

Bryan Zhang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Vestavia Hills High School, Vestavia, AL

Educator: Kevin Zhen

Category: Short Story

Roller Coasters

“Dude. One more ride. We have to do it.” Logan asks, pointing at the red and white tracks of a roller coaster as we walk across a narrow alleyway.

“I’m good, the line looks way too long,” I say. “Also, didn’t the teacher say we have to be ready to go at 6:00? It’s already 5:30.”

“Come on, there’s no way it’ll take that long. I’ll just go wait and see,” he responds, slipping his arms out of his jacket and shoving them into his backpack.

“You’re gonna be late, we have the math team tournament after this, remember?”

“Good, I didn’t want to go anyways,” he replies as he pivots around; his white sneakers darting across cracks in the road weaving between crowds.

Crooked sandstone buildings with cracked bricks decorate each side of the narrow cobblestone path, the fumes of burnt barbeque and oil lofting into the air. Groups of people gather at the entrances of each store, bent dollar bills between their fingers. Classmates rush by, some with funnel cakes in their hands and others with empty bottles of water. Beside me, a cart with shrieking people rushes down the tracks, spraying harsh wind in both directions before it ascends again as a toddler throws a coughing fit. Cheerful music erupts from the ticketing booth Logan stands in front of. He waves with one hand as the other digs through his pockets.

“Hey, can I borrow five bucks for the ride?” Logan yells, rushing back.

“I only have \$10 left.” What happened to *your* money?”

“Well, I brought some but I spent it all on the jacket,” he says. “Please?”

“You’ll waste it either way, we only have half an hour left,” I sigh.

“Please, I’ll pay you back; I promise,” he continues.

“Ok, fine,” I mutter, snatching a crumpled \$5 bill from my pocket.

“Thanks,” he says, darting back to the rough line. His math team jacket tips out of his bag. The left sleeve spills over. Then the right. The navy jacket falls, scrunched on the dusty path. I signal at him, but he continues to gaze at the towering ride, responseless.

“Hurry up, let’s get some food before we have to leave,” yells a familiar voice. Brayden jogs to my side, throwing his backpack over his shoulder.

“Oh, hey Brayden. Where’ve you been?”

“I was trying to find you guys,” he replies. “You wanna get some food though?”

“Sure. Where do you wanna go?” I ask.

“I don’t know, we could go to that restaurant over there,” he says, pointing at a small building with colorful signs plastered over its walls like a mural.

We hobble across the winding path, crowds nudging past us and bumping into our shoulders. My backpack sways gently along my shoulder as my glasses fog in the heat.

“Shoot,” Brayden halts.

“What’s wrong, you forget something?” I ask.

“No, the math tournament is right after this and I forgot to study,” he responds.

“Oh. I guess we’ll have time to do so tonight. Hopefully it gets cancelled or something.”

Another cart full of passengers swoops down, their arms dangling dangerously close to the track. The words “YOU LOSE” light up a screen next to me as families mumble complaints. Brayden stifles a laugh. Employees snatch balls from broken bottles, tossing them into small glass jars.

“NEXT!” yells an employee from behind the booth.

Lining up side by side, a group of teens with the same navy math team jacket step up to play, their gazes intent on the small target amidst the ocean of glass bottles. They pass faded dollar bills over the counter as they begin to hurl

the small golf balls, the deafening sound of shattering glass overpowering the alley.

My phone vibrates inside my pocket. A series of high-pitched notes sprout from Brayden's.

"NEW MESSAGE BY MRS. CLEMENS: Please pack up your belongings and come to the front entrance with your math team jacket! Urgent matters to discuss!"

"Guess we should head back," Brayden mutters.

I nod and shove my phone back into my pocket before glancing up. Above, clouds shift from white to yellow, the sun setting behind the horizon. The neon math team logo emblazoned on my jacket glistens under the beacons of sunlight. Leaves sway in the air, the breeze nudging the humidity away. I exhale. Panting, Logan sprints back towards us, sweat dripping down his neck.

"See, didn't I tell you that-" I start.

"Shut up," he replies.

We gather with the clump of classmates. One by one, yellow buses roll onto the cracked asphalt, their engines roaring.

"Everybody, listen up! I'll explain what happened once you get on the bus. Make sure you didn't lose anything!" calls Mrs. Clemens, stumbling out of a gift shop, her hand in the air.

The bus's doors swivel open with a hiss. Grabbing onto the cold handrail, we step up the steep flight of stairs. AC nozzles purr inside the cabin as classmates tumble into their seats. We follow, sitting down at the last row. Mrs. Clemens leans at the front of the bus.

"There's been a confirmed case of COVID here in Tampa, so our school system has mandated us to go back two days early. We'll head to the hotel, and the buses will leave in the morning," Mrs. Clemens announces.

Faint mumbles, groans, and sighs erupt from each row of the bus.

"Unfortunately, we also won't be able to refund your money since we paid for everything already," she adds.

"Well, that's just great." Brayden sighs. "My Mom is gonna kill me."

"Same. At least we won't have to do the math tournament," I say.

"True, but we can't come back tomorrow either," he mumbles.

"Shoot, I forgot about that. I guess we'll just have to wait for next year," I reply.

"I mean, at least we still have the band trip," Brayden suggests.

"There's COVID, we probably won't go anywhere," I mutter.

Head leaning against the cold window, the bus doors close. The engine kicks on again as we speed out of the parking lot.

"Crap. I lost my jacket," Logan exclaims, fumbling around his backpack.