

MATH PERSON

by Julia Schanen

1. MY FIRST TIME AT THE AMC (NOT THE ONE THAT SELLS POPCORN)

Is a number the opposite of a feeling?
Is a proof the opposite of a poem?

I love clothes with history, art with mystery,
unusual haircuts and boba tea,
flowers and ballet and photography.

Does that make me the opposite of a mathematician?

What if
opposites attract and interact
and even co-exist, within one person,
as equally valid facts?

This is the question I'm trying to pursue
by travelling somewhere new
without much preparation
or confidence
or even accurate directions.
My mom drops me off, and I run, with minutes to spare,
from the wrong building to the right one.
And into a lobby filled with parents, and an auditorium filled with boys.

I stand there, awkward and alone, tempted to back away from all this noise.

A boy brushes past me, shorter than my shoulder,
He holds a clear bag filled with several perfect pencils,
while I clutch just the two I'd grabbed from the junk drawer of my kitchen.
What if both break?

This boy, who looks maybe 12, moves with resolve toward the front of the auditorium.

Wait.

This is supposed to be the AMC 10. As in, American Math Competition 10th grade.

But all of these boys surrounding me look too young – like 11, 12, 13 years old.

I am 15, tall and lanky, not to mention a girl.

Maybe I am too old and too late and too female to even try this.

The auditorium is full (though not of girls).

It's every other seat, please.

I can feel the excitement building.

A scary, springy feeling.

No one looks around, at least not at me. No one smiles.

The boy to my left has brought five pencils. *Five*. I count them up.

Maybe math geniuses use up more pencils than math mortals.

The boy in front of me takes a gulp from his water bottle.

I forgot mine in the car.

Everyone looks like they are here to do battle.

But what if I don't agree?

What if I'm here, weapon-free?

With just my curiosity,

and this urge to experience something different than what math is like at school.

Seventy-five minutes pass like it's only been five. Just me, paper, pencil.

The auditorium vanishes as I fall into a spiral of joy and terror.

The satisfying click of logic falling into place.

The excruciating certainty that the answer is in reach, if I stretch really, really hard.

The paralysis of seeing three ways to a solution, but only having time to pursue one.

But which one??

My brain is on fire.

An adult voice finally puts an end to it. Douses the inferno.

I look up, wake up, can't believe it's over, this crazy math fling.

Already, I fear I have blown it. Didn't even finish the whole thing.

But before I even get up, I want more.

I know I'm in the right place, whatever my score.

I follow the crowd out of the auditorium and look for a familiar face.

But there is no one here for me,

no one to chat with feverishly,

or commiserate and celebrate.

I need to do both, to release all this energy.

I scan around for the few girls that took this exam, too.
What's their story?
Am I the only one who wants to go back into that auditorium and do it all over again?
And then can we please spend the entire evening discussing the exam questions, because I'm dying inside?

Outside, the parking lot is full of people chatting. Relatives. I even see some grandparents.
The AMC is a family event, for some families.
My mom finally shows up, looking distracted and tired.
The car ride home is lonely.
I try to tell her what just happened, but she doesn't get it.
She doesn't understand why I pushed to do this today.
I can only see the right side of her face as she drives,
but it's enough for me to see
that she is humoring me.
There is no one to text either, because my friends would think I'm nuts.
If they even knew I was here, which they don't.

Mom offers to stop by Panera as a treat for all the painful math that I've just endured.
Except it wasn't painful.
I'm someone who sat through the slow-drip of middle school math, bored and daydreaming,
not seeing what it was all for, wishing – but never working up the guts to push – for more.
Not until now.

Now, I don't want Panera.
I don't want to be patted on the shoulder and misunderstood.
I want to go back into that auditorium and finish the exam and talk about it all night.

If only this were the American Math Conversation, not Competition
My hopes might come to fruition,
to chat and discuss and share
our answers, not compare
who is the best and worst,
who came in last and first.

I try to get my point across. I struggle for a way to convey it.
In the Panera parking lot, I find the words to say it.

I'm a math person. This is me. This is what I love doing, without apology.

2. LOUD VERSUS TRUE

If you're a teenager who loves math, then you must be one of the following:

A future engineer or coder, so yeah, of course you're into math.

A socially awkward person who can't make eye contact and has retreated into numbers as a coping technique.

A genius.

Some kind of a boy.

Or, all of the above.

You are definitely not a normal person.

Ideally, you should also be at least a little bit embarrassed about your love of math, a bit self-deprecating, or someone might think you're bragging. (That goes double for girls. No one likes a braggy girl.)

Please pardon my sarcasm and my annoyance.

I've picked up all these things from the air around me.

From movies, shows, social media.

But I wish I didn't know these things.

Because I don't actually think they're true.

Just loud.

3. MY SECRET

Mathematics is my secret.

My secret weakness.

I feel like a stubborn, helpless fool in the middle of a problem. Trapped and crazed.

Also, thrilled.

I'm gnawing on a bone and I growl at anybody who comes near and tries to get me to stop.

I refuse to drop that bone.

I am dogged.

Did I mention that math is funny too?

It's hilarious how much time I secretly waste on it, when I could be doing more productive things, like walking my dog, folding my laundry or doing my actual homework.

No one in my family thinks all this math is healthy.

Go outside for some fresh air.

Go to sleep.

Here, eat something.

And they're probably right.

But here's another secret: I don't care.
About rest or nutrition or balance or any of it.
Blah blah blah.
I'm not even really listening.
Too busy gnawing away.

4) OR SOMETHING

Here's what some people say:

I'm just not a math person.
Insert shrug and sheepish smile.
I can barely figure out the tip.
Wait, you take extra math classes? Really? Why?
What do you mean, just for fun?
Wow, you must be a genius or something.

Here's what no one says:

I'm just not a words person.
Insert shrug and sheepish smile.
I can barely read a sentence.
Wait, you read an entire book this week-end? The whole thing, every page? Really? Why?
What do you mean, just for fun?
Wow, you must be a genius or something.

I'm getting tired of being mistaken for a genius,
when I'm just a plain old nerd.
Struggling, stumbling, pushing, experimenting.
Trying to get more of something that makes me feel
fascinated and uncomfortable,
hopeless,
stupid,
excited,
real.

5. MY GRANDMA'S NEIGHBOR

Math and loneliness go hand in hand.
That's how it felt to me, at least.

Sometimes I semi-pretended to need a tutor so I could go and talk about math with this charming person who lives near my grandmother's house. She talks in these lively, dense paragraphs, she teaches math at a local college, and she's the closest thing I had to a math friend.

I would emerge from her house thinking: I'm not weird, not crazy, this stuff really is fun. At least it can be, if you happen to bump into the right person who shows you, and ends up changing your life.

So when a boy I barely knew invited me onto a team for a math competition I'd never heard of, I instantly said yes. I mean, who wouldn't be excited about waking up at 6 am on a Saturday and working 14 hours straight on a math modelling research paper?

When I thought of expanding my school's Math League from just a monthly test into something that felt more like a community of humans, I reached out to someone I worried might make fun of me (but they didn't).

When I noticed that the only girl in a problem-solving class I was teaching never said anything, but kept her eyes glued to what we were doing with such intensity, I invited her to join a math circle for middle school girls, which didn't yet exist, except in my imagination.

Once I invited her, I had to make it come true,
to show her that she wasn't alone,
to show her that math and friendship can go hand in hand, too.

And that's when I started to see
that maybe just maybe
I could be to someone else
what my grandma's neighbor is to me.