

# AN INTRODUCTION (SORT OF)

**THERE ARE TWO THINGS** wrong with this world.

Well, maybe not just two. There are obviously a ton of things wrong with the world, but just for the purposes of time, I'll talk about the major two I've observed in my life.

The first one is lack of ambition. I know, I know, it's weird for me, an almost-thirteen-year-old, to talk about ambition, but it *is* kind of how the world goes around. Think about it. What if early Americans had never held that Tea Party? What if Marie Curie had decided she didn't want to study science? What if Beyoncé was too shy to sing? Well, that would be a problem. A

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huge problem. And we're lacking ambition in the world today—not just in the world, but specifically at Paxton Middle School. My school. Most people here are perfectly content to be ordinary, and that is a tragedy. Or is it a travesty? Oh, who knows, it's one of those words. Or maybe both? Huh. I'll look that up later. But sadly, there is a lack of both ambition and talent in my school. Last year, my school got a project funded through a local car dealership that basically gave the students a budget to create something that would be beneficial to the school. All the students had to submit ideas, and then we had to vote on the top five. My idea, creating a dedicated space to host a tutoring center, would have obviously been super helpful for the school. But the rest of the students overwhelmingly voted to repurpose an old storage closet into a glorified nap room. Come *on*. I completely understand the need for rest and relaxation. But there's a time and place for things like that. Like when you're at home. In your own room. On your own time! Imagine if Marie Curie had decided to focus on meditation rooms instead of discovering radiation treatment.

The second thing that is wrong with the world is the concept of love. And I don't mean love, like between family members or even the love you have for your friends. I'm talking about romantic love, the type of love that you see in the movies. Hearts, flowers, grand gestures, the whole shebang. That type of love is a parasite, especially for middle schoolers. And oddly enough, all my classmates have been infected with the love parasite. It seems like every time I turn around, someone else is inevitably and completely consumed with what they believe is love. How many

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people do you know who actually fall in love in middle school?!

Love is nothing but a distraction. A distraction from the important things in life.

My best friend, Bruno, thinks it is highly ironic that I hate the idea of love, since my mom writes romance novels. But I don't think so, because logically, tons of people have moms who are writers.

Love hasn't done anyone any favors in life, and it definitely hasn't done me any. Love doesn't take away the pain of being roughly one of fifteen Black kids in your school or of losing a grandma to colon cancer or of never having a dad while growing up. Love doesn't help me forget—but ambition definitely does.

Which brings me to my next point. I have big dreams and even bigger ambitions. When I get older, I'm going to be a biologist. I have everything all mapped out. Howard University for college. Johns Hopkins for graduate school. Cure colon cancer in my twenties. Win the Nobel Prize (à la Marie Curie) when I'm an old woman like my mom (so, about thirty-five). It's a solid plan. A plan I will definitely achieve as long as I can overcome one obstacle. Well, not so much an obstacle as much as a person.

Trevor Jin.

Actually, I would like to revise my earlier statement. There are *three* things wrong with the world: lack of ambition, love, and Trevor Jin.

Trevor Jin and I were born to despise each other. I don't know if people are born with archenemies, but I definitely feel that

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I was. I can't do anything—I mean, anything—without Trevor upstaging me.

For example, when we were in the third grade, we had this science fair that I was super excited about (obviously). I worked hard for three weeks creating a solar panel that powered a small paper windmill. It was a perfect complement to the clean energy unit we had just learned about. But Trevor Jin brought an actual robot that he had built from scratch. The robot could say “I love you” in forty different languages. Yuck. But of course, Trevor won first prize, and my perfectly perfect solar panel only won second.

That wasn't the beginning of things, though. Our feud truly started as most feuds do. With a stolen story.

