

Questions They Never Ask on the SAT

A very smart, attention-starved freshman (subject X) falls for the most popular guy in her class (subject Y). If X and Y date for at least three months, which of the following extra-curricular activities is X most likely to be involved in?

- A:** Backseat anatomy lessons, clothing optional.
- B:** Accuracy and precision experiments involving peeing onto a little plastic stick.
- C:** Two-hour biology lectures from a very disappointed father.
- D:** Field trips across state lines for “routine” medical procedures.
- E:** Proving the statistical fallacy of the statement, “It can’t happen to me.”

Note: More than one answer may apply.

chapter¹

the shape of things 2(come)

I don't tutor high school students.

That was what I told Bryce when I started working at the West Columbia Community Center two and a half years ago. Maybe what I should have said was: *I don't tutor high school students, especially spoiled, superficial, popular high school students.*

Despite my decree, here stood Sarah Gamble, junior class goddess. She towered over me like she expected me to bow at her feet. It would have been one thing if she had walked up to me at school, but what was someone like her doing here?

“Hey, Rhonda,” she said, like we were long-lost best friends. “You’re just the person I was looking for.”

She slid into the chair across from me. I couldn’t help but notice how clean and smooth her cinnamon-toned skin was—it was like she paid acne to stay away from her face. Her smile was so large, I could count all thirty-two of her perfectly white teeth.

“I hear you’re a pretty good tutor,” she said as she twisted a strand of hair around her finger. “I need a little help with my trig homework.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Nothing personal, but I don’t usually tutor girls like you.”

Sarah stopped smiling. *Finally.*

“And just what the hell does that mean?” She crossed her arms and stared me down.

I straightened my glasses. “There must be a mistake. The college students tutor high school students.” I jerked my head toward the corner, where a group of college freshmen were dozing off.

“All I know is, my father donates a lot of money to this place.” She pulled a textbook from her bag. “If you have a problem tutoring me, take it up with the bald guy with the bow tie. He sent me over here.”

God, I hated uppity, popular girls like Sarah Gamble. The entire world had to revolve around them. (Of course, I used to be an uppity, popular girl myself, but that was another story.) Although I was a senior and she was a junior,

I saw enough of Sarah and her clique at school to know that I wanted nothing to do with her.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I said. I was layered in a turtleneck, sweater, and blue jeans, but I still felt like a naked whale in front of her. Even though she was wearing a heavy wool coat, I could imagine her rail-thin waist hiding underneath. I also had a skinny waist—it just happened to be hibernating below a lot of extra fat.

I marched to Bryce’s office and pounded on the door. I didn’t bother waiting for an invitation—I just barged in.

“You know I don’t do high school students.” I immediately thought about my choice of words and tried not to wince.

Bryce Mitchell, the director of the tutoring program, glanced up from his pile of paperwork. His bow tie looked like a miniature propeller on his huge body. “Don’t yell. You’ll disturb the students,” he said in his schoolteacher voice.

I looked through his window. Sure enough, a roomful of brown faces stared back at me.

I shut his door. “Prep students are too bossy. They don’t want to learn—they only want answers.” I crossed my arms. “And isn’t it against the rules for a high school student to tutor another high school student?”

“You made up that rule.”

“Well, it’s a good rule. It deserved to be made.”

“You’re tutoring her, end of story,” Bryce said.

“But—”

“Do you know who that girl is?”

I stole a glance at the wannabe supermodel at my table. “Of course I do,” I said. “What’s she doing here, anyway? Girls like Sarah Gamble don’t come here.”

Bryce chuckled. “What do you mean by that? You’re a black prep school student, just like her.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a rich, stuck-up, black prep school student. That makes all the difference.”

“Do y’all have classes together?”

I shook my head. “I only see her during lunch period. Sarah and the other divas put on a pretty good fashion show for the rest of us lowlifes.”

Bryce ran his fingers over his non-existent hair. “She’s also Deborah Gamble’s daughter.”

“I don’t care if she’s the Pope’s daughter—I’m not tutoring her.”

