

*A fine morning on the Oakland Estuary*

With difficulty, she labels a test tube containing another water sample. Given the rocking canoe and screaming from her ridiculous sister and friends on shore, *Molly, Molly*, the fools chant, it's all she can do to print neatly, much less get the information down in its correct order: *12/8/16 – Oakland Estuary, 14:22 hours, 37.7940 N, 122.3153 W*. She hands the slender vial to Laura, a cranky double-major grad student: Environmental Science and Engineering – with honors. Dark-haired and scowling, Laura's seated at the bow of her precious canoe. *Specially engineered concrete canoe*, she's drilled into Molly since morning, which feels like a week ago.

"Thank you," she tells Molly, pressing skinny lips into a fake smile before inserting the sample into a tray of two-dozen others. They each hold water Molly's siphoned from different points along the narrow inlet. "Sit carefully!" Laura adds for the thousandth time. But Molly's already back in her cold perch in the hull. Her chubby thighs squeezed together, allowing room enough to row and avoiding the witch's next command to *step lightly*.

But Laura's meaner to Josh. Bearded and owl-faced, Josh does the heavy paddling at the stern and is in the School of Journalism at Cal. He's won a big award for publishing a series of articles on pollution in the estuary and surrounding neighborhoods. His work was even picked up by *The Times*; though Laura claims *journalists are wimps*. Clearly, she's jealous.

"Your friends will shut up?" Laura asks, fixing Molly in the center of her blue Ray-Bans.

A chubby, brown-haired girl in each lens nods back. She should have definitely slept in this morning. Half the ecology class did, including Fred, who's now screaming loudest on shore and flapping his short arms. He resembles a bellowing sea lion, balancing on short flippers. And there's her tiny, blonde sister, Mia, at the end of the bunch, jumping and waving, like an annoying gnat. She's flanked by two stuck-up BFFs in big sunglasses, skinny jeans – and vaping, of course. Idiots. And skinny Charles stands behind his camera, filming everything. Shit. What are they doing here anyway?

It's not like any of them care about Mrs. James' family, or the Lakeside community. They probably haven't even read Josh's articles that Ms. Fischer assigned: Two hundred families sickened by local drinking water. Mia certainly didn't read them. They're probably here scoring dope, or whatever.

And she's stuck in a canoe with a madwoman and being blamed for her sister's obnoxious friends. Meanwhile, Charles is pointing the camera right at them. Damn. She'll just ignore him. Tune all of them out. At least she's doing something useful. And they're heading back to the pier. They've collected all the samples Laura needs. And they're moving with the current. And it's high tide, thank god, since the row of collapsed factories they're approaching stinks; though Josh says it's way worse when the tide is out.

It used to be a homeless village until the support pillars rotted, causing a cave-in. A few people were killed, others injured; it was awful. And now a huge cyclone fence surrounds the mess with big warning signs to KEEP OUT. She can't imagine wanting to go in.

*Molly, Molly.*

This has to be her sister's idea of a joke. Pulling back on the oars more vigorously, her upper arms are killing her: swim team or not. How does tiny Laura do it? Must be the long, orangutan arms she's got.

*Molly, Molly!*

Laura groans in front while Molly ducks her head, letting the Warrior's cap cover her face. Take *that*, Charles. Though this could be Fred's doing: his dumb way of asking her to Spring Fling – like she'd go.

Doubling-down on her effort, she's just managing to keep up with Laura's maniacal pace; but once they pass the bend of factories, they'll be out of sight of the fools and almost at the pier. And she'll be free of this horrible woman.

Still, Ms. Fischer reminded them this morning that it's been the hard work of Cal students, like Laura and Josh, to have identified the estuary as being the probable source of toxic levels of cadmium, mercury and lead; the very same chemicals found in Mrs. James' drinking water and much of nearby Lakeside for the last two years. No local or state environmental agency has lifted a finger to investigate. Instead, it's been the sole work of Cal students to draw national attention to low-income families being poisoned by their drinking water.

In fact, Laura suspects that an old computer mainframe factory, which is inside the fenced off heap, is causing the pollution, especially since water tested around the area contains the highest concentration of the three chemicals. And the three chemicals are standard byproducts of computer manufacturing. Josh agrees. It's the only thing they seem to agree on, but it's kept them working together all through graduate school.

