

NEARLY NORMAL

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# LIZZY'S STORIES

## NEARLY NORMAL

(AS TOLD BY LIZZY)



Starting on April first, school classes were being taught remotely because of the [Covid-19](#) pandemic. Most of the online classes were stinky boring. Plus being in lockdown with my sister, Neddy, was torture. She was constantly bugging me to play games with her or asking me crazy questions—not to mention the fact that my parents expected me to help her with the remote learning. I mean I get that they are really distracted with dad being sick and mom trying to find work since they were both laid off from their teaching jobs. I get that we all have to pull our own weight, but I was pulling my own weight plus Neddy's, and Neddy was kinda pulling zero weight.

Wearing a mask is a pain, too, but I know it is important. The whole pandemic situation was making me feel very nervous.

But things started improving when the contest began. By the middle of April, my dad was out of the basement, and Grandpa, was out of the hospital.

My biology class was the one online course that was good. Of course, we were all excited about the contest. It gave us something positive to fill the hours during this difficult time, and I loved being with our team. The prize money and college scholarships for winning the contest would surely help my family's financial situation.

To improve things further, VC, Neddy, and I started inventing new activities that would bring our lives back to something more like normal. We called them pandemic pastimes. Then the whole family, including my mom and dad, Grandpa and Grandma, and the aunts, uncles, and cousins, started inventing pandemic pastimes too.

The first thing we did was to create a [family bubble](#). VC's mom and dad were home trying to figure out how to earn some money since their restaurant was closed. Milo's dad was working remotely from home. My mom and dad were staying home too. Grandpa and Grandma were at home, not seeing anyone either.

The adults decided to form a family bubble. We agreed on all the safety measures everyone would take so that we could all still get together. There would be no visits inside our houses by anyone except the bubble people. That would allow Milo and VC to get together with me and Neddy in person for the contest meetings and [Virtual World](#) adventures.

Now that we could see each other, Milo and VC went over to my house for a visit. They went into the family room, where Neddy and I were watching TV. Milo didn't even say hello. He just blurted out, "I would like to ask Svetlana to join our team."

## THE RACE TO THE BIG BANG

I had a hunch that was coming. Since last summer, Milo has had a giant crush on her. But I didn't think she would ditch her sisters and brother if their family decided to enter the contest. "I'll check with the rest of our team to see if anyone objects to inviting Svetlana," I said.

I checked, and by the next day, I told him that no one objected to Svetlana joining us. I actually really liked her. She was smart and, like me, was into soccer and martial arts.

The next pandemic activity was art. All us kids took a virtual art class together. Our great-aunt, Grandpa's sister, had started teaching remote art classes using the [Room App](#). It was for all the kids in the family. That included our second cousins, her grandkids. So, every Monday evening, we all logged into *Room* and did art projects.



Grandma saw how well this worked, so Wednesday became online cooking class. We made Chinese fried dumplings in our first meeting. Grandma had her computer connected to a *Room* meeting with the camera pointing first at the preparation area and then at the frying pan. Grandpa took a picture of the scene. I was with Neddy at VC's house and we followed along. Our dumplings came out delicious.

We heard that outdoor activities were pretty safe. So, one day, we met Grandpa and Grandma for a picnic at Heublein Tower. It was a huge old mansion that is now open to the public. Grandpa dropped Grandma, VC, Neddy, Milo, Griffin, and me at the trailhead. Then he drove up to the picnic area with the food.

It was a beautiful, sunny morning as we started up the trail. Grandma led the way, followed by Milo and me with VC, Griffin, and Neddy bringing up the rear. We hiked for about ten minutes up a very steep trail.

"I'm tired," whined Neddy. "This is too much work."

Grandma shot her a look and said, "if a seventy-five-year-old grandmother and a six-year-old boy can do this, a healthy twelve-year-old can do it too. Suck it up."

VC and I laughed. Neddy's cheeks turned red, but she didn't complain anymore.



After another five minutes, we reached the top of the ridge. The view from there was fantastic. We could see down into the valley for at least ten miles. It was definitely a photo op.

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Grandma took a bunch of pictures of the view. Then she said, "OK, my sweet grandchildren, please line up for a picture." The older kids started posing at the edge of the cliff. "Hey, kids," Grandma yelled, "be careful. Come away from the edge. It's more than a hundred-foot drop."

After the pictures, we continued up the trail. Then something exciting and scary happened. VC had taken the lead, way ahead of the rest of the gang. What she saw in the woods made her turn around and run like crazy.

"A *bear!*" she screamed. "Run!"

Sure enough, a big black bear came lumbering out of the woods onto the trail. It was about twenty feet away. Grandma shushed us and told us to freeze. If it wanted to, the bear could have definitely hurt us. I grabbed my phone and started shooting pictures.

Thankfully, the bear gave us humans a quick look and then proceeded across the trail into the woods on the other side. Milo and

Neddy, who were holding their breath, both let out a huge sigh and looked like they were going to crumple to the ground. Grandma was holding Griffin in her arms.

"How come you weren't scared?" VC asked me. "Bears can be really dangerous. You just stood there calmly taking pictures. You can't outrun a bear."

"It isn't like I have to outrun the bear," I replied. "I just have to outrun one of *you*."

Later, I showed everyone my best picture of the bear. I said, "Grandpa is gonna love this one."

