



**Operation Bully Protection**



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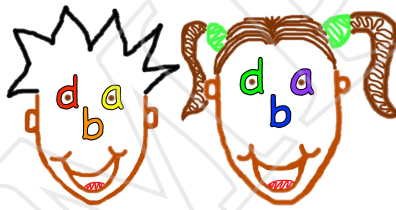
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*Change can be difficult...*  
*our response to it doesn't have to be.*

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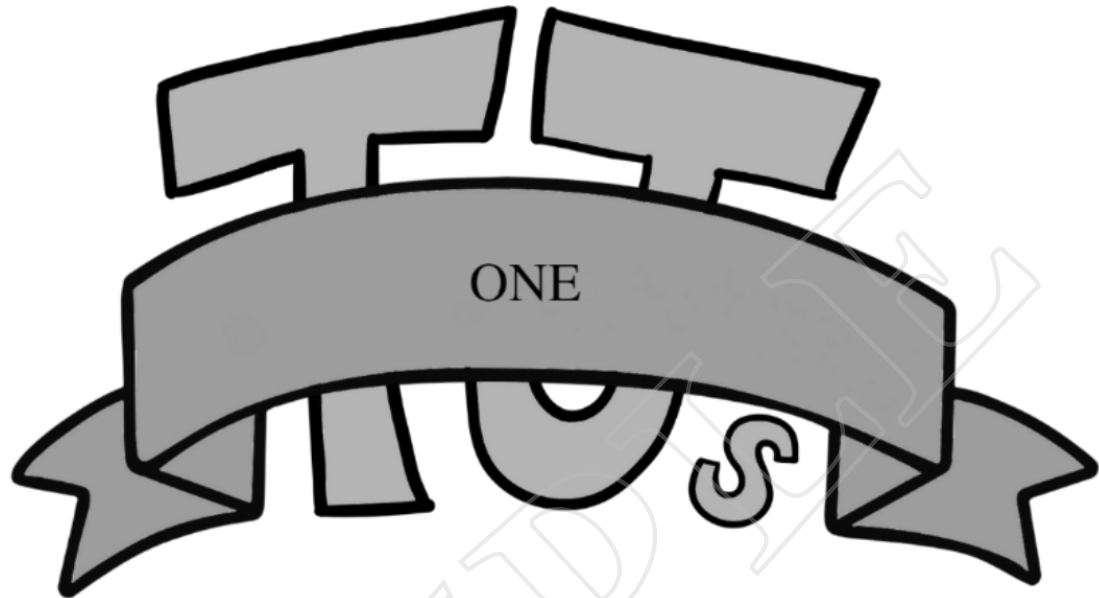
# T.J.'s New Adventures Operation Bully Protection

"Mr. Angel" Ramirez



*"Dreaming and believing is the pathway to achieving!"*

## 1. A New Introduction



### *A New Introduction*

If this is your first time meeting me, then reading on would definitely be in your best interest. If you already know who I am, and the adventures that my friends and I tend to have, then reading on would *still* be in your best interest. Why? Because things have *changed*. And not just a little bit, but a *lot*!

Firstly, the things that haven't changed. My name is *still* Tomas Raymundo Olivera Uribe Barrientos Lopez Espinosa, Jr., or T.J. for short. Speaking of short, I *have* grown. *Finally*! Not as much as most

of my friends, though. Actually, I'm still the shortest. But not by much. I used to be an *entire* head shorter than Paul, who was the second shortest of the T.J. League, but now I'm only three or four inches shorter than Marcus. Wait. Did I just confuse you? Let me explain.

In my last adventure, Justin was the tallest person in the T.J. League, followed by Erick, Sammy, Marcus, Paul and then me. But that has definitely changed. Actually, I'll start from the shortest and leave the tallest for last, that way it's a surprise.

First, as I've said before, I'm still the shortest, followed by Marcus. Next tallest is Erick, who's grown the least of us since our last adventure. That just leaves Paul, Sammy and Justin. Fourth shortest is now Paul. If Erick's grown the least, then Paul has *definitely* grown the most. From second shortest to third tallest. That just leaves Sammy and Justin.

Hmmm. Wait. I just realized that I told you that I was going to start with things that *haven't* changed, but for the past three paragraphs I've been doing the complete *opposite*. Which leads me to something that definitely hasn't changed. I *still* have ADHD. Although I *have* learned techniques from mom, dad and my old school's Intervention Aide that help me manage it better than I used to.

I also still have a bit of dyslexia. Once again, thanks to mom, dad and a few educators from my old school, my reading and writing



accuracy has improved. I *still* use the Talk2Text app on my tablet when I'm doing my writing, but only for my final draft. That way I get to practice and get better at my reading and spelling.

And the most important thing that *hasn't* changed, if you haven't guessed it already, I still have the *greatest* group of friends in the world. Erick. Justin. Paul. Sammy. And the bestest friend in the world, Marcus!

This past summer, we hung out with each other more than we ever have before. Just making as many memories as we could. Some of them will definitely live rent free in my memory, while others have left some scars. Especially during our backyard camping trip. But I'll save that for another adventure.

And now, to get to the things that *have* changed. Well, the things that I haven't accidentally already told you about, anyway. And like I said before, a *lot* has changed since my last adventure.

You might be asking yourself, "how?" Well, for starters, I'm not in fifth grade anymore. I'm not even in sixth grade. Actually I'm in middle school now. I'm just starting seventh grade. It's only been a week, really, but boy has it been a *huge* shock! When I found out that we could no longer play T.J. League, it threw me for a loop. Why can't we play T.J. League, you ask? Good question! The answer? Middle School does *not* have recess. I know, right!

Instead of recess, we have something called Nutrition. It's basically a snack break. We can either eat something we've brought

from home or buy something from the cafeteria. I usually bring something from home, like I used to in elementary. Not to mention, it costs money to buy something from the cafeteria. Lunch is still free for me, though. But for some reason nutrition isn't covered under my food plan. Actually, I don't think anybody's is.

Since the first week of school has already passed, I've learned that bringing a snack from home is the smarter way to go. Why? Because sometimes people are waiting in line so long, to buy something from the cafeteria, that by the time they buy their snack, they only have one or two minutes to eat it before the bell rings. In case you didn't already know this, if I don't have my snack, I get hangry. And you do *not* want to have to be around me when I'm hangry.

Another thing that has changed is P.E. In elementary school, we went out to P.E., one grade level at a time, and had two P.E. coaches. Our P.E. coaches usually had fun activities prepared that would help us stay limber and in shape. Either that, or they would have less fun activities planned that would prepare us for the state physical fitness exam. And those only got harder as we got older.

Now, before P.E. even begins, we have to make sure that we're in our P.E. uniform. Which reminds me of something I forgot to mention. In elementary school, we got to choose what we were going to wear every day. *Now*, we don't get that luxury. Now we wear the same thing. Every day. Monday through Friday. No more personal

choices. Yeah. Instead, we *have* to wear the school uniform. (Read the next words with sarcasm) Yay, me!

Back to P.E. Not only do we have to wear the school uniform, but we also have to wear a P.E. uniform. 'To keep your stinkiness to your P.E. clothes,' my homeroom teacher told us. But that isn't entirely true.

You see, last year, since some parents complained to the school board that it wasn't fair to force children to change in front of each other in the locker room, we don't have to anymore. And before you ask, yes, there's a boy's locker room and a girl's locker room. And yes, they are separate from each other.

No, boys and girls seeing each other change was not the issue. The issue they raised was body image. What do I mean? Well, first of all, it wasn't me. It was them. The parents. They told the school board that although some kids are happy with their body image, there are those who have insecurities about their body. One mom said that forcing a child to relive the same embarrassing, or possibly traumatizing event, every single day, was like forcing a trigger on someone with PTSD. Both can lead to permanently scarring the victim.

They even brought in a child psychologist as an expert witness. At least that's what I heard. I wasn't actually there. But thankfully, due to those parents, no one has to change in the locker rooms anymore. We can just wear our P.E. clothes under our school uniform.

Which is what I do. It's just easier. The eighth graders were *not* happy when they found that out. 'We were *forced* to change and we're okay! Why don't they have to?' was the basic sentiment.

Don't get me wrong, not having recess, as well as having to wear school and P.E. uniforms *are* big changes, but the *biggest* change towers above those.

Now, instead of having just *one* teacher for all of our subjects, we have one teacher for *each* of our subjects. That means six different teachers! *Every* day! *Six* different names to remember. *Six* different seating arrangements. *Six* different homework assignments. *Six* different people contacting your parents if you aren't behaving in class. *Six*!

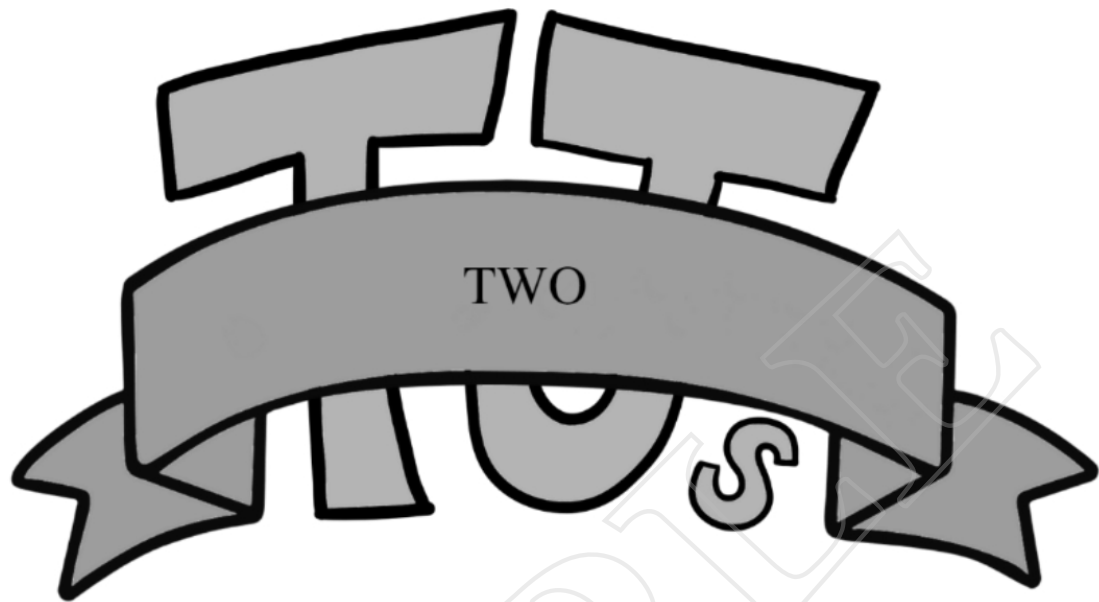
And instead of staying with the same classmates in all of your classes for all of your years at this school, like we used to in elementary school, your classmates change from class to class! Subject to subject! So, not only do we have to learn each teacher's name, we have to learn the names of all our new classmates. For *each* class!

I'm not sure who designed the way this school works, but it seems like the teachers just drew names from a hat. You know, like for secret Santa. And whatever name they drew, that student got added to their class. Not sure how that's going to help us build bonds of friendship or how that might increase our learning abilities or improve our test scores!

Thankfully, I have at least *one* member of the T.J. League with me in each class. Except my elective. What's an elective? It's the one class, outside of the normal school subjects, where you have the opportunity to learn something new or something you probably already like. Which elective am I taking? Art. I thought Paul might be taking art with me, but he chose something different. This school just happens to have a fashion design class. Probably because there's a fashion design school just down the street. For adults. A fashion design school for adults. Some of their students even visit our school a few times a week to help out in Paul's class. At least that's what he told me, excitedly, as he jumped up and down.

Well, I think I've covered all the major changes that have happened since my last adventure. And now if you'll excuse me, I have to go pound my little sister, Xochitl. Why? because she definitely *hasn't* changed.

“And if you don't give me back my Batman pillow, I'm gonna...”



## ***Get Over It!***

“Now remember, if I catch anyone wandering around on their own, that person will become my partner for the rest of our trip. And I’m more of a people watcher than a participator. Which means, instead of getting to *play* with your friends, you’ll get to sit with me and *watch* your friends have fun. And I’m pretty sure you didn’t just fork out fifteen dollars to do something most people do for free while watching YouTube from the comfort of their bed.”

Tom was finishing up his rules and expectations before we actually broke up into groups for mini golfing. Most were things we

were used to because our parents had the same rules or expectations. Others were a bit different. Like, you *must* stay with your group leader. If you need to leave for any reason, like you have to use the restroom, you *must* tell your group leader first. And if you *do* go to the restroom, or anywhere else for that matter, you *must* go with a partner.

“Because if anything happens to you when you’re alone, there’s no one to come back and tell me that the Lucky Charms Leprechaun kidnapped you for finding his secret stash of gold coins!”

After everyone agreed to Tom’s rules and expectations, he introduced today’s leaders. Some were S.W.A.T. leaders we were used to.

*Please excuse this interruption for an important and exclusive update: Even though I’ve only started middle school a week ago, the youth group at Marcus’ church starts when you’re in sixth grade. Why? Because most elementary schools in our neighborhood only go up to fifth grade and middle schools are sixth, seventh and eighth grade. Actually, now that I think about it, I think my old elementary might be the only one holding out. Which I’m totally okay with. Like I said in the last chapter, there’s no recess in middle school!*

And since Marcus’ church starts middle school at sixth grade, I’m now in my second year of S.W.A.T. And no, it doesn’t stand for what you probably think it does. No, we do *not* wear tactical gear and learn to handle intense hostage situations, or whatever actual

S.W.A.T. team members do. No, for us, S.W.A.T. stands for Spiritual Witnesses Amongst Teens. Although our shirts *do* have bullseyes on them, our targets are *not* bad guys with guns. Our target is completely different, but I'll get into that later. For now, let's get back to mini golfing.

*Thank you for joining us for that important and exclusive update. We now return you to your regularly scheduled adventure: Since most of our youth group is here, some parents provided rides. Why? Because there are twenty seven of us and only four youth leaders. If parents hadn't agreed to drive, some of us wouldn't have been able to come.*

"So, if you *want* to, you can be in a group with your own mom or dad. *Or*, and please forgive me parents who graciously agreed to provide rides for stinky, smelly, talkative, loud, whiny, unappreciative teenagers—."

"Hey!" most of us shouted.

"What?" Tom responded. "Those are all boomer words for 'respectful' and 'responsible' young adults. Right parents?"

"Yeah."

"Of course."

"Absolutely."

"C'mon zoomers. You have to brush up on your boomer lingo."

No one was believing a word that Tom or the parents were saying.



“Aren’t you supposed to be setting an example for us?” Tasha asked.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Tom responded.

“If my calculations are correct, and they’re rarely incorrect, you just lied to us and encouraged the chaperoning adults to go along with your statement of falsification.”

Tom just smiled, closed his eyes and gently shook his head.

For those of you who don’t know Tasha, let me share something important about her. Tasha is intelligent beyond her years. Actually, she’s a musical savant. Pair that with her high functioning autism and you get moments similar to this. She understands most things that the rest of us may *never* comprehend in our lifetime, but she also has moments of what my mom explained to me as ‘black and white’.

What does that mean? That means, that her mind works a little bit differently than my own. You see, my mind can see situations in black or white. As in, Tom either just told us the truth or told us a lie. But my mind can also blend black and white to create gray. As in, Tom *definitely* lied when he said that they were ‘boomer words,’ but he was just joking with us. He meant no harm in his ‘white lie’.

*I* can see the difference because of the way my brain works. Unfortunately, although Tasha’s brain *far* exceeds the limits of my own, she sometimes has a little difficulty filtering situations like this one.

“You’re right, Tasha. I did not set a good example for you and your peers with my previous statements. I apologize. What I was meaning to say, is that if your parent has chaperoned this trip, you can stay in their group if you’d like. Or, you have the option to join another group,” Tom explained.

“Thank you, for admitting your fault. I appreciate your willingness to rectify your words and give a proper explanation of your previous statements,” Tasha said.

Sammy *used* to be the person that hurt my brain, more than anyone else, because of the confusing words she used. Now, it’s Tasha. Yeah. Because of Tasha, I pull my phone out to Google word definitions more than ever. Which I guess could be seen as a good thing. Because of Tasha, my vocabulary continues to increase!

Huh? What? Oh! Yeah! I *did* mention a phone. Since I’ve started middle school, my dad said it was time for some more responsibility. That *usually* means something bad. But *this* time it was actually good!

The week before school started, my dad told me to put my shoes on and get in the car. When I asked him where we were going, he told me not to worry about it. He does that randomly. Except it’s usually with our whole family. We’ll get in the car and dad will just start driving. Sometimes we’ll end up at a town center for dinner and a movie. Sometimes we’ll end up at a distant amusement park. You

never know where the adventure will take you. Once we even ended up across the border. Boy was *that* an unexpected destination!

This time, when I got in the car, things started off like normal. I had *no* idea where my adventure would take me or what kind of adventure it would be. Thankfully, our destination was a cell phone store and my adventure ended with me having my very own cell phone!

Now, before you get overly excited for me. I have to inform you that it's not an 'adult' cell phone. What do I mean? Let me explain.

Dad said 'adult' cell phones are for people with jobs. People who are earning money to pay for their own cell phone and phone plan. *Or* for responsible young adults who have proven that they can be trusted to have an adult phone. How? Well, being responsible with a 'kid' phone is the first step. When I asked him what the next step was, he told me he'd let me know when I'd reached the next 'check point'.

So, I'm sure you're wondering what a 'kid' phone is. Once again, let me explain.

First, let me start off with this. A 'kid' phone is *still* a smart phone. It's just a smart phone with limited abilities. Just like your parents can set up your computer or tablet in 'kid mode', which limits what you can and can't do with it, my dad got me a phone that was *designed* for 'kid mode'.

What does *that* mean? That means that whenever I want to add a number to my phone or download an app, it sends a request to my dad's phone. After, and *only* after he approves it, can I add the number or download the app. And not only *that*. He can also limit the amount of time that I use it. For games and stuff. Which is usually one hour a day. During the school week. On Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, I get extra time. Depending on how much I earned during the week. How do I earn extra time? I'd rather not bore you with the details. Instead, let's get back to mini golfing.



"At least they have pizza Fridays," Marcus said, trying to put his ball into the hole.

"I won't argue there. The pizza in middle school *is* better than the pizza we had in elementary school," I agreed. "But what about the whole no recess thing?"

"I will admit that I'm going to miss playing T.J. League, but at least they put the sports equipment out at lunchtime," Marcus said. "That way I get to play basketball every now and then."

"But *I'm* not good at sports with balls full of *air*," I reminded him.

