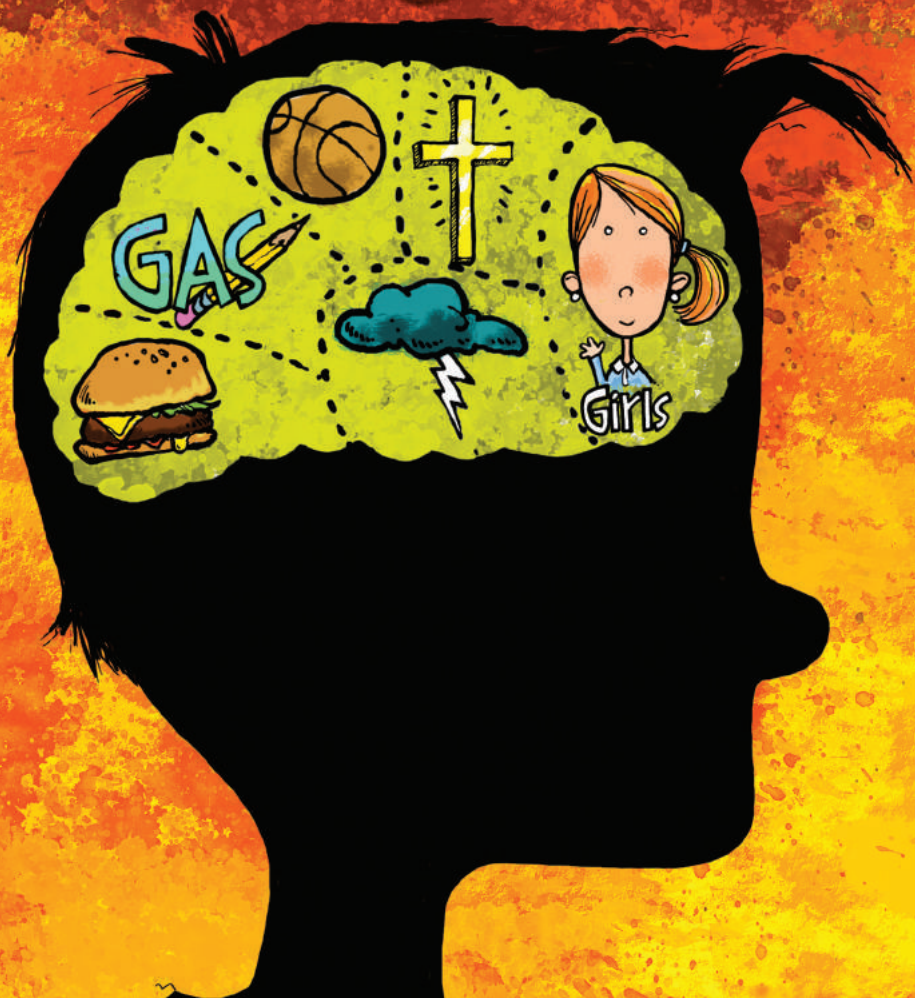


# a.k.a. genius



Marilee Haynes



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By Marilee Haynes





# One

I clomp up the steps and through the front door, thinking about the squeak that followed me home. Well, followed me home because it's coming from the wheels of the backpack I was pulling behind me. The fact that it's definitely a squeak and not a squeal and that it happens at regular intervals—once per rotation—makes me sure I can take care of it with a little oil.

Once inside, I kick off my shoes and place them neatly in the basket by the front door, because that's what you do in my house. My mom has a "no-shoes-in-the-house" rule that you don't mess with. She also has a "don't-eat-cookies-in-your-bedroom" rule, but I think of that one as

more of a suggestion. My plan is to snag a couple cookies and head to my room.

I've only taken  $2\frac{3}{4}$  steps toward the kitchen when an itchy feeling like somebody's watching me starts between my shoulder blades. I swivel my head to the right and look into the dining room—nothing—then to the left. And there, sitting on the living room couch, are my parents.

This is weird for a couple reasons. First, it's the middle of the afternoon, and my dad should be at work. And second, no one sits on the living room couch. Heck, no one ever even goes into the living room. But there they are. In the living room. Sitting on the couch. Looking at me.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad." If I act natural and just keep walking, maybe whatever the weird thing is can't touch me.

"Gabe, honey, come sit down," says my mom. The line between her eyebrows doesn't go with the smile on her face. "We need to talk to you about something." It looks like the weird thing is coming my way.

I search around in my brain and try to figure out what I did wrong or how I messed up. I come up blank. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened the last few days, my room is kind of picked up, and I did my homework last night. I don't even think I've been too rotten to my sister lately.