Which brings me to the next pandemic pastime. Besides getting exercise outdoors, Grandpa had started offering us a twenty-dollar prize every month to the grandchild who took the best wildlife photograph. He knew by then that we were really motivated by prizes! That month, Milo and VC were neck and neck. VC had a lovely picture of three deer in the woods, and Milo had some great shots of a mother turkey with four babies. But everyone agreed that the bear shot would probably be the winner that month.



## THE RACE TO THE BIG BANG

A short time later, after a final uphill climb, we reached the Heublein Tower. Grandpa was there with the lunch laid out on a picnic table. We had turkey sandwiches with tomatoes and apple juice to drink.

After lunch, we put on our masks and explored the Heublein house. We climbed to the room on the fifth floor, with views in all directions.

"This view is super cool," squealed Neddy. "You can see for miles. I can see all the buildings in Hartford and the hospital in Farmington. I can even see our house."

After the tour, we went back down and outside. Grandma asked a fellow hiker to take a photo of our group. Then it was time to go home.



"Hey, Milo," I asked as we started our hike down from the tower, "where did you get the pictures of the turkeys? I have seen wild turkeys before, but I have never seen turkey babies."

"They were in Westmore Park," he answered. "I was walking with Svetlana when we saw them. And don't worry—we were six feet apart."

"Did you say anything to her about joining the team?" I asked.

"Not gonna happen," he replied. "She and her siblings got letters from TSI too. So, they are forming a team of their own to compete in the contest. She said her family would disown her if she joined our team."

"OK," I said, "then our team is finalized."

I had another cool pandemic pastime. Jackson had programmed an online gin rummy game so that he could continue playing remotely with me. I guess he was determined to finally win a game against me. I downloaded his application, and we played. It worked great. It dealt the

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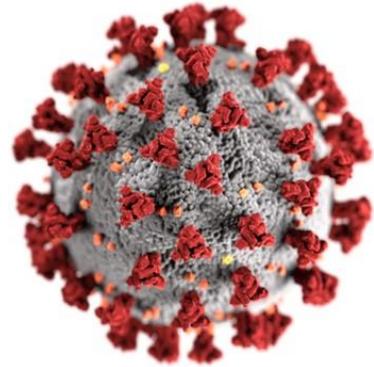
cards randomly and showed each of the player's cards on the screen. It randomly provided new cards as we picked and discarded. I am continuing to win. Poor *Boy Genius* is not the smartest one at everything.

That night, we had a *Cosmic Explorer* team meeting to go over our entry form. Jackson made the changes that the team suggested. He added the street addresses and email addresses for all the team members so everyone would get the notices. VC made a final copy of the team picture. We all checked over the entry form, and then Jackson pressed the submit button. We were ready to start *The Race to the Big Bang*.

# GRANDPA'S GLOSSARY

[Virtual World](#): Virtual worlds, also known as virtual environments, use computer technology to create a simulated world that a user can explore and interact with, while creating a feeling as if he or she were in that world. The representation of the user in that world is called an [avatar](#). The user can even wear goggles to make it appear that he or she is surrounded by the 3-D virtual world. That is called virtual reality.

[Covid-19/Coronavirus](#): COVID-19 is a disease produced by a coronavirus that can cause an infection of the respiratory system (sinuses, nose, throat, windpipe, and lungs). The disease spreads mainly by sharing of the coronavirus particles through person-to-person transmission (most often in airborne droplets containing the virus particles). Coronaviruses are named for the distinct crownlike protein spikes on their surface. They cause many different diseases, including Covid-19 and the common cold.



A virus is a particle one-hundredth the size of most bacteria, too small to be seen with an optical microscope. Virus particles consist of their genetic code material in the form of DNA or RNA, a protein coat that surrounds and protects the genetic material and, in some cases, an outside oily layer. The double-strand DNA or single-strand RNA molecules contain the genetic code for the virus's structure. The code is written in the order of atoms and molecules that make up the DNA or RNA.

Some scientists consider viruses to be living organisms because they carry their genetic code, reproduce, and evolve through natural selection. Others disagree because viruses lack cell structure and cannot independently reproduce. To make copies of themselves, they employ the capability of living cells to reproduce organic components from RNA coded instructions. They invade the cells of living organisms and induce the cell's own mechanisms to reproduce the virus based on the virus's RNA genetic code. Viruses can pull off this trick with cells of animals, plants, and microorganisms such as bacteria. When infected, a host cell is forced to rapidly produce thousands of identical copies of the original virus.

One of the vaccines to combat the Covid-19 coronavirus (the mRNA vaccine) uses the virus's own trick to defeat it. A small piece of the virus's RNA with the code to produce the protein spikes is presented to the body's cells. The cells reproduce lots of copies of the protein spikes. These virus pieces get the body's immune system primed to combat the virus without any danger of producing the disease.

[Room Communication App](#): A fictional internet communication software application that permits multiple users to hear and see each other and share their digital device screens. It is like the real app called Zoom.

[Family Bubble](#): During the Covid-19 pandemic, groups of friends, family members, sports teams, business employees, and so on. formed groups (bubbles) that could meet in person. Members of each bubble followed agreed-upon rules of safe behavior to reduce the risk of contracting Covid-19. They typically agreed to eliminate all unprotected contact with individuals outside the bubble.

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*THE STARDUST MYSTERY* is on [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#)

*THE RACE TO THE BIG BANG*: Coming in May 2021

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