"Yeah. I can see how that would be a downside for you."

"And what about having so many teachers?" I asked.

“Well, to be honest, I’m kind of okay with that. It gives me more opportunities to learn from different kinds of people.”

“It *what?*”

“It’s your turn, T.J.”

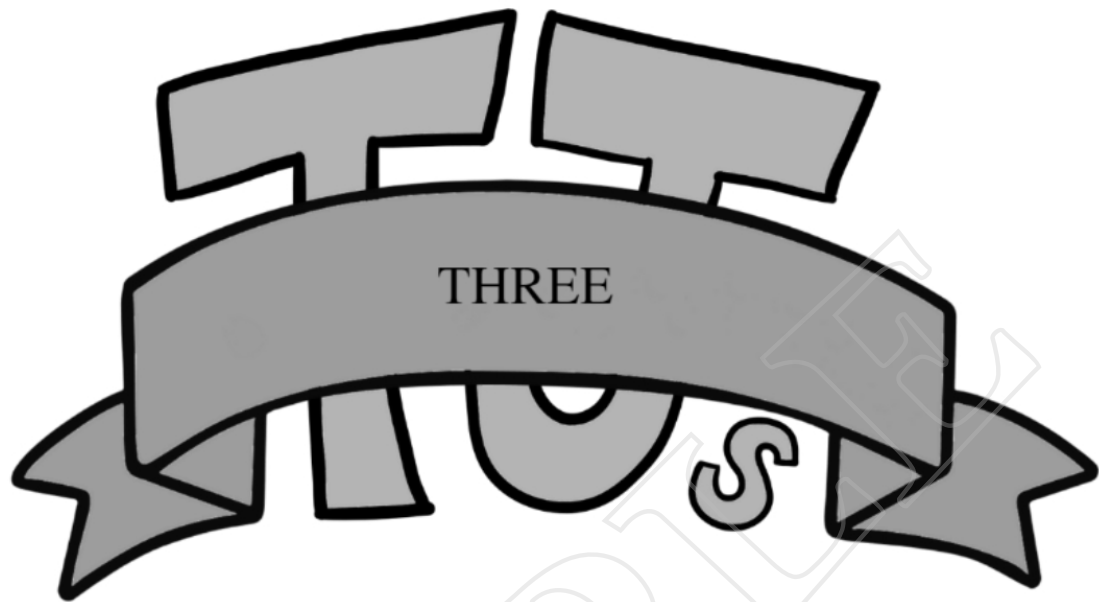
I tried my best to line up my shot, but in my frustration, I put too much strength in my stroke. This caused my ball to bounce off of the hole and out of the course altogether. Guess sports with balls that *don’t* have air inside of them are no good for me either!

“That’s a fault. It counts as two strokes. One for missing and one for bringing your ball back to the course,” Ryan pointed out.

“I say it should only count as one. This is mini-golf, not the PGA,” Mrs. Wayne said.

Marcus and I continued to discuss our likes, but mostly dislikes, about all the changes that came with beginning middle school. Until the eleventh hole that is. That’s when Johnny had enough of our whining. He’s a senior in high school, so he knows the struggle we’re going through, but apparently doesn’t empathize with us.

“Life is continually changing, and usually not in your favor. Learn it now, learn it good, and get over it!”



## ***You're Going Down!***

“Okay boys and girls, now that we’ve finished recording your weight, height and basic skills, we’re going to use these stats to measure your growth over the next nine months,” Mr. Barret explained, holding up his clipboard.

“That’s right. We’ll keep track of your growths and use those growths to encourage more growth in the future!” Mrs. DeMille shared.

I know that’s supposed to make sense, but my brain just isn’t comprehending what she just said.

“Okay. So, since last week we didn’t dress for P.E., we didn’t get to do much physical movement. But since everyone is looking nice in their P.E. uniform, let’s get those bodies moving!” Mr. Barret exclaimed.

“First, let’s get everyone into nice single file rows,” Mrs. DeMille said. “Boys on this side and girls on that side. Let’s have ten rows of seven. And let’s see if you can accomplish that all on your own.”

After giving us a signal to move, everyone started lining up. Some people rushed to be line leader, while others, like me, took our time making our way to the *back* of the line.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Even though sports with balls full of air and I have an unspoken agreement to stay as far away from each other as possible, I do actually like P.E. I think. Let me rephrase that. I liked P.E. in elementary school. If this is going to be anything like *that*, then cool. If not. Well. Then. Well, then, I don’t know. We’ll just have to wait and find out.

No, not liking P.E. is not the reason I’m making my way to the back of the line. I’m making my way to the back of the line because I’d rather give those that are more athletic than me a chance to be at the front.

“Very good, boys and girls,” Mrs. DeMille congratulated us. “We will line up like this, every morning, to begin our class. Unless otherwise instructed.”

“That’s right. And for now, Mrs. DeMille and I will be leading you in our morning stretches, but eventually, we will choose a few of you to come up to the front and lead your classmates,” Mr. Barret told us, pointing at random people. At least I *think* they were random. Maybe they were students he used to choose back when they were in sixth grade. I wouldn’t know since I was still in elementary school last year.

For the next tenish minutes, we did stretches using our legs, arms and cores. Most were simple enough for me to do, but one proved to be a bit difficult. For one of our stretches, we had to raise one arm above our head and reach behind our back, while lowering our other arm and reaching behind our back. Then we had to try and clasp our hands together. *Behind* our back!

When I raised my left arm and lowered my right one, my fingers *just* touched each other. When I switched it around, I couldn’t even do *that*. Paul tried to help me by pulling my arms closer together, but all that did was cause me to cry out in pain. Which in turn, caused everyone to turn around and look at me.

“It’s okay if you can’t clasp your hands together, just yet,” Mr. Barret said. “As we continue to do these stretches every morning, you’ll find yourself being able to stretch farther and farther and with less and less difficulty.”

When we finished stretching, we had to run a lap around the blacktop. Mrs. DeMille said that as the year progressed, we would



run more and more laps. She didn't have to say it, but I'm sure all the running we're going to be doing is for one specific purpose: the mile run.

Last year, Coach Red and Coach Jess told us that in middle school, and high school, we would be recorded a few times a year. And no, not using a camera. They told us that our P.E. teachers would record our growth—height and weight—as well as our physical accomplishments. That included the number of pushups, sit ups, and elephant lifts we could do, as well as how quickly we could run a mile. They told us that the state had set a standard goal for each grade level and gender.

I'm not sure what those standards are. All I *do* know, is that people like Marcus and Justin will probably have *no* problem reaching and possibly *exceeding* those standards. Come to think of it, Erick and Sammy shouldn't have any problems either. Paul and me on the other hand, are not the most athletic people on the planet.

In case you're telling yourself, 'Weren't you the fastest person at your old elementary school?', the answer is, yes. Yes, I was. But that doesn't mean I can run that fast forever! I can run pretty fast for about a minute or so. After that, it takes me awhile to catch my breath. If we do some short distance racing, like the twenty yard dash, or even hundred yard dash, I might come in the top three. I don't really know. Since we haven't done any *fast* running yet, I'm not sure how fast these other kids are.

Now, if I had the stamina of Marcus or Justin, then yeah, I could probably do better. But I have the stamina of one of those wind up cars. You know. The ones you pull back until you hear the tires clicking, then you release it to see how far it'll go. Yeah. Like one of those. I can start off fast, but my energy runs out pretty quickly. Not to mention, just a little while ago, when they were recording our 'stats', I could barely do ten pushups and twenty sit ups!

Like I said, Marcus and Justin have this P.E. thing in the bag. And Erick and Sammy shouldn't have too much of a problem with it. But people like Paul and me, our strengths lie elsewhere.

"Okay, now that everyone has finished running and gotten a drink of water, we have enough time for just *one* athletic activity," Mrs. DeMille announced.

'Athletic activity'? What did she *mean* athletic activity? What exactly does she call all the pushups, sit ups, elephant lifts, stretching and running we just did!

"I know. I know. Some of you are already done for the day, since you probably spent most of your summertime in front of a screen instead of exercising your body. *But*, the school finally agreed to a purchase that Mrs. DeMille and I have been begging them to buy. For *years!*" Mr. Barret said, placing his hand atop an athletic cart that had a sheet draped over it.

"And I think it's a purchase you're *all* going to enjoy!" Mrs. DeMille added.

“*But*, if you’re too tired,” Mr. Barret said, looking at his watch, “I guess ten minutes isn’t that long to play dodgeball.”

He quickly pulled the sheet away from the cart like a person trying not to knock over any dishes pulls a table cover away from a table. This caused most people to erupt in cheers. Then Mr. Barret and Mrs. DeMille motioned for silence.

The dodgeballs inside the cart were very familiar to me, and probably the rest of the T.J. League. They were the same multi-colored foam balls that Funmaker John brought to our school when we were in fifth grade. We had set up and run dodgeball so many times that we lost count. But we also *played* dodgeball so many times that we were probably guaranteed to be some of the last people standing!

“Okay. This is how it’s going to work.”

They went over the basic rules of dodgeball before allowing us to play. Rules like, no crossing the middle line. If the ball hits the ground before hitting a person, it doesn’t count. If a person *catches* a throw, whoever *threw* it is out. And if a person catches a ball, then a person gets to rejoin that team. They also said that we only have five seconds to throw a ball. If they caught anyone holding onto a ball for an extended period of time, that person would automatically be out. And the most important rule: no headshots.

After splitting us up into four groups by last name—A-E, F-J, K-O, and P-Z—they soon realized that their idea wasn’t going to

work. Why? Uneven teams. Instead, they split us up by number. On day one, they had given each of us a number and told us to memorize it. Why? Because they would be using that number throughout the year for various reasons. I guess this counted as one of those reasons.

“Numbers one to forty-three on the left side of the basketball court and forty-four to eighty-seven on the right side of the court!”

Since we had used up some time going over rules and realizing that splitting up into groups by last name wasn't going to work, I guess Mr. Barret decided to keep it simple. Just *two* groups instead of four.

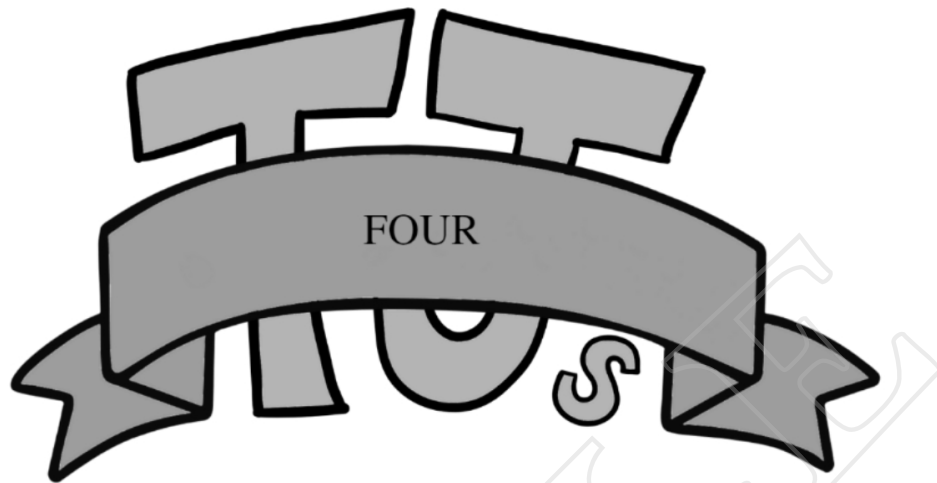
The basketball court *may* have been crowded, but that just meant more people to hide behind! *What?* In this game, it's all about strategy. Like my dad always says, 'work smarter, not harder!'.

“Okay, everybody. When I blow my whistle, the game begins!”

You could see the level of excitement in the faces of the people who had chosen to be at the frontlines of their groups.

“Ready!”

“You're going down!”



## *Well, That's Different*

“Whadja get for number four?”

“Huh?”

“Number, four. What answer did you get?”

As I’ve said before, my dyslexia only seems to apply to letters and words, not numbers. And even though algebra *does* have letters in it, math still comes pretty naturally to me. I must admit that sometimes I’ll write the letters *backward*, but that doesn’t change whether the answer is correct or not.

Samuel looked like a pigeon scoping out your French fries while trying to decide the best way to get one for himself. Except in

*this* instance, he was trying to scope out my answer to problem number four, trying to decide whether to copy my answer or not.

“Y equals three point five,” I finally answered him.

“Cool. That’s what I got,” he said, while taking the backside of his pencil to remove his answer from his paper and the *frontside* of his pencil to replace whatever answer he had written before I responded.

I just shook my head and continued my work. Even though I don’t like most of the changes that middle school has unceremoniously brought to my life, I must admit that I *do* like meeting new people and making new friends. I guess that’s the *one* thing I can admit I’m starting to like more and more.



“Okay boys and girls. Go ahead and finish up your partner talk and write down your answer to number three,” Mr. Leonard, my history teacher directed. “Next we’re going to discuss something I think most of us will be able to relate to. Medieval Times.”

Medieval Times? How in the world does he expect us to be able to relate to Medieval Times? Things were so *different* back then. They didn’t even have electricity!

“Now, I try my best to keep up with pop culture, especially since it will one day be considered *history*,” he explained, “so, I know

that many of you are probably obsessed with the newly released game called Squire.”

Most people in class began exchanging stories of their experiences playing the game while others looked around the room with complete confusion.

“Settle down. Settle down. I know it must be weird to hear one of your teachers talk about a game you probably play on your phone or video game console at home.”

‘Video game console’? Who in the world says, ‘video game console’? Just call it what it is. An X-Box, a Play Station, a Switch, or whatever it is you use to entertain yourself at home, instead of doing your homework.

“Now I must admit that I am more partial toward this game than some of the more violent choices out there,” he continued.

“But you still get to beat up and kill people,” Charlotte called out.

“That’s not till level five,” Shazmee responded.

“I like the realistic graphics,” Adam joined in.

“Okay, boys and girls. We’re getting off track,” Mr. Leonard said, holding his hands out, in front of his chest. “Let’s open those new history books to chapter one.”

“New? Mine has like four names written on the inside front cover.”

“New to *you*. Those new to *you* history books,” Mr. Leonard rephrased.

We took the next five minutes or so doing ‘Round Reading.’ ‘Round Reading’ stands for ‘around the room reading’. That means that Mr. Leonard chooses a person at the front of one of the five rows in our class, to begin reading. That person will then read one paragraph. Then the person behind them reads the next paragraph. When we get to the end of the row, Mr. Leonard chooses the next row to read.

We probably would have read a bit more of the chapter, but the Vice Principal walked in with a new kid. Sort of.

“Good morning, boys and girls. I would like to introduce you to a new student to our school.”

She motioned for the new student to join her at the front of the classroom. While they obeyed, Mr. Leonard did his best to keep the whispers to a minimum. I’m sure, by the look on his face, he wished they were nonexistent.

“This is, Tracy. Tracy will be joining your class and I expect you to treat them with respect and kindness, while showing them what great citizens you all are.”

Tracy looked very uncomfortable. I’m not exactly sure why, but I think I might have an idea. And no, it’s not only about being the new kid. More like not sure how they would be accepted.



Now, I'm sure you're telling yourself, 'isn't that what *every* new kid worries about?' And normally, I would agree with you. But you're not here, in Mr. Leonard's third period history class, sitting in the second seat from the front, in the third row from the right side of the class. But I am here, watching this first hand. And I'll tell you something. Tracy is not the only one feeling unsure. Because if there's anyone else like me in this class, then they're feeling unsure of themselves also.



One thing I think I forgot to mention, when I was telling you about the differences between elementary and middle school, was our lunch schedule. In elementary school, the entire grade level used to eat at once. In middle school, it depends on your track. You may be eating with people from your grade level, or you may be eating with people from a grade level above or below you.

So, what does that mean for me? That means no more eating with the entire T.J. League, at our regular bench. Instead, I get to eat with some of my new friends. For about five minutes or so. Which isn't so bad. Just different.

"So, what do you guys think?" M.J. asked.

"About what?" Vanessa asked.

"About the new kid!" M.J. clarified.

"*Exactly!*" Vanessa said. "About *what?*"

“About the way he was *dressed!*” M.J. answered.

“I think you mean *she*,” Natasha corrected.

“*No*. I meant *he!*” M.J. reiterated.

“That’s pretty insensitive of you,” Vanessa pointed out.

“How?” M.J. asked.

“You *know!*” Vanessa responded.

“*What?* He was a *boy* last year. And his *name* was Trevor. I *know*, because he was in *my* cabin at summer camp just a few weeks ago,” M.J. explained. “And I can tell you for a *fact*, that he’s a boy!”

I sat silently, chewing my lunch, while the conversation continued. Voices were raised every now and again, and probably would have gotten out of hand if Marcus hadn’t showed up.

“Hey, T.J.!”

“Hey, Marcus,” I responded, with less enthusiasm than usual.

“Invite me to another table.”

“Huh?”

“Invite me to another table,” I whispered a little louder this time.

I think Marcus understood the look on my face so he did as I asked.

“Hey, T.J., wanna sit with me over here?”

“Sure,” I responded, picking up my lunch tray and moving over to another table.

M.J., Vanessa, and Natasha were distracted when I got up to leave and paused their discussion. But not for long. As soon as Marcus and I sat down at a nearby bench, we could hear their voices above the dull roar of the lunch area.

“So, what was that all about?” Marcus asked, as he opened his boxed orange juice.

“I just didn’t want to be a part of that conversation. Thanks for saving me!”

“What conversation?”

“About the new kid in our history class,” I answered.

“What new kid?”

“Well, it wasn’t *exactly* a new kid.”

“I don’t get it. Was it a new kid or *not* a new kid?” Marcus asked.

“It depends on how you look at it,” I answered.

“So, help me see.”

“Well, it’s like this.”

