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adventures
TJ's
The Nighttime Nemesis

T.J.’s Adventures
The Nighttime Nemesis

“Mr. Angel” Ramirez

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Different.… not weird.

1 Scary Bedtime Story

"So did your family do anything special for the three-day weekend?" Sammy asked, as we all gathered during breakfast time.

It's kind of weird. We never *reserve* a special bench, it just always happens to be available. Actually, now that I think about it, I think we've met at the *same* spot ever since last year.

"My family visited my grandma out of town," Paul answered. "We don't get to see her that often because she lives so far away."

“That’s cool,” Erick said, “my family went to the river.”

“The river?” Justin said, in a confused voice.

“Yeah. We camped outside and got to go white water rafting.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I asked.

“Not really. We all wore life vests and only went through level two and level three rapids,” Erick explained.

“T.J. got in trouble!” Xochitl shouted, from behind me.

“What?” Marcus asked.

“Go away!” I ordered, standing up and pointing towards the line up area.

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Xochitl shouted, then stuck her tongue out at me and left anyway.

“She’s *so* annoying!” I said, hitting the table before I sat back down, which probably wasn’t the *best* idea, since my whole hand is now tingling.

“Brothers and sisters can be *so* annoying,” Justin commented.

“I’ll second that,” Erick agreed.

“I don’t have that problem,” Sammy commented.

“Duh! You don’t have any brothers or sisters!” Justin pointed out.

“Jealous much?” Sammy taunted.

“Why I oughta!” Justin shouted, as Erick held him back from reaching Sammy, who was making faces at him. Luckily the school bell rang so he didn’t have to hold on very long.

“Finish up your breakfast and throw away your trash,” Mrs. Johnson, the breakfast supervision aide called out to us.

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“Good morning, students,” Mrs. Whiston chimed, her usual salutation. “We have been working hard on our biography writing style, but today I want to mix things up a bit.”

Almost everyone in class exchanged confused glances. What does she mean by ‘mix things up a bit’? Mrs. Whiston is *known* for mixing things up. She does it *all the time*. ‘To keep things fresh’ she would usually say. Sometimes it was a good thing, and other times, not so much. Hopefully, this time it will be a good thing.

“Instead of doing a research paper this week, I am going to give *you* a choice of what to write,” she announced.

Once again, everyone looked at each other confused. What does she mean? Does that mean *we* get to choose what our research topic was going to be? I’m confused.

“Let me clarify a bit,” Mrs. Whiston said. “When you go to the library, there are many different genres of books, right?”

“Right,” we all answered, together.

“Who can give me an example of a type of genre we can ask the librarian to help us find?” she asked.

Lots of people raised their hands, including me. She looked around the room for a moment before calling on Matthew.

“Fithon,” Matthew said, confidently, causing Mrs. Whiston to smile before correcting him.

“I think you mean fiction,” she said.

“Thass whu I thed! Fithon!” Matthew responded.

A little info on Matthew. Matthew was born with a cleft pallet. Even though he’s had surgery to fix it, he has a pretty heavy lisp. Which makes it hard to understand him. Sometimes. Since we’ve been in the same class since kindergarten, most of us understand everything he says. But sometimes, just sometimes, it’s difficult to understand him.

“Okay. Okay. Fiction *is* one of the genres. Can anyone name another genre?” Mrs. Whiston asked.

Once again, hands shot up quickly. This time, she called on Fernando.

“Nonfiction,” Fernando said.

“Very good. Any others?” Mrs. Whiston asked.

This time she called on Desiree.

“*Mys*-tery,” Desiree said, in an eerie voice, with a matching facial expression and creepy finger movements.

“Good job, Desiree,” Mrs. Whiston lauded. “And of course, we have *all* been using biographies to do our research papers.”

“*I* like biographies,” Jefferson commented, without raising his hand. I can’t remember the last time he’s done that.

“Some of us like fiction. Some of us like mystery. And some of us like biographies,” she said, gesturing towards Jefferson, while slowly walking around the class. “I am giving you a chance to write a story using *your* favorite genre.”

“How long does it have to be?” Pablo blurted out.

“Three pages,” Mrs. Whiston answered.

“Back and front?” Carlos asked.

“Back and front,” Mrs. Whiston answered, again.

“Does it have to be typed?” Lauren called out.

“Handwritten,” Mrs. Whiston said, holding up her hands to prevent more questions. “In case some of you are a bit scared, I will be introducing creative writing and adding it to our repertoire of writing styles.”

All right! *Finally*. Wait! Does that mean I can do a comic book style writing?

“Now to be fair, I am going to be implementing a ‘words only’ rule,” she continued.

“What does that mean?” Phil asked, while raising his hand.

“That means, although we have some great artists, no illustrations allowed,” Mrs. Whiston clarified.

“Awww. Why not?” Billy asked.

“Because I want us to work on our writing skills,” Mrs. Whiston said, turning on her overhead screen. “You can add some artwork if

you'd like, but it won't count towards your three pages, front and back."

Dang. Guess I *won't* get to do a comic *after* all. I was thinking of adding another scene to the Batman comic that I've been working on.

"Wait, wait, wait," Mrs. Whiston said, as the overhead screen turned on and mirrored the desktop of her laptop. It seems she forgot to close a file that had the answers to a math quiz we were supposed to take later. Jefferson hurried to block the screen with his folder as Mrs. Whiston rushed to her desk to close the file before anyone could write the answers down.

"Close your eyes. Look away," she ordered.

After closing the file and thanking Jefferson for assisting her without asking, she opened a different file featuring an umbrella. Above the umbrella was an empty cloud with a single line in the middle of it. Typed underneath the line was the word 'Topic'. Falling from the cloud were *large* rain drops. Typed inside one of the raindrops were the words 'facts/ideas'. Only one raindrop was touching one of three panels on the umbrella. On the left panel was the word, 'Beginning'. On the middle panel was the word, 'Middle'. And on the right panel was the word, 'End'.

"Oh, and I forgot to mention something. I want your creative writing assignment to be a bedtime story," Mrs. Whiston said, as the classroom phone rang.

Bedtime story. Bedtime story. *Bedtime story*? I couldn't think of a *single* idea for a bedtime story. Conflicts for Batman to deal with. Check. Scenarios for the T.J. League to overcome. Check. Bedtime story. Bedtime story. Bedtime story. I've got *nothing*!

"Karla, they're asking for you in the office. Your mom brought your backpack," Mrs. Whiston said, as she hung up the phone. "Frankie, could you please pass out these brainstorming worksheets?"

This week, Frankie is teacher's assistant. As he passed out the worksheets that were exact copies of the overhead screen, without the typed words, Mrs. Whiston began explaining creative writing. Whatever she was saying was *probably* helpful, but I can't stop staring at the screen. Bedtime story. Bedtime story. Bedtime story. I can't think of a good bedtime story to write!

"So, I'll say it again. This outline will be very helpful in organizing your ideas. And as such, it will be due tomorrow," Mrs. Whiston informed us. Some people began to grumble, but that didn't stop Mrs. Whiston from continuing to explain the outline.

