On a certain morning, much like every other, an alarm goes off, before the first rays of sunshine begin to filter through the curtains. It is quickly smacked shut from the comfy confines of a hefty blanket, after which the outstretched arm returns to its woolly prison, not to be seen again.

Not another peep is heard from the silent scene, until the bright light from the shining beacon that is our lovely sun finally reaches the eyelids of the young boy, pulling him from the captivity of the oh so alluring world of dreams.

He rubs his eyes sleepily, before taking hold of his alarm clock to look at the displayed time.

“Shit,” he solemnly exclaims.

Meet Raymond, a bright and sprightly sixteen-year-old boy, right at the junction of his life.

This Raymond is one who likes to go with the flow and enjoy life as it comes, while trying to be as considerate as possibly to those around him. If one, for example, forgot to do their homework, they would always come to Raymond, who would then happily let them copy it, glad that his hard efforts in keeping up with all the schoolwork could be of use to someone other than himself.

To summarise, Raymond is someone who not only makes lemonade when given lemons by life, but goes on to share it with all those close and far, to spread the joy of a good glass with everyone he knows.

Such is the character of our Raymond.

With full knowledge of his lack of time, Raymond rushes his morning routine to the absolute limit – he grabs random items from his wardrobe for wear, skips his daily shower, edges the speed of sound while brushing his teeth and decides that the cafeteria will do, as he munches down on a dry piece of toast, alternating between taking a bite and sipping from the coffee left over after his mother filled up her thermos – despite his extended sleep, he’s still groggier than usual, as he stayed up far later than is the norm for him.

Suddenly, he starts to take a deep, incremental and involuntary breath, as air wells up in his lungs.

“Achoo!” he loudly and forcefully sneezes, letting out all that built up volume.

He quickly notices that the mug in his left hand feels far less heavy than it did a few moments ago. He finds that its contents have been spread all over the place – including on his choice of clothing.

“Fuck,” he solemnly exclaims.

As the school bells chime, Raymond opens the door, gasping and panting, to see the eyes of his fellow students turn to him all at the same time. At the front of the class stands Mrs. Wallops, who pushes her glasses further onto her nose as she faces the latecomer.

“You may quickly take your seat,” she says.

Mrs. Wallops is by no means a lenient person – far from it, in fact. To most students, her classes are their first taste of hell, as she is one of the sternest teachers in the entire school.

Her rules are simple:

1. No talking during lectures (except for questions)
2. Raise your hand before asking a question
3. Finish your homework
4. No tardiness (once the door is closed, you’re late!)

Non-appliance to these rules will result in a strike. The first strike counts as a warning. More than one strike will result in an hour of detention per strike, discounting the first one. Strikes reset every semester.

The strictness of these rules, and the absoluteness with which Mrs. Wallops enforces them is the reason why she has gained the nickname of ‘The Walloper,’ as she – metaphorically – beats all her students to submission.

Now, you may be wondering why, despite Raymond’s infringement of rule number four, he is still allowed to take a seat, rather than being sent to the administration to confirm his tardiness.

The reason for this is simple.  
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Last month, Mrs. Wallops was in a bad mood.

It had been a completely normal day, with absolutely nothing out of the ordinary – no disobedient kids, no stray cats to annoy her during her commute, no sudden rainstorm to get her soaked – exactly the kind of day Mrs. Wallops loves.

Still, it had left her in a sour mood, as this was the one day she wanted things to be outside the norm.

That’s right; it was her birthday.

It was her birthday, and yet no one had brought her a present – even something minor – or congratulated her, leaving her in a bitter state of mind.

Since administration has her date of birth, there were people who knew about it. However, due to the fact that Mrs. Wallops never shows a happy expression when congratulated, the other teachers had concluded that she doesn’t care about it much.

And so, at the end of a long day of work, Mrs. Wallops was not satisfied at all.

This is when Raymond comes in.

“Mrs Wallops?” he says, as she passes him by in the empty hallways.

“Is something the matter?” she grumpily responds.