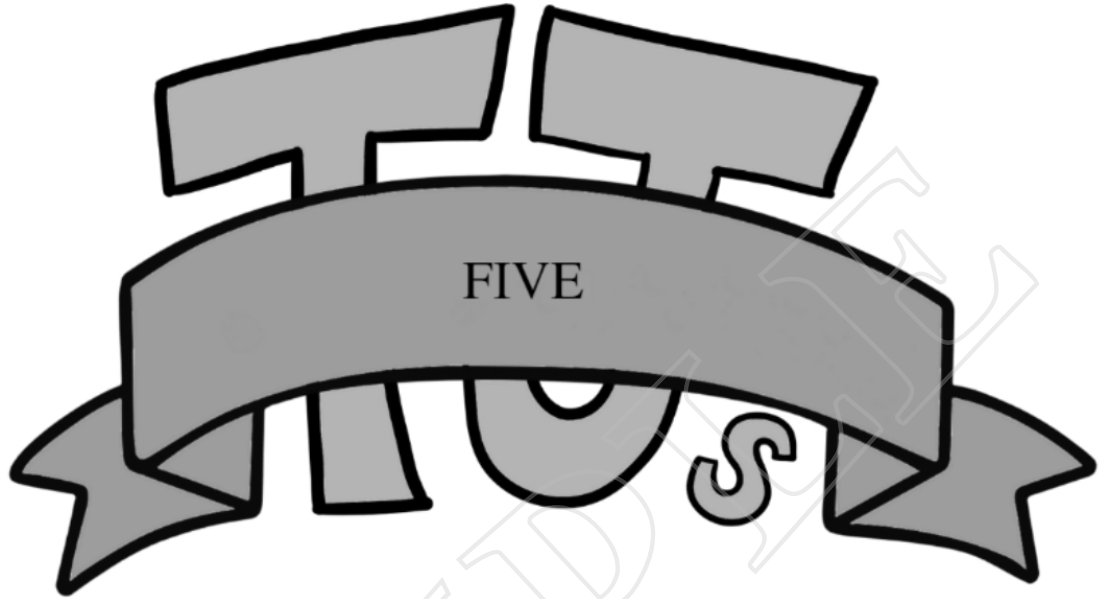
Trying to keep my explanation brief, since we only have about twenty minutes of lunch left, I did the best I could to help Marcus ‘see’. I told him what had happened when the vice principal came into our class during history. Marcus kept a pretty straight face, although his eyes squinted a few times, telling me that he probably has a few thoughts of his own.

After I finished, he took a moment before saying anything.

“Well, that's different.”

SAMPLE

## 5. The New Norm



### *The New Norm*

After lunch, I have English class. At least in this class, Marcus is with me.

Marcus was able to see what I was talking about during fifth period since both he *and* Tracy are in my English class. He didn't say anything mean or rude, like some of the other *boys* were doing. He didn't even stare like some of the *girls* were doing. He just kept his focus on the teacher. Mr. Short.

“Today, I’m going to be passing out the first book that we’ll be reading together, this year. And I’m sure that some of you have probably read it before. And I’m sure that some of you will probably dismiss it as a ‘kids’ book’. But the themes and lessons it teaches us are not only important to learn and utilize in middle school, but also for the rest of our lives,” he explained.

I have to admit. He grabbed my attention with that explanation. What kind of kid book had lessons that I would use in high school or even when I’m an adult?

“Actually, do I have a volunteer to help me pass them out?”

Jeremiah raised his hand first and got the privilege to help. Since I’m in the first row, I got to be one of the first people to see what book it was. Charlotte’s Web. Huh. Wasn’t expecting *that*.

“I like the way the author uses the different characters to show us how different people can respond to unexpected change. And how we each have a *choice* in how we respond to that change. But most importantly, how even though our *original* response may not have been something that we’re proud of, we can *always* choose to *change* our response!”

He seems pretty excited about this book. Not to mention, everything he just explained, is usually what Mrs. Whiston used to ask us to discover on our own. Hmmm. When she told us that she was making our reading and writing assignments more difficult to prepare us for middle school, I don’t think she knew that Mr. Short was going

to be our English teacher. Because if she did, then she probably would have taken a different approach.

After recording, in his teacher's log, the book number that everyone had received, we read the first chapter together. Instead of doing 'Round Reading', Mr. Short asked for volunteers to read aloud. And instead of a paragraph, we read until he said, 'next volunteer.'

Most people read their portion pretty smoothly, except for Andrew. I haven't had the chance to really meet him yet, but he's in my first period science class. He started off pretty strong, but eventually, he began to stutter some of the words. Not terribly bad, but enough for some people to snicker. Which *really* annoyed me. Some people will use *anything* to poke fun at someone. Boy do I hope they learn some of the lessons Mr. Short was talking about!



Today we go to Marcus' house after school, and even though we *could* walk home, like we used to in elementary school, we don't. Why? Because the middle school is quite a ways farther from our house than our old school was. In fact, the week before school started, we did a test run and found out it takes a full twenty minutes *longer* to get home. Twenty minutes we could be spending doing our homework. Or playing in the backyard or tree house. Or adding panels to my comic book. Yeah. Definitely farther than our old school. So instead, we take the bus.

Which reminds me. There's one more change I forgot to tell you about. Marcus' mom is *still* usually home when we get to his house, but *my* mom usually isn't. Why? Because after all her years of hard work, mom *finally* got her doctorate in psychology! I know right! I was so proud of her when we went to her graduation. I screamed so loud and yelled so much that by the time we got home, I thought I had caught laryngitis. Which I found out later on, you can't *catch* from yelling. Mom said that I had probably just exhausted my vocal cords or overexerted myself.

Anyway. She's not home when we get there because she now works as a child psychologist. And if you haven't guessed it yet, she works in the afternoons. Actually, mid-morning to late afternoon. Why? Because most kids are in *school* in the mornings. The ones not being homeschooled or taking online courses, anyway.

So, now I have a house key and it's just Marcus and me when I get home. Yup, you read that right. Just Marcus and me. *No* Xochitl. Yes! She stays at our old school's after school daycare and dad picks her up on his way home.

Now before you say how *lucky* we are to have the whole house to ourselves, let me give you another short update.

Once dad realized what would happen when mom got her new work hours, he installed a new home security system. The old one we had was just the alarms on the doors and windows, after that man tried to kidnap Xochitl. *This* one includes cameras. In *every* room.



Except the bathroom, of course. That way dad knows when Marcus and I get home. He can even talk to us through the cameras, and we can answer him back. And if there's an emergency, the system automatically notifies the proper authorities. It's both an invasion of privacy *and* a safeguard!

"So, how was your day at school?" Marcus' mom asked him.

"It was good."

"That's it. Nothing interesting happened? You didn't learn anything new?"

"Well, I *did* do the most pushups and sit ups during our assessment in P.E. And we *did* get to play dodgeball!" he answered, enthusiastically.

"Dodgeball, huh? I didn't know they still allowed that in middle school," she commented.

"I'm not sure they did. Mr. Barret said that he and Mrs. DeMille have been begging the school to buy the equipment for *years*," he told her. "But they're basically the same balls we used in elementary school."

"*Basically*?" I asked. "They're *exactly* the same balls we used in elementary school."

"Well, that sounds fun, I guess. As long as no one got hurt."

"No one got hurt," Marcus assured her.

"And what about *you*, T.J.? How was school?"

“It went pretty well. I found out that I’m still pretty good at math. That I *can’t* clasp my hands together behind my back. Oh, yeah! And something kind of strange happened during history class,” I said.

“Strange how?” she asked, wrinkling her brows.

“Well, our vice principal interrupted our class to introduce us to the new kid that would be joining us.”

“That doesn’t sound so strange.”

“*That* part wasn’t,” I clarified.

Marcus’ mom leaned on the kitchen counter, placing her chin in her hands, and gave me her full focus.

“The part that caught me off guard, was the way he was dressed. *She* was dressed? The way *Tracy* was dressed,” I explained. Sort of.

“I don’t think I follow,” she admitted.

I then did my best to explain that Tracy, who used to be Trevor, according to M.J., was wearing a flower dress and matching head band, with a matching flower, in his hair. Her hair? And that although I liked the pink Converse shoes she, he, *Tracy*, was wearing, that I had never seen pink Converse on a boy before.

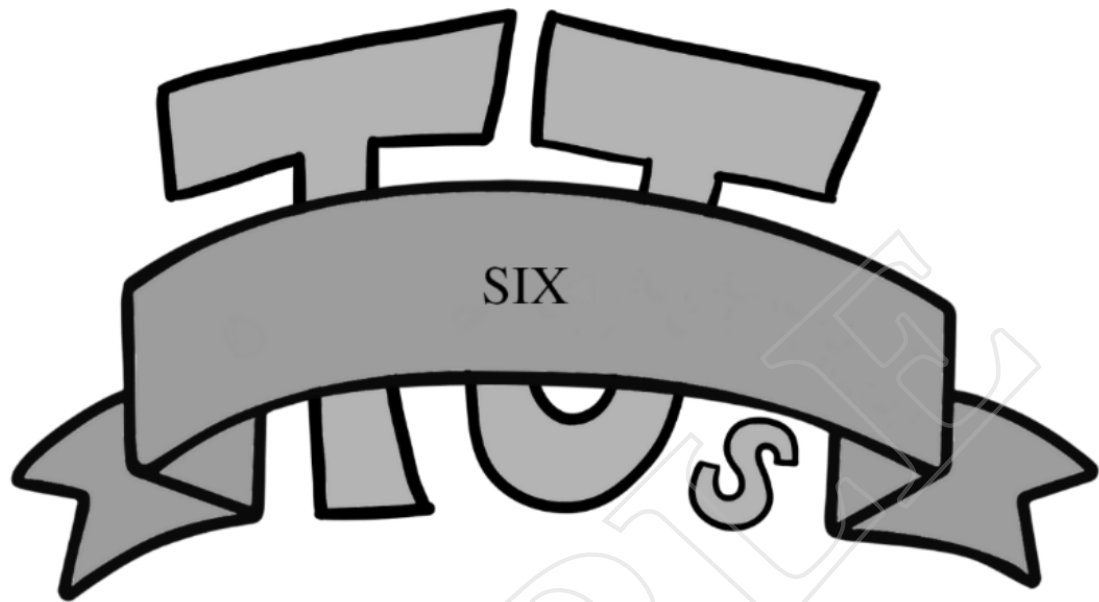
I think she understood, by how many times I tried to correct myself, that I had *no* idea how to explain it well. That I was still a bit confused about the whole situation. I mean, it *was* the first time I had ever seen this in person. I’ve seen it on a couple of TV shows, when a character has to dress up as a girl to hide, or for some comical relief,

and once or twice on YouTube videos where brothers and sisters do clothing swaps, but to see it in person was a whole different experience. Especially when it didn't fit under either category.

After apologizing for my horrible explanation, Marcus' mom assured me that there was no reason to apologize. When I told her how some of the boys were snickering and making inappropriate comments, and how some of the girls were staring, she shook her head in disapproval. But not Marcus. I made sure to tell her how Marcus stayed focused on our teacher the entire time. And how, when no one wanted to pass Tracy the Charlotte's Web book, that he reached over and passed it himself. She praised Marcus' actions and gave him a kiss on his head, followed by a hearty hug.

When I asked her how I should respond tomorrow, or if I should say 'he' or 'she' or just 'Tracy', she said that it was a question that my mom was probably better suited for. I nodded my head in agreement. Mom has been practicing her child psychology on me for *years*. Now it's time for *me* to see how much she's gotten out of it!

"I've been hearing and reading about this kind of thing more and more lately. And not just in middle schools. In high schools, and recently, about a little girl in elementary school. It seems like this might become the new norm."



## *Michael's Makeup Magic*

After eating a snack of mixed fruit and granola, Marcus and I headed upstairs so we could do our homework in his room. He took his normal spot *on* the bed, and I took my favorite pillow *from* his bed to lay down on the floor. Since we're not in the same classes, we can't exactly work on our homework with each other anymore.

Now, before you go and say, 'but you guys weren't in the same classes in elementary school,' you have to understand something. We may not have been in the same class, but that doesn't mean we didn't get the same homework. Remember, there were only *two* teachers for

our grade level. That means we almost *always* had the same homework. The only time we *didn't* have the same homework, was when one of our teachers had a substitute and they forgot to make copies of the homework for them. Besides that, we pretty much always worked on our homework together.

Speaking of doing our homework together, since we do have *three* classes together, but only have homework for two of them, we decided to do that homework first. You know, that way we could finish it quickly and then work on the homework for our other three classes.

It's kind of annoying right now, but I think, *eventually*, I'll get a hang of this six different classes thing. Thankfully, our school provides us with daily planners that are set up for six periods, that way we can write down our homework or reminders for each one. If I didn't have that to help me stay organized, I'm pretty sure I would be in a world of daily hurt.



After we finished our homework, Marcus' mom asked me if I was going to be staying for dinner. I thanked her for the offer but told her that tonight it was my turn to make dinner, so I had to get home and start prepping the meat.

Dang! *Another* update I forgot to give you guys. Maybe I should have created a 'daily planner' for all of the updates I was supposed to

share with you, that way this adventure didn't seem so unorganized.  
SMH my head!

It's okay, T.J. Just breathe. Breathe, T.J., breathe. In. And out. In through your nose. Blow out the candles. In through your nose. Blow out the candles.

Okay. Now that I've calmed down, let me share with you how dinner works.

Since mom's work hours have changed, because of her new job, we each take turns making dinner. Monday's it's my responsibility to have dinner ready for everyone. Tuesday is dad's. Wednesday is Xochitl's and on Thursdays, mom comes home early to make dinner.

Huh? What? Yes. Yes, I said Xochitl has Wednesdays. Now that she's ten, mom said she's old enough to help out with the 'bigger responsibilities'. But, of course, since she *is* a bit younger, she's only allowed to make something that doesn't require oil on the stove. If it's something preprepared, like frozen vegetables or something, she *can* use the stove. She just can't cook something that requires *using* oil. Dad said oil fires are one of the leading causes of housefires, and that even though we have one of those smallish fire extinguishers in the kitchen, he'd rather keep it being a decoration than a necessity.

What about Fridays? Oh, that's easy. Fridays alternate. Every other Friday is order in, and every other Friday is date night.

For 'order in' Fridays, we each take turns choosing what to order from Uber Eats or Door Dash or whatever. But there's one rule.

*No whining.* If you don't like the restaurant or store the person has chosen, tough. If you whine about it, you lose your next chance to choose. I don't know about you, but I'd rather endure some bad food for one night that give up *my* opportunity to ensure that I have some *good* eatin'!

As for 'date night', that also alternates. One Friday is mother-son and father-daughter date night. Then it's 'girl's night out' and 'guy's night out'. Next is mom and dad date night. And *no*. Before you even *think* it, *no!* Xochitl and I do *not* have a date night! Just thinking about it makes me shudder. When mom and dad have date night, Xochitl and I usually stay at someone's house. Either just till mom and dad pick us up or for the entire night. Thankfully, Marcus' parents are usually okay with me spending the night. The only time I wasn't able to, was when they had a planned trip out of town and didn't have an extra ticket for me. Which was *totally* okay. I mean, how could they have known it would fall on mom and dad date night?

What about the weekends? Those have stayed the same. It depends on whether or not mom feels like cooking. If she cooks, we have a home cooked meal. If she doesn't, we might have frozen dinners or take out or leftovers or dad might barbecue or something. Which is fine with me. It keeps things interesting, since you never know what's going to happen!

But back to tonight's dinner. Like I said, Mondays are *my* turn to cook, and I have to prep the meat. Oh! And the potatoes. What are

we having? Pulled pork sliders with mashed potatoes.

The pork has been cooking all day, so it should be ready. What? Of *course* you can cook pork all day! All I did was take it out of the fridge this morning, add a cup of water to the slow cooker, or crock pot, or whatever you might call it, and dropped the pork in there. Then I put the lid on, and put the setting on low before leaving for school. That way it's slowly cooking and juicing itself all day without burning. Now all I have to do is take it out, shred it, and add the barbecue sauce! But before that, the potatoes. I have to get them boiling. Wait. Why am I boring you with all the details? Sigh. Well, I'm going to get dinner ready. I'll check back in with you later.



As the potatoes sat on the stove, getting just right for me to mash them, I headed upstairs to tell dad and Xochitl that dinner should be ready in about twenty minutes. I try to make sure that it's ready by six fifteenish, since that's about the time mom usually gets home from work. All she has to do is hang up her coat, wash her hands and dig in!

Dad's in the bathroom so I think I'll let Xochitl know first.

Before I even entered her room, I could tell that Xochitl had forgotten to charge her headphones. *Again*. How do I know? Because I can hear a boy's voice. And since dad's made sure that we don't



have any video chatting, *or* audio chatting, apps on our tablets, I figured she must be watching YouTube.

“Now, take your egg and slowly, but firmly, use it to blend it in.”

Blend it in? Egg? How do you use an egg to ‘slowly, but firmly’, blend *anything* in? What in the world is she watching?

As I turned the corner into her room, I was surprised by what I saw. Xochitl was at her desk, with the latest gift her nina bought her. I think it’s called a color palette or something. You know. Those things that look like watercolor palettes that you use to paint, except these are for your makeup and stuff. I mean. Not *my* makeup. Not that I *use* makeup. ‘Cause I’m a boy. You know. So, I don’t use makeup. I meant to say, except these are for *girls*’ makeup and stuff. Not *your* makeup and stuff. *Girl*’s makeup and stuff. You get it, right? Oh, boy. I think I totally stuffed that one up.

Anyway, she’s at her desk with her makeup thing open, her makeup mirror in front of her, and her tablet next to her mirror.

“Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Excuse me! You didn’t even knock!” Xochitl protested.

“But your door was open,” I pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter! You’re supposed to knock! What if I had been changing?”

“With your *door* open?” I asked.

“Don’t change the subject!”

“Xochitl! Volume!” dad scolded, from the bathroom.

Dad’s been telling her that she’s too old to be yelling as often as she does. That she’s not a little girl anymore. That she’s getting older and that she should have more control over her emotions. Yeah. Right. Good luck with that one, dad!

“Don’t change the subject!” she whisper shouted.

“Okay, now that we’ve finished applying our foundation, we can move on to the next step.”

“What are you watching?” I asked.

“None of your *business*” she continued to whisper shout.

“Is that a *boy*?”

“Yeah. So, what?” she said, in her normal voice with its normal annoying tone.

“Teaching you how to put on makeup?”

“Yeah. *So*?”

I just stood there, trying to process it. A boy. Putting on makeup. In a YouTube video. *Actually*, it’s a boy. *Teaching* people how to put on makeup. In a YouTube video.

I’m *completely* confused.

I mean, do his parents know he wears makeup? And that he makes YouTube videos teaching people *how* to put it on. Then again, maybe his parents *bought* him the makeup. Or it could have been a nino or nina, like Xochitl, and his parents don’t even know he *has* it. But then again, where would he *record* the videos?

I walked closer to Xochitl's desk so I could see where he was recording from.

"What are you *doing*?"

The backdrop in his video didn't look like a wall. It looked like a fabric or a paper or something. Which means he could be *anywhere*. Like at his nino or nina's house. Or in the attic. Or in the basement. Or *anywhere*.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"That's Michael."

"Who's Michael?"

"Who's Michael? *Who's* Michael?" Xochitl mocked. "Michael is only *the* most famous makeup YouTuber."