“Deborah Gamble sits on the South Carolina Supreme Court.”

“I *am* an honor student,” I said. “I know who Justice Gamble is.” I puffed up my chest. “You think just because she’s some big-shot judge that I’m gonna change my mind?”

He shot me a crocodile-toothed smile. “Did you know she got her undergraduate degree at Georgia Tech?”

Instantly, my chest deflated. “Georgia Tech?”

“Rhonda, Sarah Gamble needs help, and you’re the best tutor I have. And while that’s usually enough for you to tutor someone, I figured it wouldn’t hurt your chances of

getting a scholarship from Georgia Tech if you tutored the daughter of one of the school's most prestigious alumni." Bryce straightened his bow tie. "I'm sure a recommendation from Justice Gamble would carry a lot of weight."

I grabbed a tissue from Bryce's desk and began wiping my glasses. Sometimes I hated Bryce just as much as I hated the popular clique at school. I wanted to blow him off and tell him I had my integrity.

I slid my glasses back onto my nose. "Okay, I'll do it," I mumbled.

But then again, who needed integrity with a scholarship from the Georgia Institute of Technology?

I trudged back to the table. Sarah slaved away at an erasure-filled sheet of paper, the gold bracelet on her wrist clanking against the wooden table as she wrote. She was working so hard on her math problem, I wasn't sure if she even noticed when I walked up behind her and peeked over her shoulder.

"Maybe I can help," I said. I hated to see one of my students agonizing so much, even if I thought she was a snob.

Sarah glared at me. "So I guess you tutor girls like me now."

I took a deep breath. *Georgia Tech. Georgia Tech.*

"Sorry about that," I said. "I just wanted to make sure Bryce didn't get things mixed up."

She gave a half nod and turned back to her problem.

"Are you cold?" I asked, once I noticed she still had on her coat. "Do you want me to hang up your coat?"

“I’m fine,” she snapped.

I sighed again. Maybe community college wasn’t so bad after all.

“Why don’t you walk me through your problem? Maybe I can help you find your mistake.” As I sat down, I tried to ignore the loud creaking sound that the chair made.

I expected Sarah to throw a major hissy fit and complain about how the math was too hard, or how it was so unfair for her to be studying, or some crap like that, but she didn’t. She just brushed her hair from her face, grabbed a new sheet of paper, and began the problem again.

“There’s your mistake.” I stabbed the sheet. “You can’t use this trig formula here. Try using the tangent function.”

Sarah stared at me like I had asked her to triple-integrate a fifth-order polynomial. “That *is* the tangent function, isn’t it?”

My mouth dropped open. Today was going to be a *long* day.

I pulled my chair closer and began to work with her. I actually felt sorry for the girl. It seemed as if she had either missed weeks of class or she just didn’t care for math at all. Eventually, we had to stop working on the current assignment and go three chapters back to re-cover material. Sarah and I were working so hard, I didn’t realize the time until Bryce came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

“It’s closing time,” he said. “Wrap it up.”

I glanced at my watch and turned to Sarah. “I didn’t

realize how late it was. I'm sorry we couldn't get further along on your homework."

"Maybe if I hadn't spent so much time asking stupid questions..."

"That's what you're supposed to do, remember?" For the first time that night, I smiled. "And believe me, your questions weren't stupid. You should hear what some of my fourth graders ask me."

As much as it pained me to admit it, there was more to Sarah Gamble than her trendy, knee-high black boots and designer jeans. It wasn't like I had suddenly joined the Sarah Gamble Fan Club, but I did respect her a lot more after tutoring her. She was inquisitive, and she seemed like she really wanted to learn the material. That is, she seemed like she really wanted to learn the material while she was sitting at the table. Over the course of the hour, she took three extended trips to the bathroom. Each time she returned to the table, she was chewing on a thick wad of cherry-flavored gum.