“One moment,” he goes on, as he opens up his backpack, pulling out a small, cutely wrapped package, presenting it to his teacher.

“Is this for me?” she asks.

“Yes! I was planning on giving it tomorrow, since we have no classes today, but then I just happened to run into you now, so I thought I’d hand it over,” he explains.

“Hm,” she grunts, as she takes it out of his hands, while pushing up her glasses. “I’ll gratefully take it.”

Raymond smiles.

“Can I say something extra, on behalf of everyone in class?” he continues.

“You may speak your mind,” she says, innerly giddy.

“Well, although we don’t always show it, all of us know that you’re stern towards us because you want us to be the best students we can be, and to ensure we can make it to the end of our school careers without a hitch. This present is as a thanks for all you do for us.”

Raymond bashfully laughs, as he runs out of things to say.

“So uh,” he awkwardly finishes, “Happy birthday!”  
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Although she didn’t show it at the time, she was greatly happy to have received the gift – a lovely box of chocolates – which left her a bit soft towards Raymond. Seeing him tired out from running all the way to school, and knowing he’s usually always neatly on time, she decides to let him off the hook, just this once. As such, Raymond’s good nature has saved him from his first ever strike.

With a polite nod, Raymond rushes to his seat, pulling out his pen and notebook, as Mrs. Wallops begins her lecture.

“Never thought I’d see the day our little boy arrives late to class,” says Raymond’s left seatmate, after Mrs. Wallops instated a small break.

“They grow up so fast,” says Raymond’s right seatmate.

The two Raymond is currently conversing with are his left seatmate, Ryan, and his right seatmate, Rick. These three had become instant friends since the very start of their high school lives, four years ago. The Three R’s, they were called, as an obvious reference to the simple fact that all of their names do, indeed, start with a capital R.

Another question does persist, however – what was it that brought The Three R’s together? What manner of coincidence had to be brought into existence for these three to not only be able to get along so well, but to meet in the first place? The first part is hard to explain – but, luckily, the second question is much simpler to answer:

They were asked to line up alphabetically.

“And whose fault is that?” Raymond quips back at them.

Now, as previously mentioned, Raymond is not the type to be late – whether it’s school or a casual meeting, Raymond makes sure to be punctual in all things. To him, it’s simple courtesy and, to ensure that courtesy can be applied at all times, he tries to adhere to a proper bedtime.

Last night, however, his two closest male friends – who just so happened to be his two current seatmates – had coaxed him into staying up past it, like two little devils standing atop his shoulders, whispering into his ears.

Literally, that is, as they whispered right through his headset, while the three played online late into the night.

“Touché,” answers Ryan, his left seatmate.

“You seemed like you’d be on time, though,” says Rick. “When you messaged us after waking up, you still had enough time to make it.

“Duuuuude,” Raymond whines, remembering the rest of his morning, “you won’t fucking believe what happened.”

“What was it?”

“You see,” Raymond goes on, strongly emoting with every word. “I was rushing to make it out of the house in time so I wouldn’t have to run, at least, right?”

“Sure?”

“So I was standing there with breakfast in one hand – a dry piece of toast, since I didn’t have time for anything more,” he holds up his right hand as if it really had a slice in it, “and in my other hand,” he similarly raises his left hand, “I had a cup of coffee, to wake myself up.”

“And then what?”

“Then, a sudden itch in my nose welled up – I had to sneeze.”

“You had to sneeze?”

“I had to sneeze! And it was a damn big sneeze as well. Like, the biggest one I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Bigger than the One that woke the Devil?”

‘The Sneeze that woke the Devil’: a term referring to a very specific night, almost two years ago.

It was 11 o’ clock on a Tuesday and The Three R’s were, as they often did, even at the time, playing an online game together. On any other day, Raymond would have signed off by the time 10 rolled around, but, as it was a Tuesday, he had a bit of extra time, as they didn’t have a first period on Wednesdays. As such, Raymond was still playing with them – albeit silently, so as not to keep any of his family members, who had similar habits to Raymond himself, awake.  
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“Can you cover the left flank?” exclaims Rick, over the mic. Met with no answer, he asks, “Ray?”