"Your final draft won't be due until Friday, but I want your outlines to be turned in tomorrow, so that I can make sure you understand how to use it," she further explained. "I also want a rough draft to be turned in with your outline. I'm going to give you about five minutes to think about the *topic* of your bedtime story. Once you have your topic, I want you to write it on the line inside the cloud.

Once you're done with that, please take out your daily journals and answer the writing prompt on the board."

Many people began to write their story topic as soon as Mrs. Whiston turned around to set her timer for five minutes. Not me. I'm just sitting here. Thinking. *What* kind of bedtime story can I write? Should it be happy? Should it be sad?

I decided to look at the writing prompt on the board: 'What is the scariest dream you have ever had?' Scary dream, huh? I've had *plenty* of those. Wait. That's it! I know what kind of bedtime story I want to write. A *scary* bedtime story! Thank you, writing prompt!

2 Thank You, Technology!

“Okay, everybody! Today at recess we have handball!”

“Two on two basketball!”

“Four on Four soccer!”

“Four square!”

“And dodgeball!”

Normally, we would have one more recess activity, but one of the fourth grade Future Funmakers is absent today.

“Now before we release you,” I said, “let’s review our playground rules.”

“Tattle tales don’t prevail!” Sammy shouted.

“Tattle tales don’t prevail!” the first graders repeated.

“Try a game that’s not the same!” Justin hollered.

“Try a game that’s not the same!” they repeated, again.

“Don’t shun my fun!” Paul yelled.

“Don’t shun my fun!” some first graders screamed.

“Shoes!” Marcus called, like a drill sergeant.

“Behind shoes!” they finished, straightening their lines.

“Shoulder length!” I shouted.

“Apart!” they said, adjusting their spaces.

All the Future Funmakers, minus Sammy, headed to their assigned activity. Since Sammy is running four square, and it’s the closest to the line up area, she gets to dismiss the classes.

As I hurried to the two on two basketball games, I continued to think about our creative writing assignment. You know, where is it going to take place? Who are the characters going to be? What is the villain going to be like?

“T.J.! He fouled me!” a first-grade girl whined, as she rushed to show me her hand. She may have been right, but I wasn’t sure, because I wasn’t exactly paying attention like I should have been.

“No, I didn’t! I hit the ball!” a boy said, running close behind her.

“Zim, Zam, Zoom,” I ordered.

“But he hit me!” she cried.

“No, I didn’t!” he denied.

“Zim, Zam, Zoom or I let the next two teams play,” I said, with authority.

The little girl stomped away, with her arms crossed, followed closely by her teammate. I know that I could have handled that better, mainly by paying attention to the game, but my mind just can’t seem to focus right now.

“Does that mean my team automatically wins?” the first-grade boy asked.

“Next team!” I announced.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, running to his partner and giving him a high five.

For the rest of recess, I did my best to focus on the game in front of me, so I could be a fair referee. I may not be a great basketball player, but I know enough about the game to know when someone is doing something wrong. Thanks to Funmaker John, that is.

Twice a week, Funmaker John works with us so that we’ll be familiar with the rules of the games we run during recess. If he didn’t do that, I’m not sure how much I would know about basketball. Or soccer. Or volleyball. Or four square. Remember, I’m *no* good at games that involve balls full of air.

By the end of the last recess, I knew *exactly* what my story was going to be.

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"I'm going to write about a boy who dreams about becoming a famous soccer player," Marcus told me.

It seems Mr. Anderson has assigned *his* class the same assignment Mrs. Whiston has assigned *us*. I'm not sure if they copied us or if we copied them. Either way, Marcus' story is going to be *way* different than mine.

"What are you going to write about?" Marcus asked.

"I'm going to write a scary bedtime story," I told him, taking out the tablet that my grandpa recently bought me. It was a reward for getting one hundred percent on my spelling tests, for an *entire* month!

For those of you who don't know, I have dyslexia. Dyslexia is when letters or numbers get switched around, mixed up or straight out change. At least that's what happens with me.

Luckily, mom has learned some techniques to help me recognize words when I'm reading. You know, underlining certain letter combinations. Or overlining. Overlining helps, too. Or using dots. Squiggly lines. You know, things like that.

She also taught me how to make sure that I *spell* words correctly when I'm doing my homework, writing a story or when we

have our spelling tests. Thanks to mom, I've been able to get one hundred percent on my last *six* spelling tests!

"A *scary* bedtime story? You mean, like a ghost story?" Marcus asked.

"Not really," I answered.

"I'm not following" he said.

"I got the idea from Mrs. Whiston's daily prompt," I explained.

"What was the prompt?" he asked.

We may have the same creative writing assignment, but I guess when it comes to daily writing prompts, our teachers come up with their own.

"It asked us to write about the scariest dream we've ever had," I said.

"You're going to write about your scariest dream?" Marcus continued to question.

"No," I said, in a 'are you kidding me?' voice while rolling my eyes.

"Then what are you going to write about?" he asked, looking over my shoulder, at my new tablet.

"You'll hear," I answered.

"'You'll hear?'" he asked, confused. "Don't you mean 'you'll see'?"

"Nope. I mean, you'll hear," I corrected, opening an app on my tablet.

“I’m *completely* confused,” Marcus admitted.

“That’s okay. You’ll hear soon enough,” I said, taking a seat on Marcus’ bed, leaning against his headboard. Marcus quickly followed like an excited puppy dog.

I tapped a red, circular button, on the top right corner of the screen, and began talking.

“It was a dark and stormy night,” I said, in my best scary voice. Suddenly, the words began to appear on screen.

“What!” Marcus shouted.

“And two best friends were hanging out in their bedroom,” I continued. Once again, the words typed themselves onto the screen.

“Wait a second!” he yelled. “That’s not fair!”

I pushed the button on the screen to make my tablet stop listening for my voice.

“What’s not fair?” I asked.

“You don’t even have to write anything!” Marcus said, in a strong voice.

“What do you mean? Of course, I do,” I answered, just as strong.

“Nuh uh,” he shot back.

“Why do you think I won’t have to write anything?” I asked, beginning to get defensive.

“Your tablet is writing everything for you!” he said, grabbing my tablet.

“But I still have to write it on *paper*,” I explained, grabbing it back.

“Oh. Yeah,” he said, in a ‘I never thought of that’ voice.

“So, if you think about it, I have to do *twice* the amount of work that *you* do,” I pointed out.

“Sorry,” Marcus said, getting off the bed.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said, in a soft voice.

“It’s okay, I’m just grabbing my math homework,” Marcus said.

“Okay. I just don’t want you to think that I’m angry with you,” I clarified.

“I don’t,” he said, plopping himself back onto his bed, after getting his math book and a pencil.

Not the heavy math book we sometimes use in class. The math book that we use for homework. The one where we can write in it *and* can rip the page out and turn it in to the teacher.

“I just want to work on something that won’t disrupt your story telling,” he continued.

“Oh. Thanks,” I said.

“I also want to hear what your story’s about,” he said, giving me a big smile that told me that he really didn’t think that I was mad at him.

“And then the truth came out,” I said, smiling back and giggling a bit.

It didn't take too long for me to dictate my story to my tablet. I had to stop every so often because Marcus would make a comment like 'ooo, that's good' or 'don't make it too scary', adn the app would type what he said.