Okay, I'm not actually certain that's how most feuds start. I'm not even 100 percent certain that I know anyone who is in a feud, but I'm certain this is how the feud started with Trevor. Trevor and I started kindergarten the same year, and we both had Ms. Colton, a bright young teacher who had only been a teacher for a little over a year. Trevor came to school in a bow tie and suspenders, and even then he acted like he was the king of the world. I was naive (because hello, I was five), and I attempted to make friends with Trevor.

For the first few minutes of class, Trevor and I sat on the round alphabet carpet. We went through normal kid stuff, favorite foods (mine: chicken nuggets, his: ice cream) and our favorite thing to play on at the playground (mine: the swings, his: the bouncing horse). After five minutes, we were the best of friends, or at least that was what I believed.

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During our conversation, I told Trevor about my summer adventures, how my nana had saved up so she could take us on a trip to a lake house, where she taught me to swim and forage for berries. Trevor listened patiently, nodding his head during each part of my story. In return, Trevor told me about how he went to Disney World with his parents. When Ms. Colton clapped her hands a couple of seconds later, calling us to order, I was convinced that I had found a best friend that I would have for the rest of my life.

Ms. Colton decided that we should all do introductions since it was our first official day of school. She kept it simple. She just wanted our names and what we did over summer vacation. When she asked the class who would like to go first, Trevor immediately raised his hand, and Ms. Colton picked him. I was happy for Trevor. (Again, I would like to cite naivete.) I mean, why wouldn't I be? Trevor was my new best friend. He went up to the front of the room, a perfectly put-together child, not a hair out of place, his white shirt crisp and pressed.

He told the class his name and date of birth (not something Ms. Colton asked for, but whatever). When he first started talking, I was beaming with pride. After all, I thought Trevor was my friend. But then he started his summer story, and certain parts started to sound eerily like what I'd just told him. He talked about going to the lake and having to find his own food. And I sat there getting more flustered with each word. The icing on the cake was when he told the class that his grandma had saved up to take him on this special vacation, just the two of them. That was when I

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knew that he'd stolen my story, the whole thing. I was so mortified that by the time it was my turn to go up and present, I froze on the carpet, unable to move. From that day on, I only talked to Trevor whenever I was forced to.

And there are tons of stories like that. When it comes to Trevor Jin, I always seem to come up as second best. He makes sure of it.

But I'm working on that, and this year's the year that things change. Also, because I'm working on my scientific writing, you will see tons of things called footnotes. (These are used by real scientists when they give extra information that they don't have time to put in the main article.) So I will be using these handy devices to convey my most personal, most intimate thoughts. None of which will have to do with love or Trevor Jin.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Cupid Commandment Number 13: For a Cupid, there is nothing more noble than the pursuit of a quality education (except for maybe the pursuit of love).*

**PREPARING FOR THE FIRST** day of school is similar to preparing for battle. At least, I think it would be similar to preparing for battle. I haven't actually prepared for battle before, but I imagine that preparing for battle would include plenty of planning, and if I'm known for anything, it's my ability to get things organized.

I'm the queen of organization. I already have my bookbag packed according to my class schedule (something we just got last weekend). I have:

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- 1) Five binders (color coded for each of my different classes and filled with paper)
- 2) A pencil pouch filled with ten already-sharpened pencils, three highlighters, and five pens
- 3) Two glue sticks
- 4) Safety scissors<sup>1</sup>
- 5) A pack of fresh note cards

Most students at PMS (Paxton Middle School)<sup>2</sup> will not have already gotten their supplies, because technically we won't get our supply lists until the first day, but it's the same supply list every year. It never changes.

I imagine that Marie Curie<sup>3</sup> would have always, always been organized. And that is motivation enough to buy my supplies early, even if my best friend, Bruno, says that I will end up being the only one who brings their supplies on the first day. I'm completely fine with that. Except I know that he's wrong. I won't be the *only* person who will come prepared. I know one other person who will be in class today in freshly pressed khakis and a button-down shirt (Honestly, who dresses like that in middle school? Who dresses like that if you're not a thirty-year-old man?), with

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1. My mother still doesn't trust me with scissors even though this is my last year of middle school. It's not like I'm the one who stabbed myself with a toothpick last year.