“Ahhh-CHOO!” Raymond lets out in response, a sneeze so loud it causes the other two to jump in shock, as if they’d just gotten jumpscared.

“Dude, are you okay?”

“Do you need us to call an ambulance?”

“It’s all good boys,” Raymond finally says, recovering from the great force he’d just let escape his oral orifice. “Let’s get back to work.”

However, before he can make it to the left flank, as requested, Raymond’s attention is forcefully pulled away from the game, as the door to his room is swung wide open in an instant, hitting the wall with a loud *whack*.

“Rayyyymonnnnd?” the figure in the door shrieks, their voice echoing through the chamber, as if to remind Raymond that there is, indeed, a time and place for everything – which happened to not be right now.

“I might need that ambulance after all,” Raymond mutters into the mic before disconnecting from the game, but not from the voice chat, leaving the other two to wonder what hellish things could be happening, based on the pained screams that could be heard from Raymond’s side.  
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In this context, ‘The Devil’ obviously refers to the one who’d brought the pain upon Raymond: it was his little sister, a large year younger than Raymond.

The reason for her anger was that, unlike Raymond, she had to wake up even earlier than usual on Wednesdays, as she had volleyball practice in the morning. She had explicitly told Raymond of this fact, to which he responded by promising her he’d be extra quiet, to make sure not to wake her up when she went to bed early – a promise he dutifully followed, as he knew his sister was not to be messed with when woken up prematurely. This was a fact he was once again reminded of due to this incident.

After that day, he dutifully logged off at the normal time, even on Tuesdays.

“Way bigger.”

“A sneeze larger than the One that woke the Devil? No way,” remarks Rick.

“It’s true!” Raymond insists. “So, there I am, mug of coffee in my hand with the largest sneeze of my life about to be released, when I remember that I need to sneeze into my elbow – since that’s just good manners.”

“Right,” confirms Ryan, “but how does this make you late?”

“I’ll show you,” he says, as he re-enacts the scene: arms raised, holding the fake items, he acts out the beginnings of the sneeze, before moving his arm up to his mouth, to catch the non-existent germs.

“Achoo!” he fakes, before freezing his whole body like a statue, to preserve the exact moment things went wrong – aside from his right hand, with which he points to the his left hand, now above his shoulder, as a result of moving his left arm up.

“Remember what was in this hand here?” Raymond asks.

“Your mug of coffee?”

“Oh, it wasn’t a mug of coffee anymore, I can assure you of that.”

As Raymond finishes his retelling of the morning’s happenings, loud laughter sounds out from directly behind him.

“*That,*” remarks Sarah, “has to be the most Raymond reason to be late I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Meet Sarah, Raymond’s longest friend. The two had been together for as long as they could remember, although neither of them could recall exactly *why* they had been friends for so long. Either way, they enjoyed each-other’s presence, so they often spent time together.

What many didn’t realise, however, is that this was done in a purely platonic manner – they’d never even considered each-other as a romantic option, despite the often-relentless teasing of those around them. Family members, specifically, were the worst for this, as they secretly hoped their son’s/daughter’s/brother’s/sister’s friend would become a proper member of the family – which was a big source of frustration to the two.

Still, it never deterred them from hanging out, which is why, despite everything, they are still close as ever.

“It really is classic Raymond, isn’t it?” the two seatmates of Sarah laugh along as well.

“Hey, what can I say? I’m iconic,” answers Raymond, not offended in the slightest, as his easy-going personality doesn’t let him.

“Huh-hum!” sound through the classroom, as Mrs. Wallops clears her throat, pulling everyone’s attentions towards the front of the class. “Five minutes have passed; let us resume the lecture.”

After a further uneventful school day, the bell chimes to announce the end of it – for Raymond and friends, that is.

“Man, Thursdays are the best,” remarks Rick, excitedly.

“Right?” confirms Ryan, referring to the time of the day – it’s only 2 o’ clock, yet classes were already finished for the day.