I also had to stop because the app didn’t always understand what I was saying. This was the first time I was using it, so it took some time to learn some tricks that made it work better. Like speaking slowly. It couldn’t exactly keep up with my quick speaking. And speaking clearly. It felt like I was talking to someone who didn’t speak English. Marcus did his best not to laugh but let out a giggle and chortle every so often. I also learned that if I said ‘period’, it would type a period. But if I said, ‘open quote’ or ‘close quote,’ when someone was talking, it would just type the words ‘open quote’ and ‘close quote’.

At first, I kept manually adding in the punctuation that the app didn’t understand. Then, Marcus suggested that I just add it in later when I write it down on paper. It saved me time, so I decided to take his advice.

Normally when I do a writing assignment, I have to write everything down and have mom read it through to make sure that I spelled everything correctly. Now, I just have to copy my tablet. Thank you, technology!

3 Time To Read

Mom still wanted to look over the handwritten version of my story. It ended up being a good thing. I had forgotten a few commas and one period. It was also good, because when I went to put it in my homework folder, I saw the envelope Mrs. Whiston had given me earlier! I don't know what it's for. She didn't give one to *everyone*. Just a handful of people.

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I thought I had heard the weather man say that the heavy winds were supposed to be ending *last* night. Not! So, here I lay. Wide awake. Thanks to the gusts that are shaking my windows! I guess five days of insane winds just weren't enough for Mother Nature. I really need to look her number up on Google or Ask Geeves or Duck Duck Go or something. And great! *Now* I have to use the bathroom.

I hate waking up in the middle of the night having to use the bathroom. Our house is *so* dark. Not that I'm afraid of the dark or anything. Okay. Maybe just a little. Okay. Maybe a lot. But don't tell anyone!

I've suggested to mom that we should get those lights from that infomercial. You know. Those white circle ones that have sensors and turn on when you walk by them and then turn off when you pass them for longer than three seconds. They would work *perfectly* in the hallway at night. Oh well.

Okay. Here I go. Out the door and down the hall. It's just three steps to Xochitl's door. After that, it's six down the stairs. Then four *more* down the stairs. And finally, eleven more to the bathroom. I can do this. One. Two. Three.

"Look. I don't know what's going to happen. If all goes well, then no harm, no foul. If not, then I know that my children, that I love with all my heart, are enjoying themselves."

Why does mom sound like she wants to cry? I tip-toed over to my parent's door to get a better listen.

“That doesn’t give you the right to make choices without consulting me! I mean, a slumber party? Really? And science camp? We can’t even afford that!” dad said. It sounds like dad is trying his best not to shout. He probably thinks Xochitl and I are sleeping.

“We don’t have to pay *anything*. Weren’t you listening? His teacher sent home a letter today. Someone from the school has paid off the remaining balance for the trip. That means *free*,” my mother was reminding dad.

“Another handout. People feeling sorry for us because they cut back on my hours. I won’t allow it!” Now he *is* shouting.

“Really? Really, Mr. Macho? You’re too proud to allow your son a possible once in a lifetime experience? What a wonderful father *you* are,” mom commented.

I can tell that tears are streaming down her face. She gets a certain tone in her voice when she’s doing her best to fight back tears.

“Don’t make this about me. Don’t make me the villain here,” he said, lowering his voice.

It was quiet for a few seconds. Then, I heard dad’s footsteps walking towards the door.

Shoot! He can’t know I was listening. I tip-toe ran as quickly and quietly as I could to the restroom. I gently closed the door *just* in time to hear dad stomping down the hall and downstairs.

I was in such a hurry to get to the restroom that I forgot to turn on the light. Hey! Maybe he doesn’t even know that I’m in here.

I turned on the bathroom light so that I wouldn't trip over the scale. Oops. Seems I had been focusing a little too hard on mom and dad's conversation and not enough on getting to go to the bathroom in time. Before I could put the toilet seat up and my pants down, I wet my overnight protection.

I know that's what they were designed for. You know. Keeping accidents from getting all over your clothes and stuff. But I *really* wish I had just come straight downstairs. I guess it's a good thing mom keeps some of my extra overnight pants in here. But I can't reach! Not even with the step stool. She keeps them in the upper cupboard, so friends don't accidentally find them. Great. Now what am I going to do?

"T.J.? Is that you?" asked a gentle voice.

Oh, no! It's mom! What am I going to do?

"Uh. Yeah. It's me." I answered. Man. I hope I don't sound too troubled.

"Are you okay? You sound like you might have eaten some bad food," mom asked, concerned.

"Uh. No bad food. I was just trying to change my overnight protection, but I can't reach them," I said, changing my voice.

"Aw. You almost went three whole nights without having an accident," mom tried her best to console me. I just hope she never finds out what *really* happened. "Open the door and I'll get you a new pair," she offered.

“Okay,” I responded, unlocking the door.

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The next morning was pretty quiet in the house. Except for Xochitl, of course. Mom and dad have passed by each other without even making eye contact. It’s kind of scary. I’m on my *best* behavior to make sure it doesn’t get any worse. Xochitl on the other hand. Well. She’s Xochitl.

“Where’s daddy?” Xochitl asked, when it was time for dad to give us a kiss and hug goodbye.

“He’s not feeling himself,” mom answered.

“Aw,” Xochitl said, sadly.

We grabbed our backpacks and sweaters and headed for the car. I don’t like how mom said that dad isn’t ‘feeling himself’. Usually, she says that dad isn’t ‘feeling well’. Xochitl probably didn’t notice the difference, but I did.

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“She *still* wanted to read it?” Marcus asked me, at breakfast.

“Yeah. She wanted to check the punctuation,” I explained.

“But don’t you guys do a peer review?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Don’t you guys check for punctuation and spelling mistakes? *We* do,” Marcus said.

“We do, too. But what was I supposed to do? Tell my mom she *couldn’t* read it?” I asked, in a ‘are you crazy?’ voice.

“I guess you’re right,” he said.

“And now I don’t have to worry about writing a final draft!” I exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” Marcus asked.

“Because no one will be able to mark my paper!” I said, pulling at my jacket like those people on television do when they want to look cool.

“But didn’t you write it in *pencil*?” he asked.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked.

“Don’t all final drafts have to be written in *pen*?” he asked, in a ‘I don’t mean to burst your bubble’ voice.

I looked into the mid-distance while thinking of a way out of what Marcus has just said. After about ten seconds, I realized it was impossible.

“Dang!”

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After turning in our homework, we worked on today’s writing prompt: If you could have three wishes to make for someone else, what would your wishes be? Billy asked if the wishes had to be for specific people and Mrs. Whiston said yes.

“No wishes for world peace or food for the poor,” she clarified. “Oh, and no making wishes for more wishes for other people. Just one wish per person.”

This is a tough one. Usually, people *do* think of wishing for more wishes or world peace and stuff. And I can only choose *three* people. I know that I would want to wish for my dad to have his old hours back. That’s an easy one. Especially after what I heard last night.