Strange, the estuary's never looked so clear. Sunlight bounces off gentle ripples and San Francisco shimmers in the distance: everything sparkles. But Josh warned her against splashing any water in her eyes or mouth and to wash her hands thoroughly before eating or touching food. Actually, he and Laura also agree there's probably a leaking storage tank full of waste from the computer factory that's buried close by. But the City of Oakland's too preoccupied with building luxury apartments downtown to cleanup this area and the stature of limitations has run out to prosecute the factory owners.

*Molly. Molly. Molly.*

"Can't you *do* something?" Laura twists around, snarling with shoulders hunched.

"Can't you shut them up?"

In all honesty, Molly would love to shut them up – shut everyone up – but what is she supposed to do? Ask folks politely to be quiet?

"I can't think with these Neanderthals," the double-major-doctoral-candidate continues. "And I still have work to do, if-you-don't-mind." She jolts back and attacks the water.

Damn. Laura's a bitch. And no way can Molly keep up now. But then, Mrs. James sat in their living room a few days ago crying, because half of Lakeside has moved out. She and her three grandchildren are living in a *wasteland*, she told Molly's mom. And she's too sick to clean their house. Her grandkids are sick too; the whites in their eyes have turned piss-yellow. Molly saw it herself. It's liver failure, Josh explained, from cadmium and mercury poisoning.

*Molly, Molly!*

She's up, turning to the fools on shore, "Hey, guys," she yells. "Guys!" But damn, if the canoe doesn't lurch away all of a sudden. Her feet and legs are moving forward, while the rest pitches backwards; her head's going for a concrete side, for sure. And the whole boat's skimming fast away. *Shit!*

Screams blanket her while she braces for impact – it's fucking going to hurt. Then she's bouncing right into contaminated water.

Eyes closed, she hits something solid, but not too hard. And strong arms hold onto her.

"Gotcha," Josh says into an ear.

But she squirms; she doesn't want him to feel how fat she is.

"Fucking shit!" Laura's shriek pierces the clamor. "Morons!"

The test tubes! A wild thumping now fills her chest and ears and she tries to sit upright, clasping a bleeding hand onto grey concrete. But Josh keeps hold.

“Oh my God! Molly!” she hears Mia, exclaim. “Are you all right? My God!”

“All’s well,” Josh shouts to the group, still securing her in the seat.

“Jesus Christ!” Laura breaks in. “All is not well! Stupid – stupid!”

“Awesome!” Fred yells. “You were taking out the boat!”

She lurches up just as Laura secures a lid over the metal box of samples. Thank god.

“Yo, is Ms. Fischer with you?” Fred yells at her. “Am I in trouble?”

“Sweet, Jesus,” Laura says. “Can we get out of here,” she fumes, fitting the square container under a seat before eyeing Josh. “Huh? Can we move?” She takes up her oars and ignores Molly.

“Are those my Chookas?” Mia now shrieks. “Molly!”

Shit. Leave it to Mia to spot her stupid boots. And, of course, Charles has his camera up.

“You’re wearing my boots!” Mia continues.

“You okay?” Josh asks her quietly, as a full-throated chorus of *Molly-Molly* starts in.

She’s jammed back in the hull, hand still bleeding, and rows in time to Josh’s soft count of *one-two, one-two* – in rhythm with *Molly, Molly*. Stupid Mia; it was dark when she grabbed the dumb things.

But she almost ruined a whole day’s collection of samples. Thank god, Ms. Fischer went to the San Leandro Estuary with the rest of the class. *Molly-Molly*. Thank god they’re paddling away. Laura’s shoulders lurch up and down, like she’s pounding someone to death. *Molly-Molly*. She should have fallen in. She’d have hidden under the computer factory until dark. Then gotten cancer and died.

“I’m interviewing Mrs. James later,” Josh tells her. “We both want you to come. Okay?”

*Molly-Molly*. No. It’s definitely *not* okay. Nothing’s okay. But she nods affirmatively, keeping time with Laura’s pace.

The End.