I took out my phone to do a Google search.

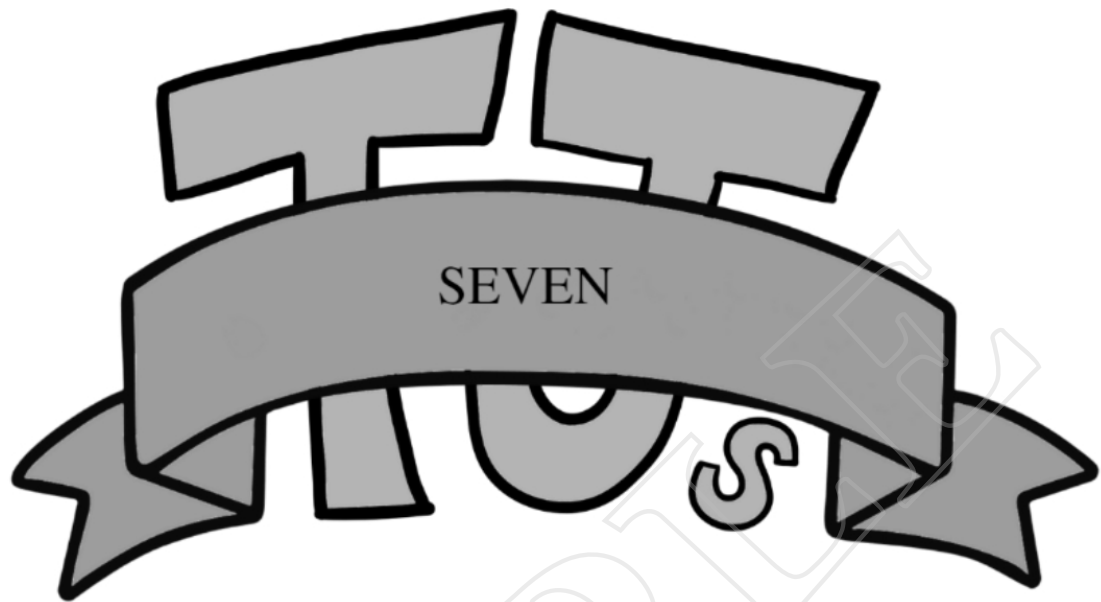
"What *are* you doing?" Xochitl asked.

"None of your business," I answered, turning around to exit her room. "Oh, and dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. So, make sure you're washed up and downstairs by the time mom gets home."

I left her room, while scrolling through the Google results. She *may* have been exaggerating a bit, but this Michael kid *does* seem to be pretty popular. Over ten million followers and over one billion total views. And he's only been doing this for about two years. Wow! I have friends at school who have had their own YouTube channel, since like third or fourth grade, and they haven't even gotten one *thousand* subscribers yet!

Huh? What? What's the kid's name? Michael. Oh! Not his *name*. His *YouTube* channel. Oh! I knew *that*! Wait. Let me check. Hmm. Guess that fits. Sort of. "Michael's Makeup Magic."

SAMPLE



## *Should We Help?*

By the time I got downstairs, dad was out of the bathroom, so I told him that dinner was almost ready. When he asked me why my sister was yelling, I told him because I was in her room. He asked me if I was kidding, to which I replied, ‘why would I make that up?’ He just shook his head and headed upstairs. Somehow, just *some-how*, I feel like I’m going to get blamed for this. Why? ‘Cause I’m the *oldest*. *That’s* why!



As I was scraping the last of the mashed potatoes into a serving bowl, the front door opened. *Perfect* timing.

“I’m home!”

“Mooom! T.J. got me in trouble!” Xochitl shouted, from the top of the stairs.

“Tomas!”

*See! I told you!*

“Xochitl, what have we told you about lying?” dad asked, standing *directly* behind her, causing her to jump.

“But he *did!*”

“And I’m guessing he also forced you to forget the discussion we’ve had about raising your voice to your parents,” dad countered.

Mom took a deep breath while I came behind her and took her coat. I’m sure she’s had a hard enough day, listening to kids’ problems at work. She doesn’t need this right now. Your home should be your sanctuary, not your nightmare.

“Xochitl, dear, we can talk about this later. Right now, I’m going to wash my hands and get my stomach ready for something yummy with pork in it.”

Mom walked right past Xochitl and directly to the bathroom. Xochitl’s face went from one of surprise to one of complete fury. At me. She was looking directly at me when her face morphed.

What did I *do*? I ignored it. That’s what *I* did. I ignored it and headed back to the kitchen so I could set the food on the table.

Tonight is dad's night to set the plates, cups and silverware, so I'm not going to worry about that or Xochitl's little fury face.



“Okay, boys and girls, we’re going to do something you’ve probably never done before,” Mrs. Pierce said, at the beginning of math class. “Today, we’re going to take a pretest.”

“Pretest? What’s a *pretest*?” Alexander asked.

“A pretest is where I give you a test on something that we haven’t gone over yet.”

“What? How in the world are we supposed to pass a test on something that we haven’t learned yet?” Max asked.

“Don’t worry. Pretests aren’t graded. They help me to know what you’ve already learned or what you might remember from last year,” Mrs. Pierce explained.

“So, if we’re not being graded, then why call it a pretest?” Marley questioned.

“Because it’s easier than calling it a ‘I want to find out what you’ve learned and remember’ test.”

“Aren’t you just describing an assessment?” Marley asked.

Mrs. Pierce opened her mouth, but nothing came out. It was like she was frozen. Like she had never realized what Marley had just pointed out.

“As I said before, today we’re going to be taking a pretest.”

Marley just shook her head in shame. I guess it was easier for Mrs. Pierce to just ignore what Marley just said, than to admit that Marley was right.



“A pretest? What’s that?” Justin asked, during nutrition.

“It’s basically an assessment. You know, to find out what you’ve learned or need to learn,” Sammy answered, for me. “But since most people don’t exactly know what an assessment *is*, most people, especially teachers, just call it a pretest.”

“So, you get graded on stuff you might not have even learned yet?” Paul asked.

“Mrs. Pierce said it wouldn’t be graded,” I answered.

“And they usually aren’t,” Sammy added. “Like I said, it’s basically an assessment.”

Justin gave Sammy a slightly confused face with his left eyebrow raised. He’s matured enough to know that if Sammy says something, then it’s probably right, and you’re better off accepting whatever she’s said than to argue or question it.

“Oooh!”

We all turned to see what had just caused that outburst from the other side of the eating area.

“Oh, I’m sorry *Tracy*. I didn’t see you there.”

“Yeah. I hope you can *forgive* us.”



Tracy was on the floor, with a white dress covered in splotches of brown where the chocolate milk had landed.

Some people were laughing while others were shaking their head.

“Maybe we should help her up.”

“Her? *Her*? You mean *him*. It was just last week that I saw *him* go into the *boy’s* bathroom at the park.”

“Oh. Then let me try that again. Maybe we should help *him* up.”

“Why? He’s a *big* boy. I’m sure he’s capable of helping *himself*.”

The two bullies were overexaggerating their words to add insult to injury.

“You’d think that people would be more mature in middle school,” Marcus commented.

“Actually, boys tend to mature two to three years later than girls,” Sammy informed us.

“But still, that’s not right,” Erick said.

“Yeah. Maybe we should do something,” I suggested.

“Like what?” Justin asked. “Those are *eighth* graders. You trying to get us *killed*?”

“But there’s only two of them and six of us!” I reminded him.

“Yeah,” Marcus joined in. “Since when does the T.J. League back down from a fight? Even when it seems like a sure loss?”

Paul nodded his head in agreement.

“I’m not sure that there’s much we *could* do,” Sammy commented, which *totally* caught me off guard.

In case you’ve forgotten, Sammy is the *toughest* of us. Maybe not the *strongest*, but *definitely* the toughest.

“If we try to step in and help, then the school’s hierarchy is going to fall into place causing all of their friends, and those that are under their thumb, to come after us,” Sammy continued. “So *really*, it’s six against however many are in their army.”

“But we’ve got friends, too,” Erick declared.

“So, you’re willing to start a civil war, right here and now?” Sammy asked him.

“Civil war?”

“Yes, Paul. A civil war. If we were to get *all* of our friends from elementary school *and* any *new* friends we’ve made in the past week, we *still* wouldn’t have all of the seventh grade on our side. But for sake of argument, let’s just pretend that we got the *entire* seventh grade behind our cause. That’s adding *plenty* more people to our cause.

“But for sake of argument, let’s say that the bullies over there, got *all* of the *eighth* grade on *their* side. Even if our numbers were evenly matched, we would basically have one grade level versus another.

“And since sixth grade has their nutrition *alone*, while seventh and eighth grade *share* a nutrition time, we’d basically be creating the

*perfect* situation for a civil war. One group of people, who *should* all be united under one banner, in this case it's due to the fact that we all attend the same school, versus another, because they have become divided, usually due to one or more moral disagreements or actions."

"What!" Justin asked.

"She's saying that our actions could cause the seventh graders to fight against the eighth graders, which would be dividing us instead of uniting us," Marcus simplified.

"Why can't she ever just talk *normally*?"

"*She* is standing right *here*," Sammy said. "And it's not *her* fault that *he* hasn't reached the same intellectual level as *her* or gained the same amount of vocabulary as *she* has."

Justin tilted his head and squinted. I think he's trying to decide whether or not he should be offended.

"I think we're getting off topic," I said, taking a look over at the spot where Tracy and the bullies were.

The ground was empty, except for the spilled milk and remnants of food that had fallen off of Tracy's plate, and the bullies were nowhere in sight. It was too late. There was nothing we could do to help.

"It doesn't matter now. Seems like it's all over," Erick said.

"Ugh! We should have *done* something!" Paul declared.

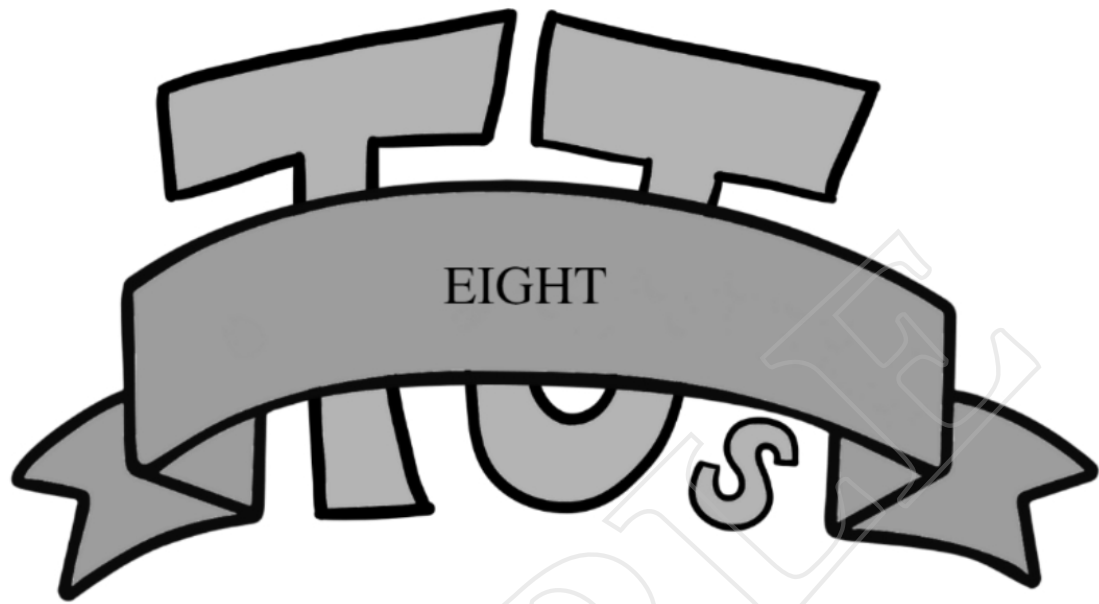
"I'm not so sure about that," Justin responded.

“Guys,” I said, looking everyone in the eyes. “Whether we should have helped or not is no longer important.”

Marcus gave me a look that said, ‘did I just hear what I *think* I heard.’ I just ignored it and continued my thought.

“The *real* question is, if something like that happens *again*, should we help?”

SAMPLE



## *Learn Anything Good?*

Nobody said anything. They just exchanged glances. Justin was the first one to even move something besides his head and neck. He grabbed his chip bag and held it up to his mouth, filling it with the salty contents inside.

We ate the rest of our snack in silence, pondering the correct answer to my question. But also, considering whether or not Sammy's civil war comments were true. For those of you who don't know, she's rarely wrong, but it *has* happened before. Only a few times since I've known her, but there *is* precedence there.

Thankfully, lunch was much quieter in the eating area. Probably because Tracy went home. It wasn't announced over the school speaker system or anything, but when History class came and went, with no Tracy, it wasn't difficult to figure out why.



“In Jesus’ name, amen. So, what book of the Bible are we in?” Tom asked.

“Genesis,” we answered.

“Good. What chapter?”

“Two!”

“What verse?”

“One!” Sebastian called out.

“Ooo. Nice try, but no.”

“Two. Three. Four. Five. Si—.”

“Nope. Nope. Nope. And before you try to continue on, nope!”

“Fifteen,” Tasha said, confidently, with a tone of finalization.

“Yes, Tasha. Correct, as usual,” Tom said. “Now, did anyone read ahead, like I suggested? To see what important event would be happening tonight?”

Tasha, and *only* Tasha, raised her hand.

“Very good, Tasha. Want to take a guess, or explain, what we might be going over tonight?” Tom asked.

“Not really. If no one else read it, I’d rather keep the knowledge I’ve gained to myself, just the same.”

Tom just nodded his head then asked for a volunteer to begin reading.

After volunteers read to the end of chapter two, and before Tom could begin his lesson, an important question was posed. Without a hand being raised. But Tom didn’t seem to mind.

“What does it mean ‘He brought her to him’?” Felicity asked.

“Well, first, let me start off by saying, that in this context, some people read it one way, while others read it another way.”

“But how do *you* read it?” she added.

“I read it exactly as written,” Tom answered. “As in, Adam didn’t have to go *searching* for her. Eve was *brought* to him. He didn’t have to meet her at some club or make a profile online or through an app or anything. *His* helpmate, or wife, was brought to *him*.”

“Does that mean that there really *is*, somewhere out in the world, a soulmate for *everyone*?” Elijah asked.

“I think that depends on your definition of ‘soulmate’.”

“Yeah. Like are we talking a *Disney* soulmate? Love at first sight? Happily ever after? Riding off into the sunset, kind of soulmate?” Artemis asked Elijah.

“Not really. I just mean, is it really *that* easy? Like, do I just have to wait around for God to *bring* me my future wife, or

something?” Elijah clarified.

“Thank you, Artemis, for your question. And thank you, Elijah, for your clarification,” Tom said. “To answer your question, yes and no.”

I don’t think Elijah, or anyone else wondering the same thing, liked that answer much.

“Let me explain.”

Tom told us that although he believes that God *does* have the right person already created to be our spouse, just like with anything, we still have to do our part. That just like when we pray and ask God to help us with something we are struggling with, or want to accomplish, that God is not a genie that just grants unlimited wishes. That we still have to put in the work to show God we are serious, and that he will do his part in helping us.

But he *also* explained that there were people in the Bible that didn’t *get* married. I know! It surprised me, too!

He told us about the Apostle Paul. He told us that the Apostle Paul said that some people are blessed with ‘singleness’, like the Apostle Paul himself was. As in, there is no desire in their heart to get married. Not because they don’t need a spouse to be complete, but because in their heart, their greatest desire is to just serve God. And that if our heart is like that, the Apostle Paul said that it is better for us to stay busy for the Lord than to force ourselves into a marriage that may end up in disaster.



“Now, when you say spouse, do you mean a husband for a woman and a wife for a man? Or are there examples of God having a wife for a woman and husband for a man?”

“Very good question, Benjamin. I’d be glad to answer your question. But before I do, is there anyone else that would like to answer or add their own input? I’d like to hear what you guys think about the matter,” Tom said, scanning the room for hands.

At first, no one raised their hand. Then Kyle said something, *without* raising his hand. He said that the Bible is pretty clear that God created Adam and Eve. Not Adam and Steve. Tom asked him if he could rephrase that, so others could better understand his response.

“I think he means that in chapter one, it says that God created them *male* and *female*. And that here, in chapter two, like we just read, a man should leave his childhood home, and cling to his *wife*. *Not* his husband,” Tasha said. “I think it’s pretty clear.”

She was pretty blunt as she said it. Not to mention, she said all that *without* even *looking* at anyone. Or even *up* for that matter. Instead, she was looking at her shoelaces, as she untied and retied them.

Tom thanked Tasha for her input and asked if anyone agreed or disagreed. Or if anyone else had anything to add.

For the most part, there was a consensus as to what Kyle and Tasha said, but as I looked around the room, I could tell that some people weren’t one hundred percent comfortable with what was being

said. That they may have had some reservations but decided to keep them to themselves. Maybe so as not to cause a stir. Or perhaps to not bring attention to themselves. Whatever the reason, they stayed quiet on the subject.



“So, they announced, in the sanctuary, that the youth group has planned an out of state trip for the summer camp next year,” Marcus’ mother said, as his dad pulled out of the church’s driveway.

“Yeah! And we’re even going to get a chance to visit a *real-life-castle!*” Daniel said, excitedly.

“They also mentioned the price tag. Which is why they’re announcing it so early this year,” Marcus’ father added.

“Yeah. It’s going to be considerably more than usual,” Daniel said, in a less enthusiastic voice.

“But not impossible to afford,” his mother said, confidently. “At the end of service, Tom posted some information about the trip, including all of the fundraisers he has set up to help families afford it.”

“How in the world did he do *that?*” I asked. “At the end of class, he was showing us how he could get a cookie from the middle of his forehead, all the way down into his mouth, without using his hands. There’s no way he had time to post that with a cookie slowly sliding down his face.”

“He probably prescheduled the post,” Marcus answered, for his mom. “You can actually do that with texts on your phone, too.”

“And how would you know *that*, mister? You don’t even qualify for a phone until your thirteenth birthday,” his father reminded him.

“Because you don’t need a phone to text,” Marcus reminded him. “The whole T.J. League texts each other, and Erick and Sammy are the only ones with phones.”

“And how exactly do you do that?” his mother asked.