2. Yes, our school initials are PMS. Yes, it is very embarrassing. Sometimes I wonder if there are actual adults in charge at that school.

3. Marie Curie is my absolute hero (heroine??). She was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, and she won it twice. Honestly, if I could go back and be reincarnated as Marie Curie, I totally would.



all his supplies spread out on the desk in front of him.

Trevor Jin will be prepared, more than prepared, but this is going to be my year. This is going to be the year I best Trevor Jin.

A soft knock sounds, and my mom opens the door. I don't know why she even knocks. She never actually waits to be told she can come in.

Privacy is not something we have in the Johnson household.

She leans on the doorframe, smiling at me like a crazed raccoon. She looks absolutely ridiculous in a yellow poodle skirt, her hair pulled up into two poufs on either side of her head. I pull at my blue sweater self-consciously, giving her a withering look.

“You're not taking me to school like that.”

My mom chuckles, coming over and giving me a playful hip bump. “Why not? It's a lot of fun. I'm getting into character. My newest heroine<sup>4</sup> is a love-shy girl carhop<sup>5</sup> who loves a boy from the wrong side of the tracks. You know getting into character helps me to write.”

I roll my eyes.

“That's *Grease*. You're literally just writing the plot to *Grease*.”

My mom scrunches up her nose, sticking her tongue out at me.

Honestly, sometimes I forget who the adult is in this house.

“The client is always right, Erin.”

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4. My mom is a romance writer (I know, I know). Well, technically she's what you would call a ghostwriter. Someone who writes a story for someone else, gets paid, and then gives all the credit to the person who paid them. It is, honestly, one of the stupidest things I have ever heard of. It would be like me writing a report for Trevor Jin because he paid me, and then Trevor getting all the recognition and credit. No, thank you!

5. A carhop is a fifties-style waiter/waitress who serves people at their cars. Sometimes they do this on roller skates.

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“Whatever,” I mumble, slinging on my backpack and glancing down at my watch. “We’re going to be late if we don’t hurry.”

I look at her outfit again, groaning. “Mom, you can’t get out of the car looking like that. Please don’t get out of the car looking like that.”

Mom laughs. Actually laughs. Like this wasn’t some type of emergency that would tarnish my reputation as a serious student.

“Don’t worry, peanut,” Mom says, dropping a kiss on my forehead. “I won’t embarrass you.” She pulls playfully on my sweater. “Even though I would be the perfect complement to this grumpy librarian getup.”

She wiggles her eyebrows at me as I swat her arm.

“Better grumpy librarian than over-the-hill sock-hop girl.”

She snorts and we both laugh. My mom is definitely not over-the-hill. She had me when she was twenty, and she still looks like the living embodiment of some type of goddess. She is all smooth, even dark chestnut skin and perfect ringlet curls, where I’m short (honestly, when will I get a growth spurt?), pale brown (apparently, this is all thanks to my dad), freckled (again, thanks, Dad, whoever you are<sup>6</sup>), and I have impossible lionlike (reddish-brown) hair that refuses to lie down no matter how much gel I put on it. It really isn’t fair that I have such a mismatched appearance, while my mom (who constantly goes out of her way to look like she’s an alien from another planet) looks so effortlessly beautiful.

“Can you pick up Bruno?” I ask politely, even though I know

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6. I have never met my dad. He left my mom right after I was born. My mom won’t tell me anything about him, except that I look like him, which is not helpful at all.

she is going to pick up Bruno. Bruno's mom is her absolute closest friend in the world.

"Duh, of course I will," she responds, ushering me into the kitchen. She pushes a bagel into my hand, a dry bagel with absolutely no cream cheese. Who eats dry bagels?

"I'll get them both," my mom responds nonchalantly.

I put the bagel up to my mouth, preparing to swallow it down quickly, but I stop when I fully digest what my mother has said.