“You guys want to hang out then?” suggests Raymond.

“Damn right I do,” Ryan immediately answers. “What about you, Ricky?”

“I’m busy, sorry. Some other time,” he responds, as he packs up his stuff and gets up.

“Man, you’ve been busy every day lately. You got yourself a girlfriend, or what?” exclaims Ryan, slightly indignantly.

“Who knows?” he says, shrugging, as he walks off. “See ya.”

This action may seem like an attempt to subtly sweep the topic under the rug, by implying he really *does* have one, but is uninterested in talking about it.

The reality is a bit different, however – Rick has been heading straight home ever since a certain incident, two weeks ago:

Rick was coming home after a long day at school, with all his least favourite subjects – history, geography and art – and he was dead tired. He was low-key planning to go straight to bed and take a nap for a few hours. This, unfortunately, was not an option, as dinner was planned to be a mere 30 minutes after his return.

To summarise: Rick was feeling overwhelmed, overworked and – in general - just obsolutely owful.

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“I’m home!” he announces, as he walks through the front door and starts to take off his shoes and coat.

“Ricky? Is that you?” his mother shouts questioningly from the living room.

“Yeah!” he returns.

“I’ve got a little surprise for you, sweetie! Just wait there a moment!”

Although heavily confused, Rick obediently listens, impatiently tapping his foot out in the hallway as he awaits the promised surprise with a cynical curiosity.

“Are you ready to have your mind blown?” his mother asks him, standing invisibly behind the door to the living room.

“Sure?”

As Rick says this, she burst through the door, carrying in her arms a not immediately identified, extremely fluffy animal.

“We got a puppy!” she excitedly announces, “Isn’t it cute?”

Slowly, tentatively, Rick approaches his mother, who holds the creature forward for him to take in his own arms. He accepts the transaction, his limbs immediately turning into a bed, exclusively for the ball of fluff currently laying in it.

“It is…so cute,” he utters.

“Right!?” his mother shouts in agreement.

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Ever since that day, Rick has been rushing home at the first opportunity, so as to spend the most possible time with his newfound love.

“Bummer,” Raymond remarks. “Guess that’s that for after-school plans.”

“Wanna just go home and play CoD instead?” suggests Ryan, as replacement for going out.

“Man, we’ve been doing nothing *but* playing CoD lately! I’m getting real bored of it.”

“You got a better plan then?”

“Maybe I can help with that,” says Sarah, poking out from the seat behind them. She points to her seatmates, who are both getting up to leave. “These other two both took French, so they still have class, leaving me entirely free – and more than willing to join you on your escapades.”

“That sounds great!” Raymond responds. “Do you mind, Ryan?”

Ryan looks over to Sarah, who smiles at him and winks cheekily. In response, he turns away bashfully.

“I don’t mind,” he mutters.

“Great!” Raymond excitedly responds. “Lovely, indeed.”

“Then, follow-up question – what, exactly, are we planning to do?” Sarah asks them.

“You decided to come along before knowing any plans?” Raymond asks her, in turn.

“Of course! I wouldn’t want to miss a chance to hang with my bestie over here,” she answers him, as she leans back over her seat to playfully, and affectionally, noogie the man.

“Hey, stop it,” Raymond weakly protests, although he doesn’t particularly mind too much.

Meanwhile, Ryan, who has finally found his embarrassment to have died down, decides to look back over at the pair, without even a semblance of what may be called jealousy over his friend’s close relationship with the girl called Sarah, who he most decidedly does not have any feelings for – or so he claims.

When Sarah notices this, she launches him a quick kiss with her fingers(?), prompting him to once again look away shyly.

As she finally backs out of the physical contact, she pipes up, “Well, what about karaoke?” in response to which Raymond immediately starts to think of the best place to go – he knows the town like the back of his hand, after all.

Ricky decides there would be no point in protesting at this point, even if he’d wanted to, and resigns to his fate, praying he’s as good at singing as his mother used to tell him when he was younger.

While these three begin to make their way to their destination, two young ladies are, coincidentally, strolling through that same part of town.

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