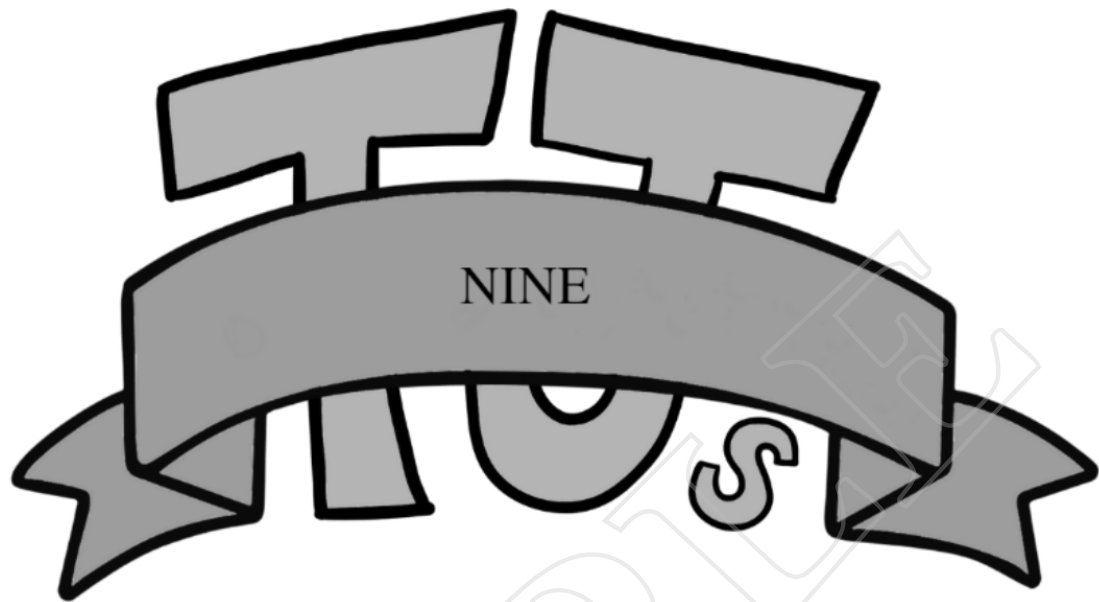
“All you have to do is have the same texting app on your tablet,” Daniel answered, for him. “That’s what I do when I forget to charge my phone. I just grab my tablet and text my friends that way.”

“Guess us oldies still have some learning to do,” his father commented.

Nobody dared respond. When an older person makes fun of themselves, it’s okay for *them* to do it. But when a *young* person decides to add *on* or *agree* to what they said—well, let’s just say that I’m not falling for *that* trap again!

After a moment of awkward silence. Marcus’s father was the first to speak.

“So. Learn anything *good*, tonight?”



## *That's Not Okay*

After discussing what we learned in class, Marcus' father dropped me off at home. I've never understood it. Even though they can just park at home, since I can walk across their backyard and into mine, Marcus' parents *always* drop me off at my front door after midweek Bible study.

Dad waved goodbye from the front door as I walked past him and hung my jacket in the living room closet.

"Shower tonight or in the morning?" dad asked.

"Tonight should be okay," I answered.

“Okay. Off you go!”



Tracy didn't show up for school the next day. I'm not one hundred percent sure why, but I think I've got a pretty good idea.

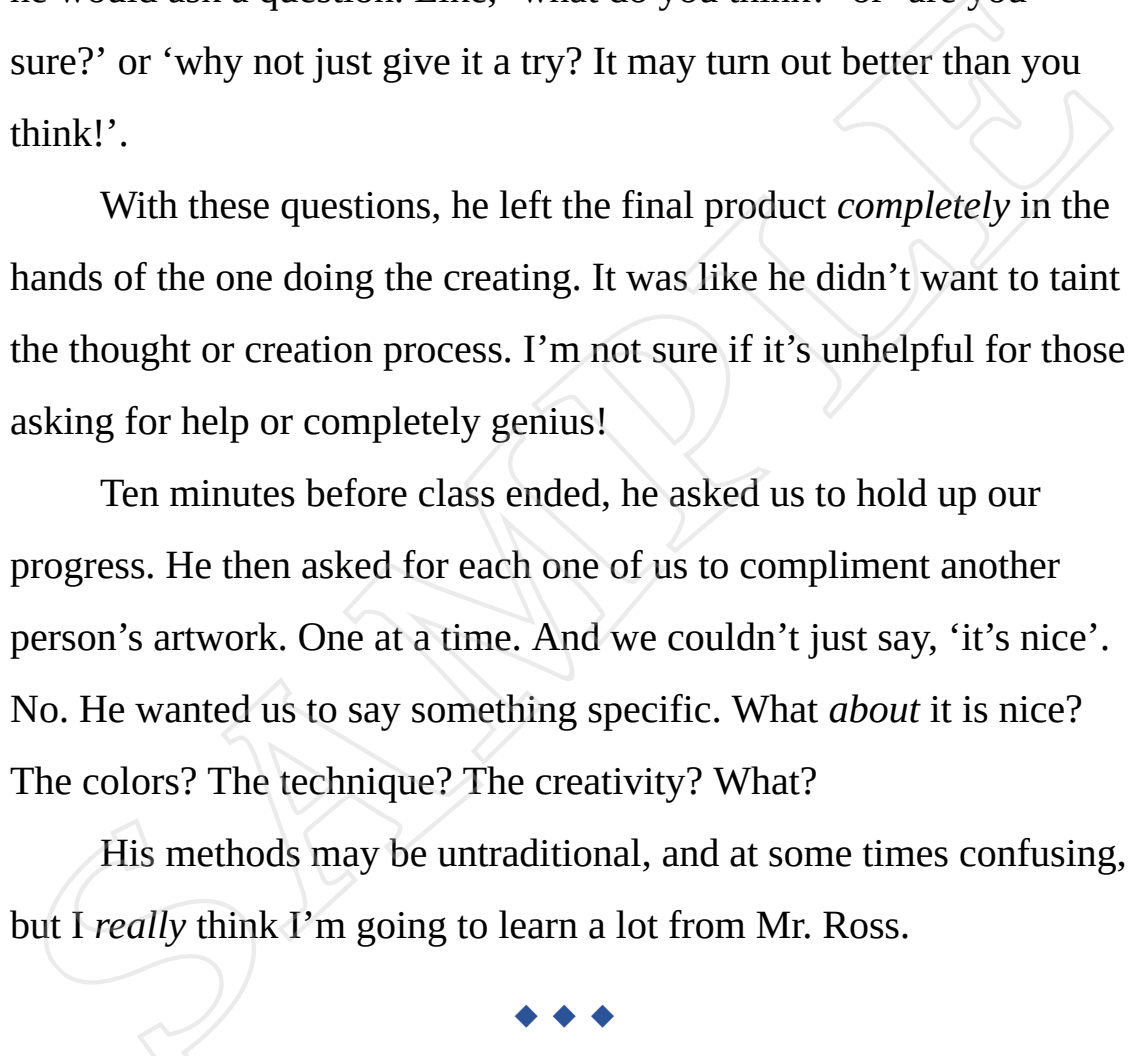
“Make sure to work on your blending. Remember, you can use multiple techniques. Wet brush. Dry brush. Or if you're using graphite or charcoal, the finger technique.”

Mr. Ross has the gentlest, kindest voice I've ever heard a teacher use. Even when people aren't following directions, he doesn't get upset or yell. He simply finds some way to find a happy middle.

“And remember, there are no such things as mistakes. Just happy accidents.”

Until now, most of my artwork has been comic book or cartoon style. Another *good* thing that middle school has brought into my life is new artistic styles. And we're only in the second week. Who *knows* how much more I'll learn by the end of the school year!

Mr. Ross quietly walked around the room, more like someone who is at an art museum, than a teacher. Like someone silently admiring the different pieces of art and the way the artists chose to transform the idea in their mind into a medium that can be observed and appreciated by all. Yeah. More like someone at an art museum than a teacher.

The only time he spoke, was when someone raised their hand and asked for assistance or for an opinion. And even *then*, he didn't respond like a normal teacher would. Instead of imparting some piece of wisdom, from his years of experience, that might help the student, he would ask a question. Like, 'what do you think?' or 'are you sure?' or 'why not just give it a try? It may turn out better than you think!'.  


With these questions, he left the final product *completely* in the hands of the one doing the creating. It was like he didn't want to taint the thought or creation process. I'm not sure if it's unhelpful for those asking for help or completely genius!

Ten minutes before class ended, he asked us to hold up our progress. He then asked for each one of us to compliment another person's artwork. One at a time. And we couldn't just say, 'it's nice'. No. He wanted us to say something specific. What *about* it is nice? The colors? The technique? The creativity? What?

His methods may be untraditional, and at some times confusing, but I *really* think I'm going to learn a lot from Mr. Ross.



When we finally got to my house, after school, Marcus and I decided to do our homework at the kitchen table instead of my room. I wanted to finish my artwork and Marcus had a map he wanted to finish.

Although we have a lot in common, and pretty much find any reason to hang out with each other, we *do* have some interests that *don't* intersect with each other's lives. One of those differences just happens to include what Marcus wants to be when he grows up.

I'm still not one hundred percent sure what I'll be doing when I'm an adult, and I'm in *no* hurry to even get there, but Marcus has his heart set on being a teacher. A geography teacher, to be exact. He said that he really enjoys all of the similarities and differences there are amongst all the cultures of the world. He can even usually ramble off some fun facts about pretty much any continent, country or culture you challenge him to! Not *all*, but most. Of course, since we're only twelve years old, there are also still plenty of cultures he wants to learn about!

That being said, his elective is geography. Which just so happens to include, cartography. What? You don't know what cartography is? Neither did I! At least, not until Marcus told me. What? No. If you don't know what it is, I'm not going to tell you! Do what mom and dad are always telling me to do: learn something new! How? C'mon! I'm pretty sure you know a few ways to find out. And if you don't, I'll give you a hint... Google it!

After we finished our elective homework, we started doing the homework for the classes we have together. Which, even though we have *three* classes together, usually only ends up being homework for *two*. Why? Because P.E. doesn't usually have homework. The only

homework we've had for P.E., so far, is getting paperwork signed, during the first week of school. Besides that, I'm not sure we'll *ever* have P.E. homework.

"How about you read the pages on the right and I'll read the pages on the left?" Marcus suggested.

"How about *you* read a paragraph then *I* read a paragraph?" I counter-suggested.

"What's wrong with reading a whole page? It will help us get through the chapter faster," Marcus asked.

"I'm a bit tired after youth, last night. And my dyslexia tends to act up the more exhausted I am," I said, faking a yawn, which in turn made Marcus yawn.

"Fine. But you start," he said.

I opened Charlotte's web to chapter three. We had read chapter one as a class and had to read chapter two for homework *last* night. I just hope I get a good amount of sleep tonight, because Mr. Short said we're going to have a quiz on the first three chapters tomorrow!

After we finished reading, we took out our science packets. But before we got started, I took my tablet out of my backpack so I could put some music on. Marcus had been playing *his* music while we were working on our elective homework. And since it's too difficult for me to focus on reading while listening to music, he graciously shut it off before we started reading chapter three. But for some reason, as long as I'm not reading out *loud*, just in my head, I can



mostly read okay with music playing. As long as it's not too loud. Then it's like my brain gets too crowded for *anything* to focus. Neither the reading portion of my brain, *nor* the 'singing to the music' autopilot that usually starts on its own, can get anything done.

We were comparing our answers with each other when a song from my playlist caught my attention. It's called 'Hopeful' by Bars and Melody. For those of you who don't know it, it's sort of a parody of another song. Except it doesn't spoof anything. It's actually a song that Bars wrote, with the help of Melody. At least that's the way it sounded, the first time I heard it while watching YouTube. It was about a year or so ago, when I was *really* bored, and decided to watch some YouTube.

You see, I like watching 'Got Talent' from other countries. Specifically kids. There are some *really* talented kids around the world! Some of my friends think that Americans are the *best* at *everything*, but after watching some of the videos that I have, I must respectfully disagree.

Well, it was during that 'Got Talent from other countries' binge I was doing, when I first discovered Bars and Melody. The kid named Bars explained that he had been going through some bullying and that the kid named Melody had helped him through it. Actually, Melody had encouraged Bars to write down his thoughts. Then they turned his thoughts into a sort of rap and singing song. Bars did the rapping and Melody did the singing.

“I wonder if that’s how Tracy feels,” I thought aloud.

“What?” Marcus asked.

“Huh?”

“You said you wondered if that’s how Tracy felt,” Marcus said.

“Did I?” I asked.

“Yeah. You did.”

“Oh. I must have accidentally thought out loud,” I said.

“What did you mean by that?” Marcus wondered.

“Have you ever heard this song?”

“Yeah. Of course. It’s part of your playlist,” he reminded me.

“Oh, yeah. Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, do *you* think that’s how Tracy feels?” I asked him.

“How Tracy feels about *what*?”

“You know. About the way those eighth graders were being mean and being bullies and stuff,” I articulated more clearly.

“Are you talking about the other day, at nutrition,” Marcus asked.

“Yes, and no,” I answered.

“Bruh. You’re *totally* confusing me.”

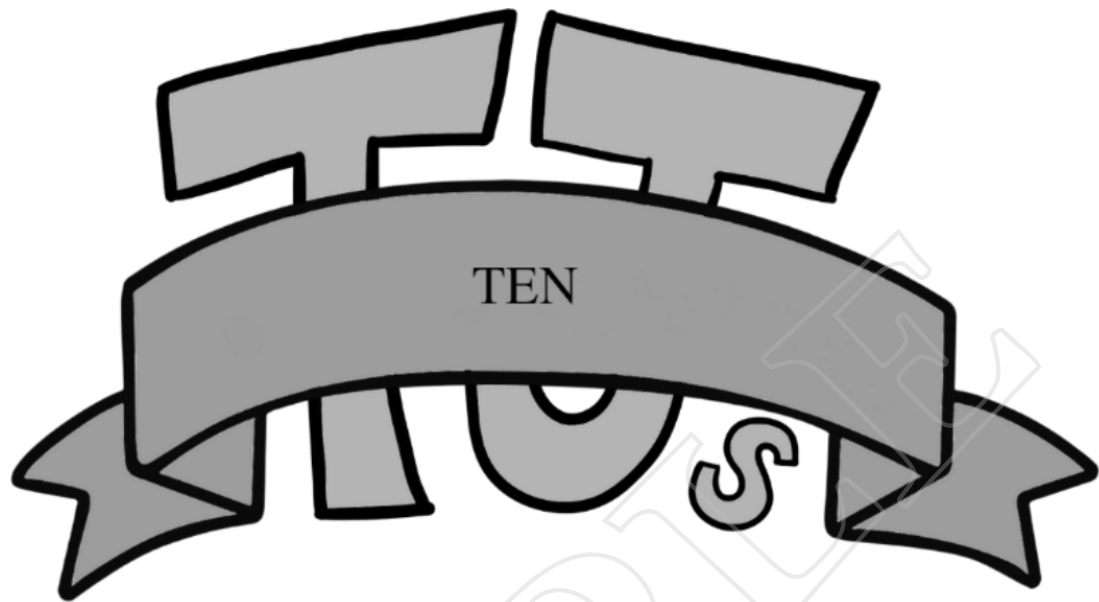
“Yes, as in that’s a *specific* event that could apply. But no, as in, in general. As in, are the feelings and situations that Bars is talking about in the song the same emotions that Tracy might be feeling?”

Marcus squinted his eyes then looked up, into the mid distance. He then tucked his lips into his mouth, telling me that his concentration was going deeper into thought.

After a few moments of silence, he shrugged his shoulders.

“I mean, it *could* be similar to what Tracy is feeling. Why do you ask?” he said.

“Because, if Tracy *is* having the same feelings that Bars is talking about, that’s not okay.”



## ***Knock It Off!***

“What do you mean?” Marcus asked.

“I mean, Bars had Melody to help him through the bullying *he* was experiencing,” I said, looking down at my science homework.

“But who’s helping Tracy?” I said, looking back up at Marcus.

Marcus’ eyes grew in size and his eyebrows raised at least an inch. I could tell that he had never thought about it before. And the next look he gave me told me that he understood why I asked. Then he sighed.

“What are you getting me into?”



We spent some time in our treehouse, on Saturday, trying to think up ways to help Tracy with the bullying. We even took into consideration what Sammy had said about the whole ‘civil war’ thing. I have to admit, most of the things I was thinking up, kept falling prey to Sammy’s civil war scenario.

After an hour or so of brainstorming, Marcus and I came up with three solid ways to be Tracy’s ‘Melody’.



When Monday came, I was both nervous and excited, but mostly determined.

I was nervous because I wasn’t sure if the scenarios that had been running through my head would play out exactly the way my imagination was creating them, or if they would fall apart quicker than a sandcastle at the whim of the tide. I was *hoping* for a good outcome, but had to be realistic about the possible battles that might be coming my way.

I was excited because I had done all I could to plan and prepare. Dad’s always saying that I should hope for the best but prepare for the worst. Just another one of his ‘Papa’s Proverbs’. Most of his proverbs are confusing or unhelpful in the moment, but this one might actually be worth repeating to others.

Either way, whether this plan of mine works out *exactly* as planned, or whether it melts away into the nothingness it was before, I'm *determined* to stick it out. I've faced some pretty big battles in the past, in real life and through T.J. League scenarios. Both have better prepared me for whatever comes my way. And though this may be similar to one or more situations I've faced before, it's also *completely* different. But 'different' has never stopped me before.



When first period started, Mr. Guggenheim announced that we would be having a seating chart change, and asked everyone to take their belongings and stand up against one of the room's walls. He explained that he would be picking numbers out of a beaker to determine who would be paired up as lab partners for an experiment we were going to start. Some people groaned because he *had* given us a free choice on the first day of class, and *most* people had chosen to sit in front of, behind, or next to a good friend.

"This experiment is going to take a couple of weeks to complete, so this seating arrangement will last at *least* that long," Mr. Guggenheim said. "I haven't decided if these partnerships will last until the end of the trimester or if we will change with each experimentation."

On the first day of school, Mr. Guggenheim told us that we were his first class. *Ever*. As in, not only was science our first period class,

but just like this is *my* first year in middle school, it's also *his*.

Actually, he told us that this was his first year of teaching. *Period*. I guess that's why he's not exactly sure how long we'll be paired up.

I hoped I would be paired up with Sammy, since I knew that anything I didn't understand, she could explain to me. Although I already know that Marcus wants to be a teacher when he grows up, I think Sammy would be the best teacher in the history of teachers. Sorry Marcus and Mrs. Whiston, if you're reading this, but it's true. Anything I've *ever* not understood, she's been able to explain in a way that makes sense. And not just that, in a way that makes me confident that I could teach it to someone else who doesn't understand.

As the numbers in the beaker lessened, the greater my chances of being paired with Sammy became. Then again, so did my odds of not being her lab partner!