I hoped she wasn't in the bathroom puking her brains out. (When I was the aforementioned popular girl, I'd had a few run-ins with vodka. But again, that was another story.) She was too coherent to be drunk. Knowing my luck, she was either anorexic or bulimic. It seemed as if girls like her were always either starving themselves or throwing up their tofu lunch. Maybe she needed a guidance counselor instead of a math tutor.

"If you continue to study the old material, you may be

able to catch up with the rest of the class in a few weeks.” I zipped up my bookbag. “When’s your next test?”

“Tomorrow.”

I frowned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve bombed plenty of tests—one more won’t hurt.”

I shook my head. “Not to pry, but what have you been doing for the past few months? You’re not failing because you’re dumb. You’re failing because you don’t have a solid background in trigonometry.” I hoisted my bookbag onto my shoulder. “Who’s your teacher?”

“Mr. Carey,” she said. “At least it used to be Mr. Carey, until Mom yanked me out of his class.”

I nodded. Mr. Carey’s idea of an adequate math education was letting his students play poker in order to learn about probability.

“Mrs. Hawthorne is my new teacher. She’s who suggested you.”

Sarah and I walked out of the building and into the crisp, frigid air. Even though this was the South, Columbia still got pretty chilly in December.

“Thanks for helping me with my homework,” Sarah said. Maybe the wind breezing through my ears caused me to hear incorrectly, but she actually sounded sincere.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I’m just doing my job.”

“I know it’s your job, but I don’t have to make it hard on you. I didn’t mean to be so snappy back there.” She winked. “The asshole disease runs in my family.”

I couldn't help but laugh. However, I knew if my best friend, Gail, saw me chatting it up with Sarah like old pals, she'd burn me at the stake.

I followed Sarah into the parking lot. It didn't take a genius to figure out the sleek, navy blue Mercedes coupe was hers.

"I'm usually not mean," she said. "I just hate being forced to do anything." Sarah pulled her keys from her purse and unlocked her car door. "My mother can be a real bitch sometimes. I'd give anything to live with my father instead of her."

At least she *had* a mother to boss her around. I almost told her so, but I was just her tutor. It wasn't my place to say such things.

"Don't get me wrong, I like school and all," she continued. "But there are some things more important than trig."

That was easy for her to say. In my universe, there wasn't anything more important than grades. I didn't have the luxury or the desire to treat high school like an extended vacation. Good grades were the best way for me to escape this hellhole.

"Listen, most of the students that come here don't have the money to hire a private tutor," I said. "You do. You should think about getting one."

"Like I said before, it wasn't my idea to come."

"Well, did you think about getting someone at school to tutor you, instead of driving all the way out here?"

She looked down and dragged her feet along the

crumbling asphalt pavement. “Mom doesn’t want anyone to know I’m getting tutored.”

“There’s nothing wrong with needing a tutor.”

“Tell *her* that.” Sarah readjusted her bag on her shoulder. “Listen, I appreciate all the help. I’ll let you know how bad I failed when I come back.”

Before I could reply, she had slipped into her car and slammed the door shut.

Well, at least she was coming back. The question was, was that good or bad?



I unlocked the door and stepped into the kitchen. Dad was at the counter, surrounded by bags full of vegetables. A cloud of thick, black smoke hovered over one of the pans on the stove. His sweater was covered in flour, and the air was saturated with the aroma of raw onion and burnt chicken.

I sat my bookbag on the table. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

Dad began to chop up an extremely withered-looking stalk of celery. “Jackie suggested I try out this recipe.” He paused as he picked up a scrap of paper and held it in front of his face. “Orange Chicken. It’s supposed to be low-fat.”

I shook my head. In the seven years since Mom had died, Dad’s interaction with the stove had been limited to

boiling water and heating up leftovers. But now that he was dating, he had suddenly become a gourmet chef.

I didn't waste time looking in the pot—I picked up the phone and speed-dialed the pizza place. While I placed my order, I began to flip through the stack of mail on the table.

“Don't bother looking,” Dad said, fanning smoke away from his face. “Not unless you want to pay the cable and electric bills.”