"Both," I say slowly, filling with dread.

My mom gives me an uncharacteristically sharp look. "Yes, both, Erin."

I groan. That means we're picking up not only Bruno, but also his obnoxious twin brother, Ben. Since our mothers have been best friends for most of their lives, Bruno, Ben, and I were raised together practically as siblings. Our mothers got pregnant with us around the same time, and our birthdays are officially five months apart. So Bruno has always been like a brother to me. We've always been attached at the hip. He is way closer to me than he is to his brother, who is meaner than a rattlesnake at a Fourth of July party. Ben is completely uninterested in me. To him, I'm nothing more than a pesky bothersome fly on the wall. But Ben absolutely loathes Bruno.

It wasn't always like this, though. There was a time when Bruno, Ben, and I were all close. But then when Ben and Bruno were eight, their parents got a divorce,<sup>7</sup> and it was like Ben turned into a

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7. Ben and Bruno's dad now lives in California. So, they only see him during the first half of the summer, and every other Christmas break.

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different person, surly and uncommunicative. It wasn't long before Bruno and I stopped hanging out with Ben. Ben can't understand how he and Bruno are even siblings, much less twins. He picks on Bruno every chance he gets. But when you're a talented lacrosse player with tons of charisma (and very little ambition), you can get away with being mean, especially when you're mean to your twin brother who doesn't own clothes in any color other than black.

Even though I typically carpool with Bruno, for the last two years Ben has been getting rides with his best friend and fellow lacrosse buddy, Xavier. But Xavier recently moved out of state. So, I guess we're now going to be stuck with Ben on morning rides to school.

When we pull up to their house, my mom leans on the horn, something that embarrasses me but makes Bruno and Ben's mom come to the door crippled over with laughter. They do this routine every time they take us to school. It isn't funny. It is never funny. I honestly would take the bus, if our neighborhood stop wasn't three blocks away. Bruno and Ben come out of the house, both of them scooting around their mother.

“Take good care of my boys, Jo!”

“Siempre,”<sup>8</sup> my mom shouts back.

This is also a part of their routine. They burst into a fit of giggles again.

I scoot over for Bruno, who climbs into the backseat, while Ben sits up front, grinning over at my mother.

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8. Bruno and Ben's mom, Isa, is a second-generation Salvadorean, and she taught my mom some basic Spanish terms. This one means *always*.

“Hi, Joanna. You look nice today.”

Ben purposefully looks back at me. I give him a biting look and he ignores me. My mother has started telling all the people my age to refer to her by her first name, even though it annoys me to no end. I roll my eyes.

“Thank you, Ben,” she says, ruffling his light brown hair. “Ready for your first day of eighth grade?” my mom asks jovially, completely unaware of the death glare I’m giving her from the backseat.

“Yep, of course,” Ben replies, fixing his letterman’s jacket. I roll my eyes again. It’s not even cold enough for a jacket, but Ben is a peacock. He loves for everyone to know just how popular he really is. As Ben turns around to face us, his mouth lifts into a smirk.

“Looks like the wonder twins<sup>9</sup> are ready too.” He laughs. “The vampire and the librarian.”

I see Bruno’s cheeks redden out of the corner of my eye.

“See,” my mom says, laughing. “I told you, you look like a librarian.”

I ball my hands into fists. “Well,” I say sweetly, “I will agree that I look like a librarian if Ben will agree to spell it.”

Bruno snorts beside me, putting his head down when his brother turns around again to glare at us, his cheeks heating to a pale pink. Okay, I’m normally not this mean, but Ben is ruthless when it comes to Bruno, and it really isn’t right.

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9. Ben thinks it’s highly original and amusing to refer to us as twins. It’s neither original nor amusing.

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Bruno, honestly, never does anything to anybody.

“Erin Marie,” my mom admonishes. Her disapproving eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. I sink back against my seat as Ben gives me a triumphant look. I huff loudly. Ben is definitely not worth it.