It finally came down to a one in three chance, since there were only four of us left.

"The next name is, Samantha!"

Yes! Now, all you have to do is pull *my* name!

Mr. Guggenheim swirled the final three pieces of paper in the beaker with a bit of extra flair before pulling the next name.

"Our next name begins with a 'T'," he announced.

That's *less* than unhelpful! All *three* of our names begin with the letter 'T'!

“May I have a drumroll, please?”

Everyone sitting down pounded on their desk while I crossed my fingers, waiting to see if Timmy, Tracy or I would be partnered with Sammy.

“Timmy!”

Aw man! Not that I *mind* being Tracy’s partner. I just really had my hopes set on being Sammy’s partner. Then again, being Tracy’s partner makes it that much easier for me to try out some of my ideas!



“Tracy’s your partner?” Marcus asked, excitedly, as we lined up for P.E.

“Yup, yup!”

“Dude! That should make things so much easier!”

“Hopefully,” I said, crossing my fingers.

Today is the first day that our stretches are student led. Mr. Barrett is supervising while Mrs. DeMille sets up some sports equipment. Even though I’ve tried doing some of these stretches at home, so I don’t look like such a noob, I *still* can’t clasp my hands behind my back! When we finished stretching, we ran a lap around the blacktop, got a drink of water and returned back to our single file lines.

“Okay, boys and girls, today begins our football season!” Mrs. DeMille declared.



Some people hooted and hollered while some of us just stood there silently. Seems people are competitive in middle school, too!

Mrs. DeMille motioned for silence, which didn't take long.

"The first thing we're gonna have to do, is separate by boys and girls."

Those who were hooting and hollering, separated quickly, while the rest of us drudged along. During the separation process, Mr. Barrett and Mrs. DeMille also separated themselves, which is probably why they didn't notice. Notice what? Notice what got me sent to the Vice Principal's office.

"Clarence, I mean *Claire*, you're heading in the wrong direction!"

"Oh, dear me, Michael, I mean *Michaela*, I *am* going in the wrong direction."

Clarence and Michael turned around and headed toward Mrs. DeMille, changing the way they were walking. As in, not walking normally. As in, they were swaying their hips side to side, with much exaggeration.

The boys that noticed began giggling and laughing. The girls that noticed shook their head and glared at them.

"Hello, *Tracy*. Is it okay if we stand with you?" Michael said, standing *very* next to Tracy.

"Yeah, *Tracy*. You've *inspired* us," Clarence said, standing *very* next to Tracy, but on the other side.

Tracy didn't answer but seemed rather uncomfortable. And not just because Michael and Clarence were standing so close, but probably because they were rubbing their hands up and down their own body in a rather inappropriate way.

"Leave Tracy alone!" I ordered, as I rushed toward them.

They either didn't hear me, or they were exercising something not taught in P.E. What were they exercising? Their selective hearing. They were *exercising* their *selective* hearing.

"I *said*, leave Tracy alone!"

Whether or not they heard me this time, I'm not sure. Probably because I didn't give them enough time to respond. I grabbed Tracy away from their grips and stood between them.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Clarence yelled.

"What am I doing? What am *I* doing? What were *you* two doing?"

"We weren't doing *anything*," Michael shouted, while giving me a shove when he said 'anything'.

"Looked like a bit more than *that*," I responded, shoving him back.

Clarence did *not* like that. Nope. He did *not* like that at *all*. How do I know? Because he grabbed me from behind and held my arms back.

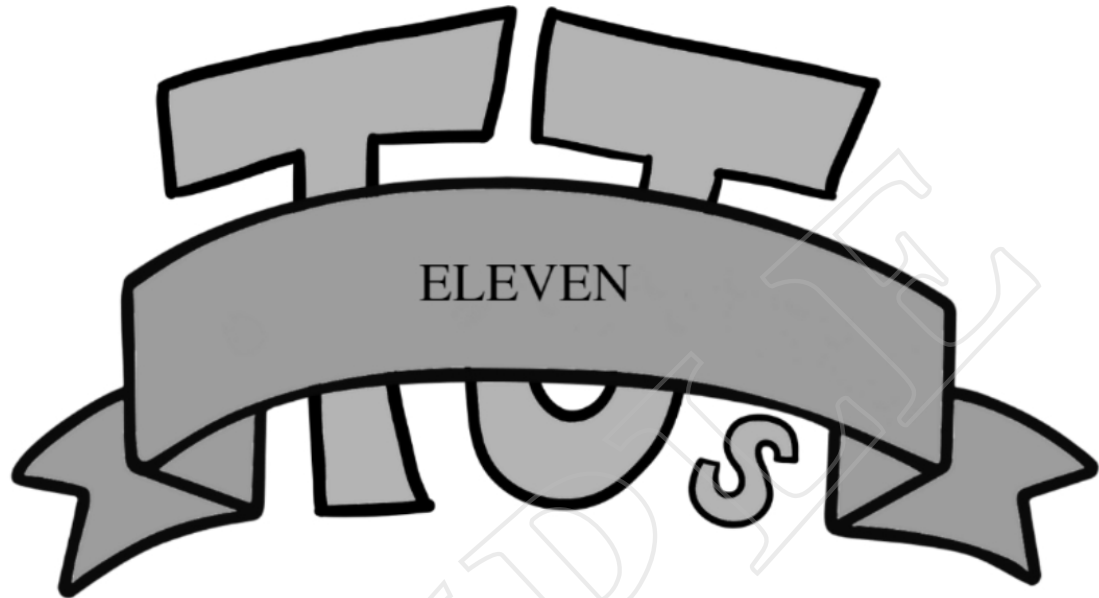
"Yeah, Clarence. Hold him just like that!"

Michael walked toward me, with his right hand raised in a fist. Before he could get close enough to me to use it, I kicked him in the gut. Once again, Clarence didn't like my actions. He spun me around and was mid swing before Marcus caught his arm. Before he was even able to respond to Marcus, Paul grabbed his other arm.

“Knock it off!”

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

## 11. That Seems Unfair



### *That Seems Unfair*

Clarence tried his best to get away from Marcus and Paul but didn't have to try long. Just seconds after the 'fight!' chanting began, both Mrs. DeMille and Mr. Barret blew their whistles.

"Everyone to their numbers!" Mr. Barret shouted.

"Not you!" Mrs. DeMille ordered, pointing at us.

Clarence stopped struggling, and Marcus and Paul let him go. Michael, on the other hand, was still nursing his stomach. I'm not

sure if he was exaggerating to get me in as much trouble as possible, or if I really *had* kicked him that hard!

“And just *what* is going on here?” Mrs. DeMille asked, when she reached us.

“T.J. *kicked* me!” Michael shouted.

“Watch that tone of yours, young man,” Mrs. DeMille ordered.

“And what do you have to say for yourself?”

She turned her focus to me, waiting for an answer.

“They were harassing Tracy. And when I told them to stop, they didn’t,” I said.

“That’s *no* reason to hit your classmate.”

“Oh, that’s *not* the reason I kicked him,” I told her.

“Then why did you?” she asked.

“I *kicked* him because *Clarence* was holding me from behind while *Michael* came toward me with his *fist* raised in the air,” I clarified, looking at Clarence and Michael, as I said their names.

“And how are you two all a part of this?” Mrs. DeMille asked Marcus and Paul.

“I heard T.J. shout at Clarence and Michael to leave Tracy alone,” Marcus said. “And by the time I rushed over here, Michael had been kicked and Clarence was about to hit T.J.”

Mrs. DeMille looked at Clarence and then at Paul.

“And when Marcus ran past me, I realized he was heading toward T.J., who was being held back by Clarence. Thankfully, I was

able to reach them before Clarence could hit T.J.”

Mrs. DeMille looked at each of us and shook her head, as if trying to decide what to do.

“As much as I hate doing this on the third week of school, I’m going to have to send all of you to the office.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“But *he* hit *me*!”

“Tracy was the one being bullied!”

None of our efforts changed Mrs. DeMille’s mind. Instead, we were escorted, by Campus Security, to the office. And warned. Warned that if the fighting continued, there would be severe consequences.



“Next!”

Michael exited the Vice Principal’s office and gave me a vengeful glare as he passed by. I ignored him and entered.

“Go ahead and have a seat, Mr. Olivera.”

Vice Principal Gruber motioned to the two chairs in front of her. I chose the one on her left.

“It seems like P.E. started off with quite a bit of unscheduled excitement,” she commented. “Your classmates have each had a chance to tell me of their inclusion in said excitement, and now you have the opportunity to relish me with the details of yours.”

I couldn't help but imagine Sammy's face as I looked at her. I think it's because of the way she spoke. You know. The words she used. And for some reason, that made all of the butterflies in my stomach relax.

I shared with her how Mrs. DeMille told us that football season was beginning and that we needed to split up by girls and boys. And I told her how Clarence and Michael made fun of Tracy by pretending to be going the wrong way. And how they were harassing Tracy while inappropriately caressing their own bodies. And how I had told them to knock it off, but they didn't. And how when I pulled Tracy away from them, that Michael pushed me.

Before I could tell her what happened next, she asked me if I pushed him back. I told her that I did. She asked me if I thought I had made the right choice. I told her that if it meant protecting a friend, then yes. She didn't seem happy about my answer, but she also didn't seem upset.

Since she just sat there silently, I continued about my involvement in the 'excitement.' I told her how Clarence grabbed me from behind and how Michael was coming at me with his fist raised in the air. She asked me if Michael had hit me.

"Not before I was able to defend myself."

"And how did you defend yourself?" she wondered.

"The only way I could, since Clarence was holding my arms behind my back. With my feet," I admitted.

“Hmmm.”

Mrs. Gruber leaned back in her chair, tapped her fingertips together, and stared at the wall behind me, in a sort of thinking kind of way. I think.

“Well, it seems like I now have a clear picture of the events that led up to our unscheduled meeting today,” she said. “And although your intentions were chivalrous, unfortunately, our school has a zero tolerance policy against violence.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what she was saying. Probably because she was using Sammy language. I wonder if Google has *that* translate?

Mrs. Gruber picked up a pink emergency card from in front of her, then picked up her phone and began to dial a number. A number I recognized. My *mom*’s number.

“Good morning, Mrs. Olivera. This is Mrs. Gruber, the Vice Principal of Tomas’ school. Well, yes, and no.”

My heart raced and my stomach turned. I’ve only been in middle school for two weeks and *already* I’m getting a phone call home.

“Speaker phone? I’d rather n—.”

Mrs. Gruber went silent and her faced turned into a ‘I am *not* happy about this’ look.

“T.J.? Can you hear me, baby?”

Okay. So, I don’t mind mom calling me ‘baby’ at home, but *here*? In the Vice *Principal*’s office?



“Yes, mom. I can hear you.”

“Good. Talk to me.”

That’s mom’s way of saying, ‘I’m here. I’m listening. You’re safe. Talk to me.’

I relayed to mom the same *exact* story I had told to Vice Principal Gruber. I then told her how Mrs. Gruber said that the school has a no violence policy and that I didn’t understand what that meant.

“What *does* that mean, Mrs. Gruber?” mom asked.

“Mrs. Olivera. I must inform you that this is a rather informal way to communicate.”

“It’s a shame you feel that way. But since our conversation is in regards to my son, you must understand that I’d prefer to hear the facts from a primary, rather than a secondary, source,” Mom explained. I think. Seems she knows how to speak Sammy, also. “So, if you’d be so kind as to help us understand what ‘no violence policy’ means, we’d greatly appreciate it.”

“Very well,” she said, correcting her posture and looking directly at the phone’s speaker, as if it was my mom. “First of all, as a reminder, or what *should* be a reminder, our school has a zero tolerance policy against violence. When you signed and initialed Tomas’—.”

“T.J.’s,” mom interrupted.

“I’m sorry?” Mrs. Gruber said.

“T.J. I understand that I named him Tomas, but he prefers to go by T.J.,” mom informed her.

“Very well. As I was saying, as you signed and initialed T.J.’s school emergency and policy packet, you would have read that our school has a zero tolerance policy against violence, and that consequences are serious and the effects, immediate,” Mrs. Gruber said, in a *very* intense tone.

“Oh, yes! I recall reading, signing and initializing almost every line. *Almost.*”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Olivera, but I don’t understand,” Mrs. Gruber said, with wrinkled brows.

“I remember reading about the school’s zero tolerance policy, but since I didn’t agree with parts of the policy, I didn’t initial the line,” mom informed her.

“But packets are not valid unless all lines are signed and initialed,” Mrs. Gruber said. “In fact, it’s school procedure to send any unsigned, or in this case, initialed, paperwork home, for rectification.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Mrs. Gruber, but I guarantee, that if you check T.J.’s school file, you’ll find my initials missing from that particular clause.”

Wow! I’ve been on the other side of mom’s serious tone before. The one she’s using with Mrs. Gruber. And I never, and I mean *never*, say *anything* back. I make sure that I don’t even *breathe* loudly.

Mrs. Gruber pushed a button on her desk, and I heard a buzzing come from the front office.

“Yes, Mrs. Gruber?”

“Can you please pull Tomas Olivera’s file for me?”

A short time later, we heard a knock on the door. After telling them to enter, an office clerk handed Mrs. Gruber my file.

“Thank you.”

She quickly opened it and pulled out the policy packet mom said she hadn’t initialed. I’m *guessing* she found out what mom had said was true. Why? Because she did that slow inhale and exhale breathing thing, while closing her eyes. I’m guessing mom heard her because she began to speak again.

“It sounds like you found out I was being truthful.”

“Yes, Mrs. Olivera. I am holding Toma—T.J.’s policy packet. And it seems you *did* fail to initial that line.”

“Oh, please don’t misconstrue the situation, Mrs. Gruber. I did *not* fail to initial *anything* I didn’t want to. To reiterate my previous declaration, since I did not *agree* with said policy, I purposefully did *not* initial,” mom said, with a tone of finality.

“Either way, Mrs. Olivera, agree with it or not, a consequence *will* be issued for T.J.,” Mrs. Gruber said, with a serious tone of her own.

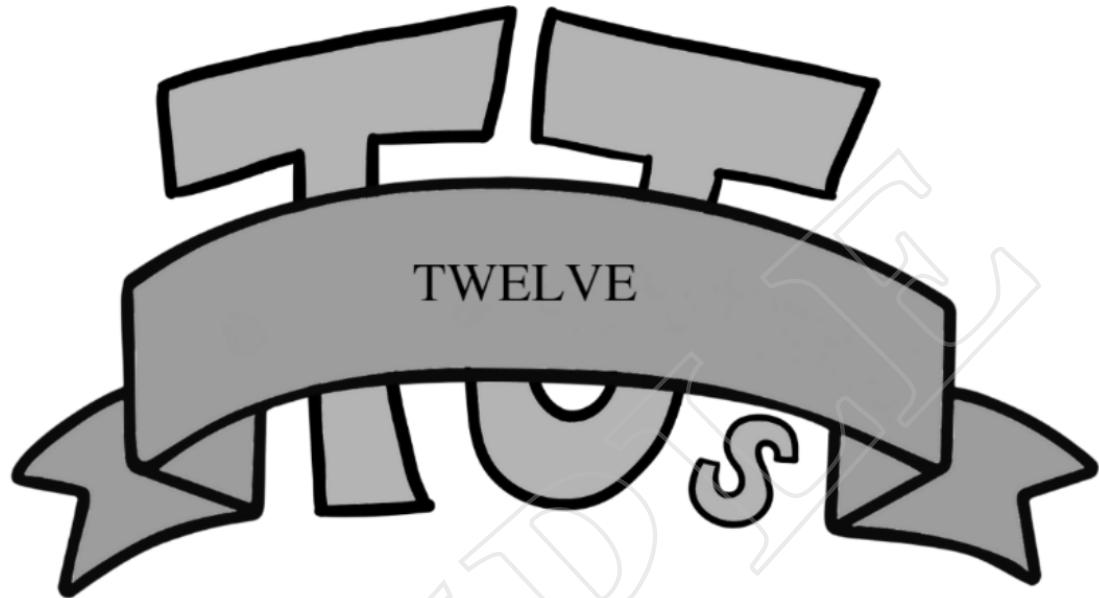
“And said consequence would be?”

“As with any acts of physical violence, T.J. will be suspended,” she said.

“Well, that seems unfair.”

SAMPLE

## 12. Everything In Love



### *Everything In Love*

“Well, since this is T.J.’s first infraction, his suspension will only last two days. If we meet again, under similar circumstances, it will be for a week. And if this cycle of behavior continues, he will be expelled from the school,” Mrs. Gruber explained.

“Hmmm. Two day suspension, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am. Two days,” she answered.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” mom said.

“Excuse me?”

“You see, I work with a number of school districts, and I know that in order for a suspension to be official, you *once again*, need my John Hancock,” mom notified her. “And since I am unable to leave my office, you will once again have an empty line on your paperwork.”

“Your husband perhaps ca—.”

“Oh, and if you think I’m not going to speak with my husband once our conversation comes to an end, you’re sorely mistaken. Not to mention, he’s out of town for a convention,” mom shared.

“Mrs. Espinosa, you don’t seem to understand—.”

“Let me help you, before you create more work for yourself,” mom interrupted. “I understand that you have a job to do. And that it involves creating and providing a safe space for children to grow and learn. And I also understand that you’re afraid of setting a precedent for other parents to learn about and exploit. And for that specific reason, T.J. *will* be spending two days at home. But *not* because I’m agreeing with your suspension consequence. No. It’s definitely not because of that. Instead, it’s to give the other two boys a chance to have a cooling off period. The boys I’m sure are *also* subject to said suspension consequence.”

“Neither of those boys assaulted another person,” Mrs. Gruber interrupted.

“We can have a conversation on the difference between assault and battery at a later date, if you wish. But for now, as I said, I *will* be

keeping T.J. home,” mom continued. “But until then, T.J.?”

“Yes, mom?”

“T.J., I want you to gather your stuff from your class and wait in the office for someone to pick you up,” she ordered.

“But what if—.”

“And because since it’s part of Mrs. Gruber’s duties, I’m sure she’ll find a way for you to do that *safely*,” she said, as if she was looking Mrs. Gruber directly in the eyes, daring her to disagree or say something snippy.

The tone in her voice told me not to argue. Just obey.

“T.J.?”

“Yes?”

“Do you understand what you need to do?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Very well. I look forward to seeing you at dinner. And don’t forget, tonight’s your turn, so make sure your sister is cleaned up and ready to eat. I know it’ll be a bit difficult without dad, but I spoke with Xochitl this morning. If you have any problems, just let me know.

