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AP Literature and Composition

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The Mean Streak

Physics. At least, that’s what we told people. To be completely honest, our trip to Cedar Point had very little to do with science. It is something that the freshmen look forward to every year at the Math and Science Center. The packet of problems and calculations is basically just for show. It’s okay, though. Who wants to spend a gorgeous day in May doing pages of work?

The measurements were simple. Collecting questionable data for a few rides only takes half an hour, so the rest of the time was ours. We scattered throughout the park in our groups of four or five, trying to make the most of trip. Eight hours may sound like plenty of time, but that’s almost nothing at Cedar Point. Hundreds of people all waiting for the Top Thrill Dragster, the tallest, fastest roller coaster in the park, makes for a lengthy stay in line.

We meandered through the winding metal path, getting closer and closer to the front. We were a small pack of high schoolers in a large herd of humans. The blazing sun beat down; drops of sweat formed on my brow. I could feel the back of my neck burning, and I immediately regretted forgetting sunscreen. We watched as people flew by, screaming in both fear and excitement. That made it even harder to stand and wait. It was like that at every attraction, but we talked the time away, simply enjoying our time together.

After what seemed like just a few rides, our fun day was winding to an end. With just over an hour left, we figured we could squeeze in one more stop. Our group of four thought about it.

“Let’s try for one last ride, all of us.”

Up until that point, Julia and I had been the only ones to enjoy all of the roller coasters. Ian and Kaylan had insisted that they were content to just watch. Ian steadfastly refused the idea of all going together, saying he would find something else to do. Kaylan didn’t seem sure, either, but we knew we could convince her. “Come on, Kaylan. It’s just one ride.”

With limited time, we had to rule out all of the popular rides. We needed a short wait. We settled on the Mean Streak, which was the perfect choice for a rookie. Kaylan followed me and Julia to the back of the park, cautiously looking forward to her first roller coaster experience.

We filled both rows of the second car, eager for our last big climb of the day. Julia and I sat in the front, with Kaylan and late arrival Dustin behind us. With our belts latched and the lap bars down, we began to move leisurely along the track. Coming out from the shade, the train of cars rounded the turn to the bottom of the ascent. The first car angled up toward the flawless blue sky, leading the others forward. The chain clanked as it pulled us up higher, higher, higher, toward the summit of the old, wooden hill. We moved at a steady pace, with the warm, early evening sun shining down on us. Just before the peak, then we began to slow. The anticipation of the steep drop was suddenly present. It’s the feeling that every thrill-seeker loves. In that instant, it all comes back.

*One of the best moments of any kid’s life is finally conquering the sign:*

*“You must be -- feet tall to ride.”*

*A real roller coaster. Not one of those little ones at the fair, but a giant, hundreds of feet high. The excitement is unreal. The ten-year wait finally ends.*

*After passing the test, everything moves quickly. Even the long wait in line seems to go by in seconds. The seat seems too big, but it doesn’t matter. The safety bar rests as far down as it can go. The worker checks to make sure it’s secure. Then, the fun truly begins.*

*I remember the ascension, the cars climbing smoothly up the steel structure. My mom sat next to me, giving me advice. “Some people find it helpful to yell,” she said, “Whatever you want.” I considered her recommendation, but the drop came before I could make up my mind. My stomach seemed to plummet, and we accelerated down the track. “This… is… AWESOME!” I shouted. I couldn’t believe how exhilarating it was. Each rise and fall brought the same incredible sensation. The ride was much too short, ending before I was ready. We stopped back at the platform, and I stepped off a changed person.*

Back on the Mean Streak, I thought of every roller coaster I had ever been on. The feeling was the same each time, never diminishing. Our cars finally reached the highest point, and we could see the impending plunge. The anticipation we felt was wonderful. We slowed even more, coming to an agonizingly crawl. Then…

Nothing.

Our stomachs didn’t drop.

There were no screams.

There were only glances all around. We remained at the top of the roller coaster, stuck. *“It’s just one ride.”* The words echoed in my head. Julia and I looked at each other, then back at Kaylan. Of course. Her first ride and the cars stop on the tallest hill. It was such an unlikely situation. All we could do was laugh about it.

I had always thought the speed of a roller coaster was the best part, or maybe the dips, flips, and corkscrews. It turns out that that may not be true. The next twenty-five minutes turned out to be the best part of our day. It was almost cathartic. What could have easily been a frightening experience became an enjoyable moment among friends. A cool breeze blew in from over the lake, and the sun continued to shine from the clearest of skies. Looking around, we could see people down below. They were all on separate missions, hustling from ride to ride. Boats bobbed in the water; children splashed in a nearby pool. Yet, we did not move. Our stalled car felt like it was stuck in time.

Everything seemed so small, sitting atop the roller coaster. All the people below were living their own lives, seemingly unaware of each other. And there we sat, watching it all go on. We stayed there in that relaxing state until the operators finally got us moving. The thrill finally came. We plummeted down the hill and raced around the tracks, just as we had all expected.

Our little group hustled to the entrance of the park and got to the buses just in time, eager to share what we had just experienced. Years of going to amusement parks couldn’t have prepared me for that field trip. It may have been faux-educational, but we didn’t walk away empty-handed. We learned that sometimes roller coasters are the best when they stop working.