for all."

T H E E N D