“And thank you, Mrs. Gruber, for informing me about today’s incident during P.E. I appreciate the school’s willingness to be transparent and allow parents to participate in the decision-making process for their children. Until our next conversation, I hope you enjoy the rest of your day!”

And with that, mom's voice disappeared, and a dial tone took its place. Mrs. Gruber *still* doesn't look happy, but I'm not worried. Knowing that I have mom on my side brings me comfort.

I stood up from my chair and let Mrs. Gruber know that I was going to retrieve my belongings and return to the office. You know. That way she could 'find a way for me to do that *safely*.'



Even though he technically didn't do anything wrong, since Marcus had held Clarence in an 'undesired' manner, his dad had *also* received a phone call. So, when my mom called and asked if he could pick me up, he said he was already on his way. Marcus didn't get suspended or anything. Just in case you were wondering. Guess his dad *also* didn't agree with Mrs. Gruber's way of handling the situation.

When I got to the office, Marcus and his dad were waiting for me.

"Hey, T.J.! Guess you're going home with us today," Marcus' dad said, excitedly.

"Guess I am!"

As we exited the office, Mrs. Gruber was standing in her doorway, with her arms crossed. Her expression hadn't changed much since I had left her office, less than ten minutes ago.



Marcus and I placed our backpacks in his dad's trunk and then got into the back seat. For those of you who may have read my elementary school adventures, you'll be happy to know that I am now tall enough to no longer need a booster seat. But not by much. The height suggested by doctors is four foot nine and under. I'm only four foot ten and a half. Which is why I still sit in the middle seat. Just in case. You know. Since it has that little hump that makes you taller.

"So, I know why I'm here to pick up Marcus, but your mom didn't exactly give me the scoop on why she needed me to pick you up. Just that her next appointment was about to walk in."

For the third time in thirty minutes, I recounted the details of our ordeal at P.E. It reminded me of the time I had to talk to the officers and the detectives about what happened at Marcus' house, when Daniel was watching us. Except this time, it didn't confuse me or give me a headache. And I *definitely* didn't get a lollipop for telling my story, either.

"Seems your mom and I have similar views as to why you boys would be better off spending the rest of the day at home," Marcus' dad said. "If those boys had no problem harassing Tracy, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't mind changing their focus to you two and Paul."

"But why would they even pick on Tracy in the first place? Tracy didn't even do anything to them!" Marcus asked.

"I can't say I know what was going through their minds at the time," his dad answered. "Anything I say would be a guess. At *best*."

“And why attack T.J.?”

“Again, Marcus. I don’t have a clue,” his dad said, with a tone of sincerity. “You know these boys better than I do.”

“But they’re from the *other* elementary school,” Marcus told him. “We barely met them *this* year.”

“And *I* only have them for P.E.,” I said.

“I have them for history, math *and* P.E.,” Marcus added.

“Again, I’ve never met either of them. So, I would rather not try and guess why they did what they did. Or what led up to today’s actions,” his dad stated. “That’s one of the ways gossip starts, and you *know* how I feel about *gossip*.”

“Yes, father.”

There was a short moment of silence before I spoke.

“I have a different question.”

“Ask away,” Marcus’ dad encouraged.

“Is what I did wrong?” I asked.

“Help me understand what you mean by that.”

“Well, on Saturday, when Marcus and I were in the treehouse, we brainstormed some ways that we could help Tracy.”

I told him about the Bars and Melody song. And how Melody had helped Bars through a tough time in his life, which included being bullied. And how I didn’t think it was fair that Tracy didn’t have a Melody. And that I wanted to help, but not exactly the way today had gone.

“I mean, when I pulled Tracy away from Clarence and Michael, I didn’t know what was going to happen next. I just knew it was the right thing to do,” I declared. “At least I *thought* it was.”

“T.J. You couldn’t have known that your actions to help a friend would lead to putting you in the crosshairs of the bullies,” Marcus’ dad said. “And you *definitely* couldn’t have predicted that one of them would hold you from behind so that the other could try and attack you.”

“Thankfully *I* was there to make sure they *couldn’t*,” Marcus added.

“Yes, Marcus. Thankfully, you were,” he continued. “And defending yourself is a right that you, and everyone else in a similar situation, has.”

“But I didn’t want to hit anyone. Hurt anyone? I didn’t want to result to violence,” I said.

“I believe you, T.J. I’ve known you, and your family, long enough to learn that your parents have instilled good morals in you. And not just instilled, but have led by example,” Marcus’ dad told me.

“Thank you,” I said. “But that leads me to another question.”

“Yes?”

“Since my main goal is to help Tracy, you know, the way Melody helped Bars, how can I guarantee that something like what happened today, doesn’t happen again? How can I make sure that in

my efforts to help, violence doesn't become a part of it? Intentionally, or *unintentionally*."

"That's a *very* good question, T.J.," he stated. "And to be honest, I can't say I know the answer to your question. Unfortunately, we can't control, or even accurately predict, the way that another person is going to respond to a situation. All we can do is control the way *we* react. Even if the other person responds with violence, we can choose to *not* respond similarly."

"So, what you're saying is, that no matter *what* I try to do to help Tracy, other people might respond like Clarence and Michael did?" I asked.

"It's definitely a possibility," he admitted.

"That almost makes me not want to even try," I stated.

"Don't give up!" Marcus encouraged.

"Oh, I'm definitely *not*."

"But you said—."

"I said *almost*," I reminded him. "I'm *definitely* going to keep doing what I can to help Tracy. That much is for sure. I'm just not sure how to do that while keeping my visits to the office to a minimum."

"Hey, in elementary school, your visits to the principal's office were more than *all* of the T.J. League. Put *together!*" Marcus reminded me.

“Yeah, but that was different. Principal Martinez and I were friends. I’m not sure I’ll *ever* get another chance to be friends with Mrs. Gruber. Not after the phone call she had with my mom earlier.”

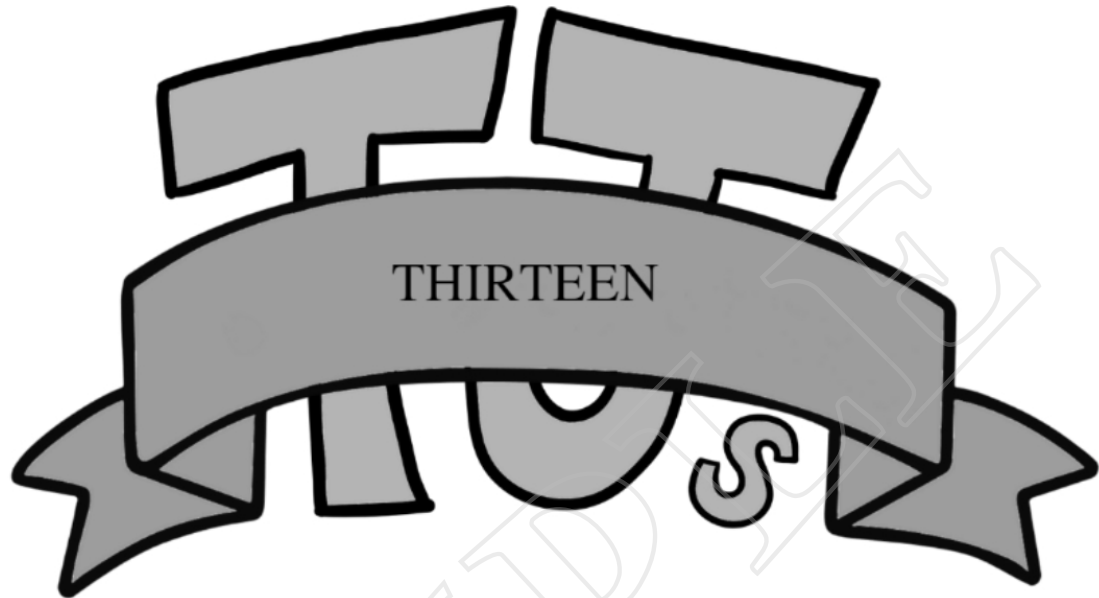
“But *she’s* not the principal. She’s just the *vice* principal,” Marcus pointed out.

“That may be true, but I would *still* rather keep out of the office as much as possible. Except when necessary. If only there were a guaranteed way to help Tracy and make that a reality.”

Once again, the car went silent, only this time it was Marcus’ dad that broke the silence.

“I’m glad, and even a bit proud, to see your determination to help a friend in need. And although I don’t know what you and Marcus planned, up in that treehouse, I have this advice to give you: whatever you decide to do, do everything in love.”

### 13. Homeschool, Sort Of



### *Homeschool, Sort Of*

“I’m not sure I understand,” I admitted.

“Hmmm. Let me see.”

Once again, silence.

“Everything we do has a motivation behind it, right?” Marcus’ dad began.

“Right,” Marcus and I agreed.

“Just like I’m sure Clarence and Michael had a motivation behind bothering Tracy at P.E. today.”

Marcus and I nodded our heads.

“Well, whatever it is that you and Marcus, or anyone else from that T.J. League, or *not* from the T.J. League, decide to do, to help Tracy, make sure you have the right motivation. A motivation of love. Even when responding to the words and actions of others, respond in love.”

“But they were going to *hit* T.J.!” Marcus reminded his dad.

“I hear you, and I understand your concern, but our actions affect those around us. Those that are watching. Again, I’m not saying that what T.J. did was wrong. Nope. Definitely not. He has the right to defend himself. Especially when it’s *more* than one against one.”

“So, what do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m trying to say, try your best to leave violence as an ultimate, last resort.”

He looked in the rearview mirror to see if we understood what he was saying. I’m not sure about Marcus, but I’m a bit confused.

“It’s like this. If someone is attacking us with words, we don’t have to respond with an attack of words. Honestly, we don’t have to respond at all. If someone bumps us, rudely, we don’t have to bump them back, to prove who we are. We can simply continue walking and ignore their attempt to bring unhappiness to our day.”

“But isn’t that *physical* violence?” Marcus asked.

“It *can* be viewed that way but are you physically harmed? Is your *life* in danger?” his dad asked.

“I guess not.”

“I’m not trying to say that doing everything in love is an easy thing to do. It’s *not*. It takes effort and purpose. But in the end, like I said, people are watching you. When they see your efforts to lovingly help Tracy, they’re going to notice. They might not agree with your actions, but they’ll notice. And when anyone decides to undermine your actions, when you respond in love, which is different to the way that people *normally* respond, they’ll notice. They’ll make a mental note of it.”

“But what good is *that* going to do?” Marcus continued to inquire.

“It will help the people, who aren’t necessarily against you, or those who *think* they are, notice your actions. And not just *your* actions, but the actions of those attacking your attempts to do everything in love.”

“Aaaand—,” Marcus said, moving his hands in a water wheel type of motion.

“*And*, actions speak louder than words. Your *actions* will affect those watching you guys. And believe it or not, since most people your age are still learning the right and wrong way to respond to things that are different, like Tracy, your actions will help them learn.



They'll help them learn that it is *always* better to do things in love, and not to respond with indifference or hate."

"I get what you're trying to say," I admitted. "It's like my mom explained to me once.

"When kids are growing up, they think that the way things work, in their own home, are the way things work in *everybody's* home. In the *world* for that matter. And sometimes that's why kids show love differently than what we know. Because in *their* home, people show love by calling you names. Or by shoving you aside when you pass by. And unfortunately, in some homes, the only love that kids learn, is physical, emotional, mental or that *other* kind of abuse. You know which one I'm talking about, right?"

"Yes, T.J. Unfortunately, I do."

"And because that's all they've ever experienced, that's why they treat other people the same way. Because that's all they really know. They've never had another example of love before. They've never experienced *real* love. So, we have to be that example to them. We have to love them the way they *should* have been loved, so that they can *learn* how to properly love others. But more importantly, *themselves*."

"Wow! Your mom really hit it on the nose!" Marcus' dad said.



When mom got home, Xochitl was washed up and waiting at the dinner table. Thankfully, after everything that happened today, Xochitl was actually cooperative. I'm not sure how mom warned her this morning, or what incentive she gave, but for once, I'm *totally* fine with it!

It was rather interesting, actually. Mom didn't mention the phone call or *anything* about what happened at school today. She acted as if nothing had happened. It wasn't until Xochitl was in the shower and I was getting my pajamas ready to get in next, that mom brought it up.

"I'm very proud of you, Tomas," she said, which *totally* caught me off guard.

"You mean, you're not angry? I mean, it's only the third week of school and *already* I've been to the vice principal's office," I reminded her.

"What have I taught you?"

Sometimes mom likes to start off conversations or ask questions without any back story. And for some reason, she expects us to just *know* what it is she's talking about. And *most* of the time, I have no *idea* what she's talking about.

"That if I don't brush and floss twice a day, that I'll regret it when I'm older and on my own insurance?"

Sometimes I like to play with her, hoping that one day she'll understand how *important* back story really is. She just squinted her

eyes, while shaking her head and giving me a ‘you *smart* aleck’ look.

She then started walking toward me, so I waved my arms around and made crazy karate sounds, even though I’ve never taken a karate class in my entire life. This, of course, didn’t work. She managed to grab *both* of my hands, spin me around, wrap her arms around me, place *both* of my hands in just *one* of her hands, and start tickling me. And all in just a matter of a couple of seconds!

“Stop! I’m sorry! I give up! You win!”

My cries were in vain. She managed to get me over to my bed, where she ran her fingers up and down my rib cage, under my arms and under my chin. She *used* to even tickle my feet. But she says that now she’s afraid her hands will melt off if she touches them before I’ve washed the stink off of them.

“I have to pee! I have to pee!”

Mom stopped tickling me, but gave me a glare that asked, ‘are you telling me the truth or are you just trying to get me to stop?’

I tried to wipe a laughing tear away from my eye, but mom grabbed my hands before I could. She probably thought I was going to try and tickle her back, or something.

“I was just going to wipe my eye,” I said, truthfully.

“Are you *kidding* me? Those are trophies of war!” she declared.

‘Trophies of war’? Who even *talks* like that?

After staring at each other in silence, mom posed her question for a second time.

“What have I taught you?”

I thought about what she had said before, to try and narrow down what she might be talking about.

Hmmm. She had said that she was proud of me. And probably not for ending up in the vice principal’s office. No. Definitely not for that. But maybe she was talking about what *led* to my visit to the office. And no, not about kicking Michael. More likely for what I had done for Tracy.

“To always stick up for those who can’t stick up for themselves?” I asked, hoping I was right.

I’m not sure how much more tickling I can take. I really *did* have to pee when she was tickling me! And I haven’t wet my bed since the end of July. And I’d *really* like to keep it that way!

“Very good, mi amor,” she complimented me, kissing my forehead.

“So, just to be clear. I’m *not* in trouble?” I said, somewhat confidently.

“Well, I’d rather you not *kick* anybody.”

“But *he* was going to hit *me*!” I said, louder than I should have.

Mom just closed her eyes, in that, ‘are you yelling at the wrong person?’ kind of way.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She smiled and gave my forehead another peck.

“Like I told your vice principal, you’re not going to be staying home for two days because I *agreed* with her. Because I definitely *didn’t*,” she said, fixing my hair. “Like I was *saying*, I’d rather you *not* kick anybody. But you were only defending yourself against two other people. So, *no*, you’re not in trouble. And *no*, I’m definitely *not* angry with you.”

She sat up and pulled me up, to sit next to her, and wrapped her arm around my shoulder.

“You’ve always had a heart for helping other people, and I’m glad that’s a gift you have. And if your heart is set on helping Tracy, then you have my support.”

I gave mom a hearty hug.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m condoning any violence,” she clarified.

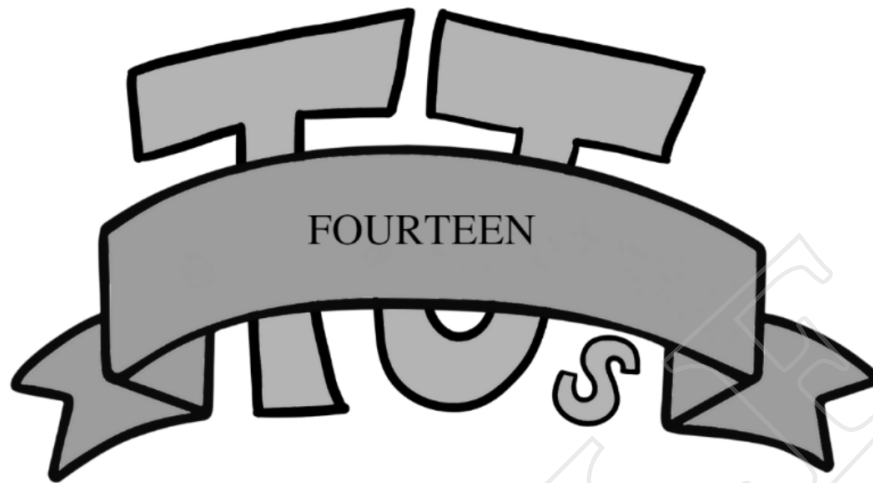
I wanted to say something, but that voice in my head told me that I shouldn’t.

“Self defense, *only* if necessary. And if your vice principal and I need to have another talk, we can. I *hope* it doesn’t come to that, but you’re my son. And it’s *my* job to protect you. The way you protected Tracy today.”

This time it was mom who gave *me* a hearty hug.

“Next!” Xochitl shouted, as she exited the bathroom.

“Now, finish getting your stuff and get in the shower,” mom ordered. “Tomorrow, you begin your homeschool. Sort of.”



## *They Don't Matter*

The next two days were rather interesting for me. Even though I was staying home from school, I still had to wake up at my normal time and go through my normal routine. Which hasn't changed much, since my third adventure. Except the overnight protection. Thankfully, I don't need those anymore.

“That's not fair! *I* want to stay home!”

Even though she's aged two years, Xochitl is still as immature and whiny as ever. Even though mom told her that I wouldn't just be on a two day vacation, that I would still have to do all of my schoolwork and homework, Xochitl didn't really listen. She thought it was unfair that *I* got to stay home while *she* still had to go to school. I

mean, it's not like I was able to stay home in my pajamas and lounge around. Remember, dad installed those wireless home cameras, meaning mom can check in on me anytime she wants to. *Actually*, she *could* just use her tablet as a monitor and leave the live feed on all day.

Fortunately, for me, our school puts all of our assignments and homework on a server and gives us access through our student I.D. number. Once again, not too intelligent on the part of the technology leaders!

I was able to do most of my classwork and homework before my normal school day would be over. I'm not sure if it's because there were no distractions, or because there was no schoolwork or homework for P.E., but that left me plenty of extra time before mom got home.