Mom and dad *rarely* argue, but since dad’s lost hours and has a harder time paying his share of the bills and stuff, they argue more often. They don’t think I know. But I do. They usually do it when they think I’m asleep. But sometimes it’s hard for me to fall asleep, so I hear them. I try *not* to. *Really*, I do! It gets so scary sometimes. Hearing them use voices I don’t usually hear them use. Yes, wishing for dad’s old hours is an easy choice. But, the other two? That will be more difficult.

As I looked around the room, most people were writing about the people they would bless with a wish. Some, like me, were scanning the room for ideas. Others, were staring into mid-space, hoping the people to give wishes to would appear before them. I decided to start writing about how I would wish for my dad to have whatever job would make him happy. I hoped that as I wrote it down, two other people to make wishes for would come to my mind.

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I never did get to finish my writing prompt. But then again, I'm not sure we were meant to. It only took Mrs. Whiston about ten minutes or so to check everyone's outlines and rough drafts. I think today's writing prompt was more about getting us to consider others, instead of ourselves.

This month's classroom focus has been 'others'. And there are only a few days left in the month. If I were to make an educated guess, I would say that Mrs. Whiston was checking to see which of us have truly internalized the material she's taught.

"Frankie, please help me pass back the homework," Mrs. Whiston instructed.

As Frankie and Mrs. Whiston passed back the homework, the rest of us shared confused faces. We usually get our homework back from the 'Graded' bin near the door. The 'Graded' bin is next to the 'Homework' bin.

Then, as people started getting their homework back, people seemed to get even *more* perplexed. I wasn't sure why, until I received *my* homework back. For the first time all year, our homework wasn't graded. At all! No red pen. No blue pen. No nothing!

"Now, I'm sure most, if not all of you, are confused," Mrs. Whiston said.

"You could say *that* again!" Justin shouted out.

“Since this was a *creative* writing assignment, I’ve decided to be *creative* in grading it,” she started. “Instead of *me* grading you, you shall be graded by your peers.”

People started whispering things like ‘what?’, ‘is she serious?’, ‘no way!’ and ‘easy A!’. Mrs. Whiston just stood there and smiled. Then after a moment of whispers, she continued to explain her idea.

“You will be graded by three of your friends,” she said, holding up a grading sheet. “You will leave your rough draft on your table with *this* grading sheet. You will then choose someone’s paper to read. You will have eight minutes to read their story and two minutes to write your input and grade on their grading sheeting. Grades will be out of ten points. One being the lowest grade and ten being the highest.

“If you take a look at your grading sheets, you will notice that there is a line for ‘Author’s Name’ but there is not a line for ‘Reader’s Name’. These will be anonymous grades and notes, so feel free to be honest as no one will know it was you. We will do three rotations.”

“What if multiple people want to read the same story?” Jordan asked.

“To make this work, everyone’s story needs to be read the same number of times. Now, I foresaw this happening, so I wrote everyone’s class number on a piece of paper and put them in this hat,” she said, holding up her Dr. Seuss hat. “You will each take a number

and read that person's story. If you pull out your own number, just put it back and take another."

Mrs. Whiston then walked around the room allowing people to take a number. Once everyone had a number, she set her timer on her overhead screen.

"Okay everybody. Time to read!"

FOUR

Good Job, T.J.

After reading two other people's stories, I started to doubt just how good my story really was.

The first story I read, was about a land where everyone was the same color. Gray. And how they all *liked* the same things and *had* the same things and *did* the same things. *Everyone* was the same. Except one person. One person could change colors. Any color they wanted to be, they could be. They *liked* different things. *Had* different things. *Did* different things. And because they were different, they had to live

outside of the city. They were only allowed to come into town on a certain day and during a certain time. One day, the color changing person saves a gray child. It's only then that the people realize that maybe being different is okay.

The second story I read, was about a girl genius, from a wealthy family, who contracted a deadly virus. This deadly virus had no cure. It had a *treatment*, but no cure. Well, this girl genius, starts getting homeschooled and decides to do some research into cell regeneration. During her research, this girl learns to unlock the full potential and power of the lysosomes in the human body. And since lysosomes are able to battle viruses, she was able to cure herself. She then continues her research and finds a way to cure *every* disease and *every* sickness! I'll give you *three* guesses as to what *girl* wrote that story. But you'll probably only need *one*.

On the third rotation, I chose my own number. Then I chose the same number as my first choice.

"He's trying to find the number of one of his friends!" Lauren whined.

"No, I'm not. I chose my number and then I chose the same number of the first story I read," I said, honestly.

"Yeah. Sure," she retorted.

"Lauren," Mrs. Whiston said, in a mother scolding her daughter kind of tone.

"Fine. *You* choose my number," I told Lauren.

“That won’t be necessary,” Mrs. Whiston said, pulling a number out of her hat for me. “Seventeen.”

“That’s *my* number,” I said, chuckling while looking at Lauren who then stuck her tongue out at me.

Mrs. Whiston chose again.

“Twenty-three,” she announced, holding up the paper for everyone to see.

“That’s *my* number,” Lauren declared.

“Well, lucky you,” Mrs. Whiston said, moving on to the next student.

Great. Now, if I give her a low grade, she’s going to say that I’m taking revenge on her. Hopefully she wrote a good story.

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“Your class did that, too?” Marcus asked, as we set up the playground equipment.

“Yes,” I answered, placing cones and handballs on their mark.

“What about the competition?” he asked.

“Competition?” I asked, stopping in place.

“Yeah. Mrs. Whiston didn’t tell you guys?” Marcus questioned.

“She didn’t mention any competition,” Sammy answered, for me.

“Mr. Anderson said that whoever gets the highest score from each class will be read by both classes. Then, everyone will vote who

had the best story," Marcus explained.

"So, the teachers will have *no* influence on who wins?" Sammy asked, grabbing some jump ropes off the cart.

"Not according to Mr. Anderson," Erick answered, for Sammy.

"Well, that's kind of cool," Justin commented.

"I have to admit, I *did* read a couple of pretty cool stories," I said, closing the bottom half of the equipment room door.

"Well, good luck to you all," Sammy said, putting the jump ropes in their designated area.

"Aw, thank you," Paul said.

"But you're all going *down*," she finished.

◆ ◆ ◆

When we returned to class from lunch recess, Mrs. Whiston passed out a packet while explaining to us what Marcus had already told us. The top paper of the packet was the same grading sheet we had used to grade each other's papers. Next was a copy of Carissa's story. Carissa was from Mr. Anderson's class. Then there was *another* grading sheet, followed by my story. Wait. *My* story? *My* story had the highest grade in our class?

"Once again, you will have eight minutes to read the story and two minutes to write your review and give it a grade," Mrs. Whiston said, once again, setting the timer on her overhead display.

“Doth T.J. get to grade hith own thory?” Matthew asked, out loud.

“We will not be including Carissa or T.J.’s own grade in the overall score. And that’s not all. Mr. Anderson and I will be using the points that you give to decide who had the best story in the whole fifth grade. The winner gets to have a special lunch with Mr. Martinez,” Mrs. Whiston said, starting the first ten-minute count down.

For those of you who don’t know, Mr. Martinez is our Principal, which is why I call him ‘Principal Martinez’.