"What's going on?" I flop into the chair that's the only other place to sit. Too late, I remember this is not a chair for flopping. I wince and rub the spot on my butt that hit first.

"Well, Champ, Mr. Dooley called today and told your mom something interesting," says my dad.

Everyone knows that nothing good has ever happened to a kid after a call from the principal. My stomach clenches up like a fist. I hold myself perfectly still and wait for more.

"Do you remember those tests that you took at the beginning of the year?" my mom asks.

"Yeah, the whole seventh grade took them. It was two days of boring. What about them? Did I do something wrong?" They seemed pretty easy, but maybe I used the wrong kind of pencil or filled in the wrong bubbles.

"No," says my mom. "Just the opposite. It seems that you did exceptionally well." She stops and looks at my dad. My dad jerks his chin toward me, which I guess means he wants my mom to tell me.

"It seems that the tests showed that you have a very high IQ." My mom smoothes her already-smooth blonde hair. "Actually your IQ is so high that you're—"

"A genius! A real genius," my dad blurts. "What do you think about that?" He looks excited, like he thinks I won

something. Any minute he's going to jump up and try to high five me.

What do I think about that? A genius? That can't be right. I mean I've always been pretty smart. I get good grades, and I like learning new things, especially science things. But a genius?

"I don't understand. I'm a genius? Really?" I don't understand what's happening. Which is funny, because if I'm a genius, I probably should understand.

A choking sound from around the corner makes us all jump.

"Sabrina?" says my mom. "Is that you? Are you all right?"

My sister comes out of her hiding place. Usually a champion eavesdropper, her cover is blown. She's coughing, and her eyes are watering.

"A bite of cookie went down the wrong way. What did you say, Dad? Gabe's a genius?" Sabrina looks at me and snorts. More coughing and watering. "No way is the shrimp a genius."

Sabrina is one year and four days younger but two inches taller than me. It's the taller part she never lets me forget.

"Sabrina, this doesn't concern you. You are not to tell anyone," says my mom.



"Please, Sabrina. Don't say anything," I say. She turns and studies me. "Please."

"Okay, okay, I won't." And I almost believe her. But before she leaves the room, she smirks a smirk that lets me know that is not what's going to happen. No way is she keeping this a secret.

"Do you have any questions?" my dad asks. "About what it means to be a genius?" He can't seem to stop saying the word. Or smiling.

Questions? Yeah, I have questions. Is this going to change anything? Is this going to change everything? Is it going to be better? Or will it make things even worse? But none of these are questions I can ask my mom and dad.

I chew on my lip and pull at a loose thread on my sock. Just that word, "genius," makes me feel different, like I'm not me anymore. The top of my head starts tingling, and my stomach goes queasy. The kind of queasy like when you're not sure if you want to get on the tallest, fastest roller coaster at the amusement park. Because if you do, you might get the ride of your life. Or you might throw up all over the person in front of you. It feels like that.

# Two

Breathe in, breathe out, and go: 34 right, 4 left, 16 right. Listen for the click and lift. Nothing. It doesn't open. Again. I rest my forehead on the cool, green metal of my locker for almost no time at all. But it's long enough.

"Can't open it again, huh, genius?" says a voice behind me.

I straighten up, turn around, and face her. Sabrina.

"It's fine."

"So you're supposed to be a genius, but you still can't open your locker? Maybe Mom and Dad should have you retested." She laughs at her own stupid joke and then stands up as straight as she can and looks down her nose at me. "Have a great day, *little* brother."

I grab the handle of my rolling backpack and head to my first class of the day dragging all of my books behind me. All of my books, since I can't get into my locker to put any of them away. Again.

St. Jude Middle School is shaped like a U. My locker is at one end of the U, and my class is all the way at the other end, which means I have to make two left turns to get there. And for reasons I can't explain, I can only steer my backpack with my right arm. So I worry that my right arm is going to end up being longer than my left. Like when a tennis player has a muscle in one arm that's way bigger than the muscle in his other arm. Not that I have muscles, because I don't. Just one arm that might be longer than the other. Which would make me an even bigger freak. A genius with uneven arms.

Maybe it's because I'm thinking about my arms that it takes a minute for me to notice. As I walk past kids still standing at their lockers, a few of them point or stare at me. Some of them are whispering. A girl I don't know says, "That's him. That's the genius." Someone else says, "Hey, Einstein," and snickers.

I feel my ears get hot, and I accidentally run the wheels of my backpack into the heel of my right foot.

Sabrina worked even faster than I thought she would. Popularity is practically a business at St. Jude, and

information is its currency. And since being popular is Sabrina's ultimate goal, she doesn't care if it's *my* information she's trading for it.