At first, I didn't know what to do. I pretty much wandered the house, waiting for inspiration to hit. When it didn't, I sat in dad's reclining chair. I knew I couldn't watch TV, because mom had told me so before she left to take Xochitl to school. And I can't play video games or play on my tablet because it's only Tuesday. Video games and tablet games are only for after school, for an hour, and the weekend.

As I sat, rocking in dad's chair, relaxation started to take over my body. Before I knew it, my eyes were getting heavy and what

seemed like shortly after that, I was awakened by the phone. It was mom. Checking in on me.

“Have you finished all your classwork and homework?” she asked. “Because it seems like you’re getting a pretty good nap in.”

“Yes, ma’am. I have finished everything. I just couldn’t decide what to do with my extra time.”

“How about you get started on dinner, since dad is out of town. I forgot to ask you to do that before I left this morning,” she said.

“Okie dokie.”

The following day was pretty similar, except this time I was prepared. Instead of rushing through all my work, I made sure to take my time. That way, by the time I finished, Marcus was already home.

Even though I was finished with my homework, since it was normally his day to come to my house, I invited him over. He was excited when I called, since I didn’t go to his house yesterday.



“And we’re not going to have any problems today, are we?” Mrs. Gruber asked.

“I can only speak for myself, ma’am,” I responded. “And I can tell you, that just like on Monday, I have no intention of causing or getting into trouble.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”



“But if Clarence and Michael harass Tracy in my presence again, I can *also* tell you, that I’m not going to just stand idly by,” I continued.

“I appreciate your willingness to help a friend, but—.”

“And I appreciate your support,” I said, exiting her room, since the homeroom bell had just rung.

I had only taken a couple of steps out of the office when I heard someone calling me. When I turned around, I was a bit surprised by who it was.

“Tracy! How are you doing?”

“I’m doing okay,” Tracy answered.

“Did you have to stay home, too?”

“No, but Clarence and Michael did,” Tracy said. “They gave me the evil eye a little while ago. I’m afraid they’re going to come after me.”

“Don’t you worry about them. I don’t think they’ll be trying to mess with you any time soon,” I said, patting Tracy on the shoulder, and continuing my walk toward my homeroom class.

“Thank—you!”

I stopped and turned around.

“For—Monday,” Tracy seemed to barely get out.

I just smiled and nodded. It’s strange. Even though we have *every* class together, except our elective, Tracy and I are in different

homerooms. Luckily, there are only *two* seventh grade homeroom classes, meaning Marcus and Sammy are in the other.



When science class began, I found out that even though I had done my classwork at home, Tracy had to cover both parts of the experiment in my absence. I apologized and ensured that I would be carrying my weight from now on.

Today's experiment has to do with light. Mr. Guggenheim held up a piece of aluminum foil and asked if anyone recognized what it was. I'm not sure about everyone else, but I gave him a 'are you *kidding* me?' look, as he held it high for the whole class to see.

"Today, we're going to make a hypothesis, an educated guess, using a piece of aluminum foil, just like this," he informed us. "But we're not *just* going to be using this. We're *also* going to be using *this*."

Mr. Guggenheim put down the aluminum foil and held up a small flashlight.

"Anyone think they might know how these two mediums relate to each other?"

Everyone looked around the room, to see if anyone would raise their hand. It didn't take long before Sammy did.

"Are we going to investigate the reflective properties of the tin foil? Perhaps using the two different sides, since one has a matte

finish and the other has a glossy finish?”

“That’s very astute and observant of you,” Mr. Guggenheim praised. “And you *may* be right. But before we begin, I want to see if anyone else has a *different* thought, on how these two might go together.”

No one else was brave enough to follow Sammy.

“C’mon. *No one* else has any thoughts?”

Once again, everyone just looked at each other.

“No one?”

He waited another moment or two before finally revealing today’s experiment, which *did* have to do with light and its reflective properties. It seems Sammy was not only on the right track, but she actually guessed one of the steps in today’s experiment.



Even though Clarence and Michael haven’t approached Tracy today, probably because the T.J. League has been providing protection, it hasn’t stopped them from making inappropriate comments. At first, Justin wanted to say something back, but I asked him to ignore them. For me. I could tell by the look in his eyes, that he was truly having a difficult time *not* saying anything, but he nodded his head and clenched his fists.

“Villains like them aren’t worth our time,” I stated. “As long as they launch long range, ineffective attacks, we have no reason to

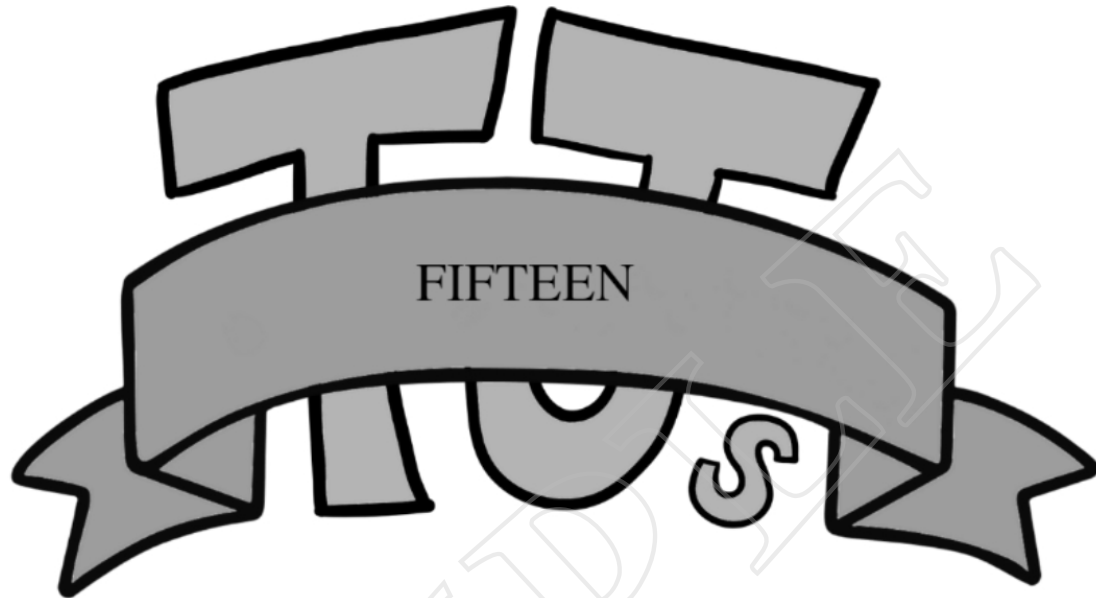
respond. It's not worth expending our energy."

Sammy gave me a look of shock. I'm not exactly sure why. All I was doing was stating the facts.

For the following week and a half, Clarence and Michael attempted to irk us with their words, but we got better and better at pretending they weren't even there. They even managed to purposely bump into me a few times, here and there, but I ignored those attempts, also. Just like Marcus' dad had said, my life wasn't in danger, so I didn't let it affect me. Kind of like a fly that lands on my pants. Its presence may be unwanted, but there's nothing that the fly can do to my pants that's worth wasting my energy.

Justin kept telling me that I should tell the vice principal, but I told him it wasn't worth it. That as long as they kept their attacks to words that I could ignore, and bumps that merely made me take an extra step, I would treat them like that fly on my pants. That until they attempt to physically harm Tracy, or one of the T.J. League members, I will just continue to live my life as if they don't matter.

## 15. This Is Tracy



### *This Is Tracy*

Clarence and Michael continued their ineffective verbal and physical assaults on Tracy and me, but I wanted to set that example that Marcus' dad was talking about. I wanted to respond to everything in love. So that people would see my example and hopefully follow it. To know that they didn't have to negatively respond to a bully's attempts to bring their day down with their words. Or that their bumps didn't have to negatively affect them. That they could just continue to walk, with their heads held high. That *they* can be better

than the bullies. That they didn't have to bring themselves down to their bully's level. That love really *is* the answer. At least in these types of situations.

And even though we don't get to play T.J. League anymore, we've had an official meeting and vote, and invited Tracy to join. And even though Tracy didn't exactly understand what that meant, we now have a new member of the T.J. League!



It's been two weeks since my 'suspension' and it seems like Clarence and Michael have found a new target. At least that's what I *think*. Either that, or they got bored when we wouldn't respond. At least not in the way they were hoping.

You see, after that ride home with Marcus, two weeks ago, mom, dad and I sat down and talked about everything. After I got out of the shower. Dad was on a video chat of course, since he was out of town, but we talked just the same. What about? About how even though it was a bit shocking to me when Tracy first entered my history class with the vice principal, and I didn't know how to respond, it wasn't the end of the world. And about how people that respond the way Clarence and Michael did, aren't the majority. And how *I* get to choose how *I* want to respond. And about how standing up for others, who can't stand up for themselves, is *always* an option

to consider. And how mom and dad *always* have my back whenever I decide to do that.

Mom, dad, and I may not always see things the same. We may not always agree about the way things should go or be done. We might not even agree on the best thing to prepare for dinner—which is Sloppy Joe's, in case you didn't know—but if there's one thing I can *always* count on, it's that they have my best interest at heart.

We've had some pretty heated discussions in the past. Some have even been documented in my previous adventures. I've said some hurtful things to them, fueled by my anger at the time, of course. I've even uttered that dreaded phrase with those dreaded words. Words I wish I could take back, more than *anything* in the world. I'd give up *all* my batman gear to take them back. I'd even give up ever getting to eat Sloppy Joe's again. All to go back in time and erase them from history.

What words am I talking about? The arch nemesis of that coveted phrase made up of the three greatest words ever uttered to another human being. If the superhero combination of words in the English language are 'I love you,' then these three words would *definitely* be their antithesis—'I hate you.' Yes, at one time in my life—a very low time—I, T.J., uttered those very words to my parents.

And yet, for some reason, my parents have continued to love me. And not just with their words, but with their actions. Mom's phone call conversation with Vice Principal Gruber is just one

example of that. And that *very* serious chat, later that night, ensuring me that I had their *full* approval and support, to protect Tracy, *and* myself, in an appropriate manner, is another. I only wish that *every* kid on this planet had parents like mine. I'm pretty sure that if they did, this world would be a better place. Don't get me wrong. My parents are nowhere *near* perfect. No *way*! But I'd rather have my loving, supportive parents over *anything* this world has to offer!



“So, what do you think?” Marcus asked.

“About what?” I responded.

“About inviting Tracy.”

Last night, our Youth Leader, Tom, announced that our next Youth activity was coming up. The last one was our mini golfing trip. He *also* announced that this would be a great volunteer opportunity for any high schoolers who need volunteer hours in order to graduate.

You see, we have two different types of Youth activities. The first is the one that more people tend to participate in. You know, the fun stuff, like bowling and mini golfing and stuff, even though they cost money. The other type is what Tom calls a service project, which doesn't cost us anything but our time. A service project is more of a volunteer type of activity.

Since Marcus and I have been old enough to participate in service projects, we've helped organize and pass out food to families



in need, we've helped clean up the beach and a state park, and earlier this year, we even got to cross the border and help out at an orphanage in Mexico. That one was definitely my favorite.

For *this* service project, we would have an opportunity to team up with other youth groups, from other churches, in running a fall festival for kids in foster homes or group homes. Some of them younger, older or about the same age as we are. We would have a variety of options to choose from, like help running games, crafts, art projects or anything else the festival organizers might need help with. Like picking up or hauling trash. Marcus and I were one of the first people to sign up, of course. It's going to take more than trash pickup to scare me off!

But that's what Marcus is asking about. Whether or not we should invite Tracy to *this* Youth activity. If this were a fun activity, I'm not sure he would be asking me for my input. But I must admit, since it's not a fun activity, like ice skating or hiking to a waterfall, it might not interest Tracy. But then again, I'm not sure we've gotten to know each other well enough for me to know for sure.

"If you think it's a good idea, just do it!" I answered.

"Yeah, but do *you* think it's a good idea?"

"Marcus Jonathan, if you do not know me well enough by now, then I'm not sure I *want* to answer," I said, punching in my student number and taking my breakfast tray.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Marcus apologized. “I *know* what you’re going to say, it would just be helpful for me to *hear* it. You know. Give me a boost of confidence or something.”

I continued walking, silently, until I found a place to sit and eat my sausage on a stick. After placing my backpack, under the table, at my feet, and taking a seat, I spoke.

“You know what would be a *great* idea!”

“What?” Marcus asked, truly confused.

“If we invited *Tracy* to join us for our Youth service project!” I continued, with *real* enthusiasm, for added effect.

Marcus’s face of confusion *immediately* shifted to one of complete annoyance.

“*Seriously!* It would give Tracy a chance to see that not everyone is like Clarence and Michael! That there are more people like you and me out there!”

Marcus’ face, if it’s even conceivable, became *more* annoyed.

“Hey! Who knows? Tracy might even want to join our youth group!”

Marcus didn’t say anything. He just crossed his arms and tilted his head, as if to say, ‘keep it up T.J. Just keep it up.’ I sat, staring at him with my most genuinely excited face, as long as I possibly could. It only lasted ten seconds or so, of course. But *I* didn’t lose that staring contest. *Marcus* did. At first, he just smiled. Then he let out a

chuckle. Then, when I started laughing, he started laughing and shaking his head.

We only stopped laughing when he reached for my sausage on a stick. Then things got serious. After smacking his hand away, he gave me a look of complete shock. What! You do *not* mess with a man's sausage on a stick. I picked it up and took a *very* serious bite and exaggerated my chewing. This of course led to another staring contest. Which of course led to more smiles and laughter. In case you haven't read my other adventures, I feel I must inform you of something *really* important: Marcus is the *bestest* friend *anyone* could have!



It took him some time to build up the courage, but the following day, Marcus finally invited Tracy to our Youth service project. Tracy seemed genuinely interested. Of course, parents had to be consulted first. Especially since *our* parents didn't know *Tracy's* parents. But that didn't last very long. After inviting Tracy's family for a barbecue at the park, Marcus' family, Tracy's family and my family all got to meet each other.

Tracy's parents thanked Marcus and me for sticking up for and befriending Tracy. We told them it was no problem. That it was 'our pleasure'. We told them that it's what we hoped that someone would

do for us if we were being bullied. They both praised our parents for raising such ‘fine young gentlemen.’

“We’re just trying our best.”

“Thankfully, they’re still willing to hear what we have to say. For now.”

“It’s not always easy.”

“One day at a time. That’s all we can do. One day at a time.”

It was during that park barbecue that Tracy decided to come with us. And it was shortly after, that Tracy’s parents gave their blessing.



“Okay, everyone. Before we get into the cars and set out on our adventure for the day, let’s circle up. I want to go over the rules for today.”

Tom repeated the same rules and guidelines he repeats for *every* activity we do. Buddy system. ‘Aloners’ would have to be his partner. No fighting, because it hurts. No doing anything that would get us arrested or make babies. Some other stuff he always says, but most importantly, remember who we would be representing during this service project. And he didn’t mean himself.

After we held hands, and Tom prayed for traveling mercies and a blessing on the day’s festival, he set us ‘free’ to get into our assigned cars. Since Marcus’ dad was at a track meet for Daniel and

his mom was babysitting his cousins, we had to go in the church's fifteen passenger van, but before we got there, Sebastian asked us a question.

“Hey guys! Who's this?”

“Yeah! This isn't one of your usual T.J. League friends,” Felicity added.

Marcus and I looked at each other. We had anticipated this happening and had decided we would respond together.

“Everyone, this is Tracy.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## **"Mr. Angel" Ramirez**

"Mr. Angel" has been writing stories since his elementary school days, and after MUCH encouragement from students, friends, and family, has decided to publish some of them for others to enjoy. When he isn't writing, he can be found leading the Blueprint Youth Ministry at Calvary Chapel Into The Light, spending time with his niece and nephews, or enjoying his favorite food: cookies!

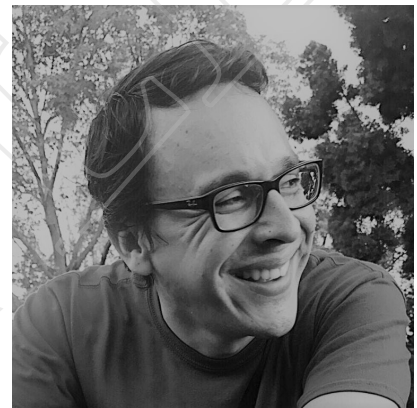


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# BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

## **T.J.'S Adventures - Operation Full Control**

The T.J. League 'protects and serves all living things' and does it nearly every recess. That is until he came to the school. Now things have changed and no one is having fun. Well, except for Erick. Something must be done. Can the T.J. League get things back to the way they were? Join us and find out!

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Strained Friendships

## **T.J.'S Adventures - The Vociferous Villain**

The T.J. League is enjoying being Future Funmakers and have successfully accomplished every mission that T.J.'s mind has been able to come up with, but their newest mission is from a new source: Principal Martinez. At first, the mission seems like it will be the easiest the League has ever accepted, but 'what kind of mission would it be if it didn't have a certain level of difficulty?'

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Physical Abuse

## **T.J.'S Adventures - The Nighttime Nemesis**

T.J.'s scary bedtime story has been read by the entire fifth grade and the outcome is probably not what Mr. Anderson or Mrs. Whiston were thinking

of when they assigned this free write. Bad dreams. Angry parents. Stuff like that. And now something new has come to light. What ever will T.J. do now?

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Bed Wetting

### **T.J.'S Adventures - Objective: Protect & Serve**

It's been raining for days now, making recess a bit different for the T.J. League, Funmaker John and the rest of the students at T.J.'s school. And guess what? Today starts off just the same. But now the electricity is out, the Internet is down and the T.J. League is stuck in the MPR with all the first graders. There's no way things can't get any worse.

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of a School Lockdown

### **T.J.'S Adventures - Operation Superhero Support**

It's almost Christmas, and the T.J. League, like everyone else, is preparing for all the fun things that the season brings. Until Sammy notices something, that is. But it could be nothing. But then again, maybe it's something. T.J. can't remember the last time Sammy was wrong. But then again, there's a first for everything. Right?

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Women and Children's Shelters

### **T.J.'S Adventures - Someone Superhero Strong**

The T.J. League is battling the evil Dr. Dreamo and his lackeys when a newcomer joins the battle. The T.J. League has never seen him before or the mysterious green fog that emits from his feet. Before they can figure out what effect it has on its enemies, T.J. has abandoned his team, changed allegiances and captured his own team - for the bad guys! Will the T.J. League be able to escape their imprisonment without their fearless leader? Has T.J. switched sides for good? Justin doesn't understand what's going on



and is reaching his limit for confusion!

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Hospitals

SAMPLE