It took a little over twenty minutes for everyone to read and grade both stories. After Mrs. Whiston collected all of our packets back, she handed us back our rough drafts with the grading sheet attached. You know, the one that people had made notes on.

“I have stapled the grading sheets to your stories so that you can use them to improve your story, if you’d like,” she explained.

“But we don’t have to?” Andres asked.

“Don’t have to what?” Mrs. Whiston asked, for clarification.

“We don’t have to change our story if we don’t want to?” he asked, more clearly.

“No, Andres, you don’t,” Mrs. Whiston answered.

“Does that mean that we’ll be doing this again?” Shanika asked.

“No, Shanika,” Mrs. Whiston replied. “I will be taking the grade your peers gave you on your rough draft and averaging it with the

grade that I will give you after reading your final draft."

"So, you *will* be grading our stories, after all?" Jefferson asked.

"I guess I will," Mrs. Whiston said.

Jefferson then mouthed 'thank God'.

We then took out our tablets to take a picture of our rough draft and grading sheet. Mrs. Whiston has us do this for *every* homework assignment, test, and project, just in case her laptop 'freaks out'. It's pretty ingenious. I think *all* teachers should have their students do this. Even *if* her laptop freaks out or breaks, she can just go back and reinsert all of our grades.

◆ ◆ ◆

When I got home, I told mom about how Mrs. Whiston had us grade each other's stories and about how my story got the highest score in my class. She got so excited, she gave me a hug, picked me up and spun me around. Then I told her about how if my story was voted the best by both classes, I would get to have a special lunch with Principal Martinez. Once again, she picked me up and spun me around. Then she went to go tell dad. I guess they've already made up. That's good.

When I got to my room, I decided to read the notes that people had written about my story. Even though mine had received the highest score in my class, it could always be better.

Unfortunately, there were no helpful notes. They all just said how good it was. Or how scary it was. Or how they wished that it would never happen to them. So, without any new ideas, I just rewrote it in pen for my final draft, even though it's not due until Friday.

I was so ready to write something, that after I finished writing the final draft, I decided to add some new blocks to the comic I was working on. The Joker is about to find out Batman's deepest darkest secret. His true identity. Batman is telling Robin that if Joker finds out his true identity, then he will soon find out the identity of the *entire* Justice League. If they don't stop Joker, *lots* of people will be in danger.

◆ ◆ ◆

When mom dropped Xochitl and me off at school the next morning, I noticed Mrs. Whiston talking to Fernando's mom in the parking lot. Fernando's mom did *not* look very happy. I couldn't help but wonder what they were talking about.

"You're *so* going to win!" Paul said, as we waited in line for the first bell to ring. "Your story was *way* better than Carissa's."

"I wouldn't say that," Sammy interjected.

"What do you mean?" Erick said. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm not on anyone's side," Sammy answered.

"You *should* be on T.J.'s side," Justin commented.

“I’m just trying to be impartial,” Sammy pointed out.

Just then, Mrs. Whiston came out of the office followed by *another* parent. I think it’s Sarah’s dad. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but his face is telling me everything I need to know. He’s angry. I’m not sure what about, but Mrs. Whiston is walking, *hurriedly*, towards our classroom. Mr. Ellis on the other hand, is standing in front of Sarah’s dad, pointing towards the front gate.

I wonder what Fernando’s mom and Sarah’s dad are angry about?

◆ ◆ ◆

Today’s writing prompt: When is it okay to yell at someone for something they didn’t do?

Instead of grading papers while we worked on the daily writing prompt, Mrs. Whiston called me to her desk.

“Yes,” I said, wondering if I was in trouble.

“T.J., I just want to let you know that I got a few angry emails and messages on the Classroom Communication app,” she said.

I wondered what they were about, but I was too afraid to ask.

“And this morning, two parents confronted me before school started,” she continued.

How could any parent be angry with Mrs. Whiston? She’s the bestest, friendliest, most compassionate teacher there is.

“Now, before I go on, I want to let you know, it is *not* your fault,” she reassured me.

Not my fault for what?

“It seems that after reading your story, yesterday, some kids couldn’t sleep. Your story scared them so badly, that some of your friends had to sleep with their parents,” she said, in a quiet, calm voice.

“Am I in trouble?” I said, instinctively.

“No, no, no, T.J. Don’t you worry. Some parents just thought that Mr. Anderson and I shouldn’t have let their kids read such a scary story,” she said, taking my hands into hers.

“I didn’t *mean* for it to be that scary,” I said, defensively.

“T.J., it’s okay. You’re not in trouble. I let Mr. Martinez know what happened, and he agrees that you’ve done *nothing* wrong,” she said, in a comforting voice.

Even though she said I wasn’t in trouble, my chest is already tightening, and without telling them to, tears are filling my eyes.

“T.J. T.J. You’re okay. There’s nothing to worry about. You’re not in trouble,” Mrs. Whiston reassured me, wiping away a tear that was falling. “You’ve done something truly *great*, T.J. Just a year ago, you had trouble reading. And it was *this* year, that you got your *first* perfect score on a spelling test. *Now*, you’ve written a story so fantastical that your peers scored it the best in the entire class. It was *so* real to some of them that they couldn’t get it out of their heads.

Most writers go their entire *lives* wondering if their stories have *any* effect on their readers. *Yours* did! And a group of angry parents is just proof of that.

"T.J., you should be *proud*! Your mom and dad should be celebrating! Your friends should be raising you up on their shoulders to take a victory lap around the blacktop! T.J. If no one else does, I want to congratulate you on a great creative writing assignment. On writing an amazing scary story. And with that, I present you with this."

She held up a certificate that said: "This Certificate is Presented to: Tomas 'T.J.' Olivera, Jr., for Outstanding Achievement in Creative Writing." It was signed by Mrs. Whiston and Principal Martinez. Except his name was written 'Mr. Martinez.'

"Good job, T.J."

5 Not Deja Vu

Even after everything Mrs. Whiston said, and the certificate she gave me, I didn't feel much better for the rest of the day, but I made sure not to show it to anyone else. I also didn't tell anyone what Mrs. Whiston told me. Except about the certificate she had given me. Everyone congratulated me and patted me on the back.

◆ ◆ ◆

Today we're at Marcus' house for homework. Sometimes we work at the kitchen table, sometimes in the living room, but right now we're in his bedroom. He's lying on his bed, I'm stretched out on the floor, and Daniel is at his desk.

"What'd you get for number three?" Marcus asked.

Even with my dyslexia, math comes easy to me. Not to mention, my dyslexia seems to only apply to letters and words. Numbers for some reason are unaffected.

"X=7," I answered.

"What?!" Marcus shouted, as he looked at my paper.

"Hey!" I reacted, pulling my paper away.

"C'mon! Lemme see!" Marcus said, trying to reach my paper as I did my best to keep it out of reach.

"And Marcus reaches for the paper as T.J. *swiftly* turns away, keeping it *just* out of reach!" Daniel said, in his sports commentator voice.

"Be quiet, Daniel," Marcus ordered.

"Will Marcus get the paper," his play by play continued.

"I don't know Daniel," he said, in a different voice, "although Marcus has superior arm length, T.J. has superior speed and agility."

"Daniel! Go away!" Marcus said, angrily, as I continued to evade his reach.