I finished placing my order and hung up the phone. “Nothing from Georgia Tech?”

“Afraid not.”

I had already been accepted to Clemson and the University of South Carolina. USC had even offered me a full scholarship. But—not to sound ungrateful—I couldn't care less. The only school that mattered to me was Georgia Tech. I had applied for one of Tech's most competitive (and lucrative) scholarships—the finalists were to be announced before the end of the year.

“Don't worry,” Dad said, in his *Father Knows Best* tone of voice. “It'll come. Your math scores are too good for you not to get a scholarship.”

Samuel Lee, my father, was a city engineer—or as he liked to call himself, “the best damn underpaid, overworked civil servant Columbia had ever seen.” In addition to my passion for math and science, I also inherited my beautiful smile, light brown eyes, and rich cocoa skin from

him. Unfortunately, he also passed along his nearsightedness, sausage-shaped fingers, and soft, pudgy mid-section.

Dad banged a spoon against the pan, trying to loosen a brown glob from it. “How was tutoring?”

“Interesting,” I said. “I ended up tutoring a classmate from Piedmont.”

Creases shot across his forehead. “When did *you* start tutoring high school kids?”

His question would have seemed innocent enough to the untrained observer, but I could already hear the worry in his voice. The frown on his face was as large as his potbelly. He stuck a spoonful of his experimental goop in his mouth. Still frowning, he forced it down.

“Today was the first,” I said. “Mrs. Hawthorne recommended me to one of her students. A junior.” I paused and watched the steam begin to build in Dad’s head. Time to release the pressure. “*She* needed help in trigonometry.”

A weary smile came to his face. “That’s great. I’m sure it’s nice to teach something other than multiplication tables and simple arithmetic.” He finally gave up on his experiment and turned off the stove. “You said she went to Piedmont, right? What’s her name?”

“Sarah Gamble.” I felt like I was in elementary school as I bounced over to him. “And her mother is Justice Deborah Gamble. Bryce thinks that if things go well, she’ll offer to write me a recommendation if I get selected as a finalist for the President’s Achievement Program.”

By now, Dad was beaming. “With your test scores and

a letter from Justice Gamble, you'd almost be guaranteed a scholarship." He quickly stifled his smile. "Of course, we don't need to expect anything out of this. And even if you don't get a scholarship to Georgia Tech, as long as you get accepted, I can pay for it." He peered down at me. "That's what fathers are supposed to do."

I felt my face sour. "You don't have to worry about paying for me to go to college. I'll get the scholarship."

"I'm sure you will, Rhonda. I was just saying that if things don't work out—"

"I'll get the scholarship," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

We stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. The black smoke that had been floating over the stove suddenly seemed to have surrounded us. I thought about apologizing for being so short with him, but decided against it. It was easier for both of us if I just kept quiet.

Dad sighed. "Why don't you tell me about your new student?"

I nodded, happy to be crossing back into neutral territory. "Sarah seems nice," I said. "She's one of the most popular girls at school. She's a cheerleader and president of the..."

My voice trailed off as a familiar grimace came to Dad's face. His eyes narrowed and his jaw turned into concrete.

"Honey, you've got to watch out for girls like her. They can be a handful."

I shook my head. So much for neutral territory.

“Maybe you shouldn’t tutor her. You know, so you’re not...tempted to fall back into your old crowd. You don’t really need a recommendation from Justice Gamble. Your grades are good enough to speak for themselves.”

He stepped toward me. I thought he was going to hug me, but instead he reached into his pocket, pulled out some cash, and dropped it on the counter. “Call me when the pizza gets here. I’m going to my room to watch a little of the basketball game.”

I pretended to count the money as Dad strode off, but as soon as I heard the familiar click of his bedroom door shutting, I dropped the cash and made a beeline to the freezer. By the time the pizza arrived twenty minutes later, I had eaten two bowls of strawberry ice cream, both smothered in chocolate syrup and topped with sprinkles.

There was no doubt about it—tomorrow was definitely shaping up to be another day for the elastic waistband pants.