My information. They're talking about me. Which means there's been a complete system breakdown. Before middle school started, I worked out a survival strategy that had as its most important component one simple thing: not getting noticed. Not getting talked about. Not calling attention to myself.

I pretend not to see the stares or hear the whispers. The only thing I can think to do is look down and keep walking. I wish I had a hat or something to hide behind. But when you have hair like mine, a hat is not your friend. My hair is like a brown helmet that sits on my head and doesn't do anything except get fuzzy when it rains or if it's humid. It's my own no-tech weather machine.

My history class is still two rooms away when I hear someone yell, "Hey, Gabe! Wait up."

It's my best friend, Linc. Well, Lincoln Jefferson Truman, but he goes by Linc. His parents have big plans for him, and I guess they thought naming him after three presidents might help. I'm not so sure.

"Hey. So, I heard something crazy before school even started." Linc shoots me a sideways look from under his pile of white-blond hair. He always looks like he needs a haircut.

"Yeah, what'd you hear?" I'm sure it's about me. But since Sabrina is the reason I'm today's headline, the story could have turned into anything by now.

"I heard you're a genius. Isn't that funny?" Linc starts laughing. Hard. Then he stops walking and looks at me. "You're not laughing. Why aren't you laughing? Is it true?" The questions keep coming. "Oh my gosh, you are. You're a genius."

Linc doesn't seem to need me for this conversation so I keep walking, and rolling.

"No, stop. Tell me," says Linc. "Tell me what's going on."

"I don't really know. Mr. Dooley told my mom and dad that I got a high score on those tests we took at the beginning of the year." I shrug. I'm still confused by all of it.

"Why didn't anyone know before? Have you always been a genius?" asks Linc. "And what happens now?" That's the first question he's asked that I have an answer for.

"So far it looks like my mom expects me to get even better grades. And starting tomorrow I'm in some new enrichment class that will help me 'reach my true potential.'" I roll my eyes.

There was a lot of talk about my potential last night. It was decided (not by me) that I haven't been fulfilling

mine. Luckily for me, tomorrow starts a new quarter so I can get going on this potential thing right away.

"None of that sounds good," says Linc. "Wait, did you say there's going to be a new enrichment class?" I nod. "Oh man, I hope my mom doesn't find out. You know she'll try to get me in even if I don't belong." Linc frowns, which looks out of place on his face. But he should worry. His mom has a way of finding things out and making things happen. Whether Linc wants them to or not.

We walk into history class and sit in our usual seats. After the sixth person asks me if I'm really a genius, I put my head down on my desk and pretend to sleep. Linc laughs and throws wads of paper at my head until class starts.

Mrs. Rockmeyer gives back the tests we took last week. When I get mine, I see that I got a B, which is what I usually get in history. I also see a note next to the B that says, "Gabe, I'll be expecting more from you." Great. History isn't that interesting, so I don't spend much time on it. But it looks like Bs aren't going to be good enough anymore.

Only one more class to go, and the only person who hasn't acted like I'm a freak today is Linc. If I hear the word "genius" one more time, I might start screaming. But if I start screaming, I won't be able to stop. And then

I'll be the crazy genius and even more people will stare at me and talk about me.

I put my head down and walk as fast as I can to meet Maya. She wasn't in the cafeteria during lunch even though it was sausage biscuit day—her favorite. It's weird that I haven't seen her all day. We meet at the Saint Jude statue and go to geometry together every day.

I get to the statue first, which never happens. Maybe it's because I was walking so fast. It's the perfect place to be invisible for a few minutes. Saint Jude stands in a dark nook at one corner of the building. He's the patron saint of lost causes. Which is kind of perfect, since sometimes surviving middle school feels like a lost cause.

Here comes Maya. I lift my hand to wave, but she walks right by. I guess she didn't see me. "Hey, Maya," I yell. A bunch of kids turn around and look at me, but not Maya. I go after her as fast as I can. Something's wrong. I know she heard me.

I catch up to her in front of our geometry classroom. "Maya? Hey, Maya, what's wrong?" I have to grab her arm to make her turn around. When she does, I see her dark brown eyes are too shiny, and her jaw is clenched. She shakes my hand off.

"What's wrong?" I ask again. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"I'm supposed to be the smartest one. Me." Maya takes a shaky breath and blows her bangs out of her eyes. "And now *you're* some kind of genius? And that's all anyone wants to talk about. *You're* the smartest kid in school? *You?* What does that make me? Second best?"

"But it doesn't mean anything. It's just what some stupid test says." I don't know why she's so upset. And I don't know what to say to make it better.

"Maybe it doesn't mean anything to you. But it means everything to me." And my second-best friend, the one person I thought could help me figure this genius thing out, walks into class without me.