"Wow! He almost had it–."

Just then, we heard a loud crash come from downstairs. We all immediately froze and looked towards the door. Both of Marcus's parents are out and they aren't supposed to be back for another hour or so. At least I think they're not. Which is why Daniel's watching us. And seeing as how Marcus doesn't have a cat or dog, we have *no* idea what just made that crashing sound.

Daniel placed his index finger on his lips, urging us to stay silent. He then motioned for Marcus and me to follow him. We silently tip-toed down the hall single file. As we reached the stairs, we could hear people talking in the kitchen.

"Forget the cheap stuff. Karl said there was silver and gold upstairs!" said a gruff voice.

Daniel turned and intently motioned for us to go to Marcus's room. Once we got there, we quietly closed the door.

"We have to call the cops!" Marcus whispered, anxiously.

"The phone's in mom and dad's room," Daniel whispered back. "If they hear us walking, they might try to hurt us!"

Just then, we heard the people coming up the stairs. Daniel motioned for us to hide. Marcus hid in the closet. Daniel hid under the bed and I, being the smallest of us, hid in the laundry basket.

"Do you know which room it is?" the gruff voice asked.

"How should I know? He just told me 'upstairs'," a second voice answered.

“This is the last time I go on a job without any information,” the first voice commented, getting closer to Marcus’s room.

Unfortunately, it’s the first room at the top of the stairs. Then again, so is Daniel’s. Except *his* is across from Marcus’s. Oh, how I wish there were locks on the doors!

“Let’s go in this room,” voice two suggested.

“No. *This* one first,” voice one ordered.

Oh, God, please let that *not* be this room. That’s it! I’ll pray. I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and folded my hands the best I could, since I had placed some of Marcus’ dirty clothes on top of me, to make it harder for the men to see me. Then I whispered in the quietest voice I’ve *ever* used.

Dear God. Please let these bad men not find us. Please let them leave without hurting us either. Please MAKE them leave. Please, please, please, please, PLEASE! In Jesus’ name, amen.

I held my breath as I waited to hear if Marcus’ door would open. After ten seconds or so, I quietly exhaled. It seems they’ve gone into Daniel’s room first. That means it will only be a matter of time before they come in here.

As I try my best not to make noise or any big movements, time seems to be slowing down. Or maybe it’s standing still. Oh, how I hope these guys will just skip this room altogether.

“There’s nothing *here*! Just a bunch of *kid* stuff!” voice one shouted.

“Sorry! Like I said, they only told me that the good stuff was upstairs!” voice two responded. Just then the door to Marcus’s room opened and slammed into his dresser.

“It *better* be in here!” voice one continued to shout.

“Think of it this way,” voice two said, in a more timid voice, “if it’s not in here, there’s only one more room left.”

“Shut up and start searching!” voice one commanded.

Oh, *please* don’t let them find us. Please, please, please, please, *please*!

I can hear one of the men emptying out Marcus’s dresser drawers while the other man just overturned his mattress. I’m so glad his bed frame has a solid piece of wood at the bottom, otherwise they would be able to see Daniel.

“T.J., if you’re there, this is Xochitl. Dad said it’s time to come home. We have to go to that meeting. Oh, and by the way, he’s *not* in a good mood.”

“What was that?” voice two asked, sounding concerned.

“Just some walkie-talkie. Nobody’s here. Keep looking!” voice one said, sounding irritated.

Just then the doorbell rang.

“Somebody’s here!” voice two said. “Let’s get outta here!”

“No! We don’t leave without the goods!” voice one commanded.

“But what if someone comes in?” voice two asked.

“No one’s coming in! They wouldn’t have rung the doorbell if they had a key!” voice one pointed out.

“Daniel! Marcus! We left the key in the house! Open the door!” Marcus’s mother shouted, from the side of the house.

“See! Someone’s here! Let’s get outta here!” voice two said, terrified of getting caught.

“Back door! Hurry to the back door!” voice one shouted.

I could hear the men run out of the room and down the stairs. I jumped up the best I could and saw Daniel climbing out from underneath the bed. He ran out of the room, and down the stairs, to open the door for his parents.

I was about to walk out of the room when I noticed Marcus hadn’t come out of the closet. Wait! The closet door is open! One of the men must have been searching the closet. I ran to the closet and called out Marcus’s name. There was no response. I called it again. Nothing. Then I heard it. A soft sniffling.

“Marcus? Is that you?” I said, as I moved a pile of clothes that were on top of a wooden trunk. Marcus must be more flexible than I thought. *I* can barely fit into that thing. I opened the trunk and found Marcus in the fetal position with his hands over his face.

“Marcus,” I said softly, trying to comfort him, “they’re gone. It’s okay. You can come out now.”

Marcus still didn’t move. As I waited to see if he would come out, I could hear Daniel telling his parents what happened.

“I’ll call 9-1-1,” his mother told his father, “you check on Marcus and T.J. And *don’t* touch anything. I want everything *exactly* the way it is when the police get here.”

A couple of moments later, Marcus’s dad entered the room. I was still sitting next to the trunk hoping that Marcus would come out.

“T.J., are you okay?” Marcus’s dad asked.

“Yes, sir,” I answered, “but I can’t get Marcus to come out of the trunk.”

“Is he hurt?” he asked, as he approached us.

“No,” was all I could say.

“Marcus?” his father called, as he placed his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. Marcus still didn’t move. His father placed his hands on Marcus’ hands and calmly pulled them away from his face. Marcus looked at his dad with terrified eyes, full of tears that were red from crying.

“Dad?” Marcus asked, as if he just realized we were there. “Dad!” Marcus said, with more energy, trying to climb out of the trunk. I guess it was a tighter squeeze than he thought. Marcus’ dad helped him out and Marcus jumped into his arms. I’ve never seen his dad carry him before, but this occasion certainly calls for it.

“They’re on their way,” Daniel said, excitedly, as he entered the room. “Is Marcus okay?” he asked, as his father slowly walked towards the door.

“He’s just a bit shaken up. He’ll be okay,” his father answered, caressing Marcus’s back like my mom does when she comforts me.

It was then that I noticed something. Everything that just happened was *almost* exactly like I had written it in my story! The only difference was that my story happened on a dark and stormy night.

Now that I think about it, it’s almost like when you have a dream. You know what I mean, right? You’re living life and then something happens, and you feel like it’s already happened before. Then you realize that you had a dream that was *almost* exactly the same as what just happened! What’s it called again? Something in French, I think. Whatever it is, it’s like that!

6 Come In, Over

The next hour or so was both scary and confusing.

It was scary because I had to relive the whole experience by telling the officers, and my parents, what had happened. If you haven't guessed, it was *quite* scary for me. One minute we're doing homework in Marcus' room and the next minute we hear a crash downstairs and we're hiding from burglars! I mean, what if they had gone into Marcus' room *first*? What if they had found us? What

would they have done to us? Did they have weapons? What if they kidnapped us or used us for a ransom? Just rethinking about the whole thing makes my stomach feel gross.

It was confusing because I had to tell it over and over! Why did I have to tell it over and over? First to Marcus' parents. Then to *my* parents. Then to one officer who seemed like he had *never* worked with children before. Then to a nicer officer who seemed to keep lollipops in her pocket. Then to a detective whose questions were difficult to understand so I ended up with a headache. Then to someone who didn't understand that we didn't actually *see* the two burglars. I mean, how was *I* supposed to know what race they were or how tall they were based off their *voices*?

After the officers and investigators left, I went home. I wasn't really hungry, and it was already bedtime, so I asked my mom if I could go straight to bed. She said it was okay. Usually, she would fuss and ask me if I had finished my homework or tell me to at least take a shower and brush my teeth, but tonight she didn't. She just held me tight for longer than usual. I didn't mind, though, even though Xochitl joined in on the hug. Normally, it would annoy me and ruin the moment, but tonight I welcomed it. It was the first time I felt safe since all of this had happened.

Although mom didn't tell me to, I'm going to brush my teeth anyway. For some reason, I don't want to change that part of my normal routine. Of course, the fact that my electrical toothbrush plays

the Batman theme song helps a bit. It helps me remember that I can be brave about the whole thing. I don't have to be scared anymore. I've even decided to wear my favorite Batman pajamas and socks to bed. My bed is already Batman themed, so it just completes everything. The only thing that's missing is my Batman character pillow. It looks kind of like a stuffed animal, but it's not. He sits on top of my bookshelf with some of my other, more important memorabilia.

I took my desk chair and placed it in front of my bookshelf since it was too high up for me to reach. Just as I grabbed it, my mom entered my room, startling me and causing me to almost fall off.

"Careful, Tomas," she said, hurrying to make sure that I didn't fall.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to get Batman so that he could sleep with me tonight," I explained, as mom helped me off my chair.

"It's okay mi amor. Just call me next time. I'll get it for you," she said.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking. 'T.J., aren't you in the *fifth* grade? Aren't you a little *old* for stuffed animals?' In one word… no! First of all, this is a character pillow. Although I *do* have a Batman stuffed animal. But why does there have to be an age limit for stuffed animals? I mean, the tag says '3+'. Which means 'three and up'! Not 'three until you're too old'. Right? Right!

Think about it. Haven't you ever seen those *huge* teddy bears that they sell at the store? The ones that you have to *tie* to your car. Do you *really* think someone is buying that for their little kid? I don't think so!

Mom says that if stuffed animals are your thing, then find friends who don't make you feel like you have to hide your stuffed animals. Find friends who just let you be you!

I climbed into bed, with Batman held close to my side. Then mom tucked me in tight. She started from the toes, after tickling them a bit, of course, then made her way up to my neck, where she tickled me a little bit more. I've never really understood why she tickles me on the neck. It just loosens the blankets so that she has to tuck them in tightly again.

After she finished her tucking me in routine, she kissed me on the forehead.

"I love you," she said, sweetly.

"Love you more," I hit back, as she took a step towards the door.

"Love you more, plus one," she volleyed, taking another step.

"Love you more, plus infinity," I returned, as mom reached the door.

"Love you more, plus whatever you say, plus one," she said, while rushing out the door.

"Hey! No fair!" I exclaimed.

That’s the only way she can win. By cheating! Oh well, I’m too exhausted to care right now.

◆ ◆ ◆

I hadn’t been asleep for long before I heard, “Batman, this is Captain America. Come in Batman.” I rolled onto my side and reached for my walkie-talkie.

“This is Batman,” I responded, still half asleep. “What is it? Over.”

“I can’t sleep,” Marcus said, “I keep dreaming about the robbery. Over.”

“Go sleep with Daniel,” I offered, “or your parents. Over.”

“I don’t know,” Marcus paused, “can’t you just come over? Over.”

“I don’t know.” I thought for a moment. “What if I get caught? Over.”

“Pleeease.”

I sighed. Marcus *had* just helped me with a bully the other day. I guess I *did* owe him one. Just then my bedroom door opened.

“Is everything okay?” mom asked.

“Marcus can’t sleep, and he wants me to come over,” I explained.

“Aw. Poor thing,” she said.

“So, can I go over?” I asked, with an ‘I don’t really want to go over, but I secretly do’ kind of voice.

You know the one I’m talking about. The one you use on your parents to get something you want by pretending that you don’t actually want it. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t. That voice!

“Batman. Come in Batman,” Marcus’ voice came in over the walkie talkie.

I held my walkie talkie up towards mom while holding up my shoulders as if to say, ‘what do I say?’. She gave me that ‘I’m thinking about it’ look.

“Batman. Come *in* Batman,” Marcus’ voice repeated.

“I guess so,” mom said, closing the door behind her as she left.

I placed my walkie talkie back on my nightstand and climbed out of bed. I grabbed Batman as Marcus’ voice came in again.

“So?” was his one-word communication.

I grabbed my walkie talkie, “okay. Okay. I’m climbing out my window. Open yours. Over.”

“Okay. Over,” his excited voice rang through my room.

Luckily the tree in my backyard has a couple of branches that reach some branches of the tree in Marcus’s backyard. Our dads worked together to make us a tree house. Well, not *exactly* a tree house. It’s more of a platform with railings and a walkway. ‘There aren’t enough strong branches to hold up an entire tree house’ my dad

said. Marcus' dad agreed. Therefore, a platform instead of a tree house.

There's a walkway from the roof of Marcus' house that leads to the platform and a walkway from the roof of my house that leads to the platform. The whole thing has railings of course, so that we won't fall. We can literally *walk* to each other's house without ever having to touch the ground!

As I opened my window, a strong gust of nighttime air entered my room. Boy is it *cold* outside! I closed my window behind me and began the walk towards Marcus' roof. There's a full moon out tonight, so everything is well lit. Hey! There's my favorite pen! I've been looking *everywhere* for it!

As I reached Marcus' platform, I could see him waiting for me inside his window. He reached his hand out to help me climb inside.

"Thank you," Marcus said, "you're the best."

"Just let me in. It's freezing!" I whispered loudly.

7 An Unexpected Conversation

I told him I'd only stay until he fell asleep, but I guess I was pretty exhausted myself. Let's just say that when I woke up, it wasn't from Marcus' alarm clock. It was from Marcus' mom gently shaking me awake.

"Good morning, T.J.," Marcus' mom said.

"Good morning. Where's Marcus?" I asked, noticing that he was no longer lying next to me.

“He woke up a while ago. He felt bad for making you come over, so he decided to let you keep sleeping,” she explained.

“Oh. Okay,” I said, climbing out of bed. “Are those pancakes I smell?”

“Actually, they’re waffles,” Marcus’ mom corrected. “You wouldn’t be hungry, would you?”

“For waffles? Even if I *wasn’t* hungry, I’d eat some!” I exclaimed, jumping out of bed.

“Hey, T.J.!” Marcus said, getting up from the kitchen table so we could do our handshake.

“Marcus!” I said back, following Marcus’ handshake initiation.

“Good morning, T.J.,” Marcus’ dad greeted me, as he entered the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I greeted.

“What’re *you* doing here?” Daniel, asked.

“Daniel Joseph!” his mother scolded.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that he wasn’t here when I went to bed last night. It just caught me by surprise,” he apologized.

“So how are you doing?” Marcus’ dad asked.

“Okay, I guess,” I answered.

“I’m just glad you boys weren’t hurt,” Marcus’ mom said, giving Marcus, then Daniel, a hug.

“You boys were *very* brave,” Marcus’ dad said.

“We *hid* from the burglars,” Daniel pointed out.

“Exactly,” his dad responded.

“How is that *brave*?” Marcus asked.

“It takes a lot of control not to lose your cool in a situation like the one you were in yesterday. You boys could have panicked and did something that would have led to you getting caught, or worse, getting hurt,” he explained. “Instead, you stayed calm and didn’t reveal yourselves. It may seem cowardly, but it was both smart and probably the bravest thing you could have done.”

“That’s very true,” his mom agreed.

“Well, it was the *worst* day of my *life*,” Marcus said, placing his hand on his forehead. “What about you, T.J.?”

“*Well*. At least it wasn’t as bad that day back in second grade,” I commented, in a ‘don’t you remember’ voice.

“What day in second grade?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah! I forgot! You weren’t *here* in second grade. It was the day a substitute teacher wouldn’t let me go to the restroom because, ‘School will be out in only fifteen minutes. I think you can hold it ‘til then’,” I imitated holding up quotes with my fingers. “I ended up peeing in my pants! And the whole class found out. They called me ‘T.J. Peed! Hey! T.J. Peed! Hey!’ for nearly a month until another kid peed in *his* pants. Then the name got passed on and changed to fit him,” I finished.

“Wow. That’s pretty bad,” Marcus commented. “The last time I wet my pants at school was in *kindergarten*. And it *wasn’t* my fault. It

was nap time, and when I woke up, I was wet!"

I had to laugh at that last part.

"Hey! It's not funny, '*T.J. Peed, hey*!'" Marcus shot back.

"I wasn't laughing *at* you. I was laughing *with* you!" I tried.

"But *I* wasn't laughing!" Marcus pointed out.

"I know. Sorry. It's just something my mom always says." I never really understood it, seeing as how *she's* usually the only one laughing just before she says it.

"That's okay. As long as this stays between the two of us," Marcus said, pointing back and forth from him to me with a serious look on his face. He is definitely *not* kidding about that.

"You've got no argument there!" I agreed.

"Okay. If you two are done agreeing, go wash up for breakfast while I finish setting the table," Marcus' mother instructed.

You didn't have to tell *us* twice. We *raced* to the restroom. I almost tripped over Marcus as we made the right turn to get to the bathroom at the end of the hall.

It was kind of weird. Marcus's house and my house were *identical* on the inside. Though you would *never* be able to tell from the outside. His house looked like a more modern home and ours looked like something straight out of the fifties, complete with patio swing and all. My mom wouldn't let my dad change anything about it, even though our house was the only one that hadn't been altered on

our entire street. ‘It makes it more family friendly’, she would always say. I kinda liked it, too.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Marcus asked, as we prepared to wash our hands with liquid soap that smelled like lilac. I prefer the orange blossom scent like my mom always buys for our restroom at home.

“Of course, you can!” I assured him.

“I only told you *half* the truth downstairs,” he began, with a hint of disappointment in his voice, “and I don’t like lying to you,” he continued, as we lathered our hands. “Especially since you’re my best friend. It’s just that… it’s really embarrassing.”

“Hey! I’m the shortest kid in our whole grade and I can’t play *half* the sports that you can. Even if I practiced my heart out! And I’m pretty sure *whatever* you’re about to share with me won’t be that bad,” I commented, trying to lift his spirits.

“So, you *promise*?” he asked, again.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” I answered, getting a little bit of soap on the Batman logo on my shirt as I crossed my heart.

“Okay,” he sighed, “here goes. The truth is, the last time I wet myself at school *was* in kindergarten.”

“Yeah. You said that already,” I pointed out.

“The part I lied about was when I said that it wasn’t my fault,” he explained. He still sounded pretty down about it.

“I don’t understand. You were only five. Of *course*, it wasn’t your fault!” I exclaimed, as I began to rinse my hands of soap.

“But it *was*. You see,” he looked around and raised his shoulders, “I *still* wet the bed sometimes when I’m asleep,” he whispered, in confidence.

“Oh. No biggie,” I said, trying not to sound too surprised.

“You don’t understand,” he said, still lathering his hands. “The reason I wasn’t in the bed when you woke up was because I wet the bed *last night*!”

“But the bed wasn’t wet,” I stated, confused.

Marcus sighed.

“I know. That’s because I use disposable underwear,” he said, looking at the floor. “I was changing out of them while you were asleep. That’s the *real* reason that I didn’t wake you up.”

“Lots of kids wear those! My mom said that one in four kids wet the bed ‘til their like twelve or thirteen,” I recited, drying my hands while trying to turn his mood around. “We did some research online and even found out that some kids wet the bed *all* the way through high school! It usually has something to do with their body not developing right.”

Marcus was starting to look a little less disappointed, but I knew he still felt pretty bad. That’s when I decided that if he could share such a deep secret with me, I should probably do the same. Make it equal, you know?

“By the way,” I began, “you’re not alone.”

“I know. You just told me that,” he said, looking a little confused.

“I still wet sometimes, too,” I said, doing my best to sound like it was nothing big.

Then I did something I had never done before. Without even thinking about it, I pulled my Batman pajamas away from the side of my waist to reveal *my* disposable underwear. Then I patted him on the shoulder as I left the restroom. I think I surprised him because he didn’t exactly follow me downstairs.

8 Three Whole Nights?

Marcus didn't talk much at breakfast. He seemed to be preoccupied by something. Probably about what I had just revealed to him. When his mom asked if everything was okay, he said that he was 'just tired from everything that happened yesterday'. She may have bought it, but I knew better.

After breakfast, I thanked Marcus' parents for the food and headed home. Unfortunately, the back door was locked. After

knocking a couple of times, my dad answered the door.

"How's Marcus," dad asked, as I walked in.

"He's doing better," I answered.

"Have you eaten?" my mom asked, fixing my hair.

"Yes. Marcus' mom made waffles," I said, re-messing up my hair.

"Homemade waffles?" dad asked, with an excited tone.

"I think they were frozen waffles," I said, pushing down the handle on our toaster.

"T.J.! You're going to burn out the toaster!" mom scolded me, as I rushed out of the kitchen laughing.

◆ ◆ ◆

The rest of the morning was uneventful, and I can honestly say that I was *actually* looking *forward* to school. I just want to get back to my normal routine so that *something* would get my mind off of what had happened last night. And *boy* did something get my mind off of it.

"Okay, boys and girls, go ahead and put your reading books away. We're going to move on to something different," Mrs. Whiston instructed.

I'm not sure why, but the way she said that got me excited.

"Some of you may have forgotten, but Science Camp is just two and a half weeks away!" she exclaimed.

Everyone in the class erupted in cheers, which led to Mrs. Whiston holding up her quiet coyote hand signal to calm us down. It took a few moments for the rest of us to put our hands up and quiet down.

"Now, I know you're all excited, but I just want to review some of the things that need to be finished before we go up, as well as some of the things that you can look forward to."

She explained that some people still had to finish their online registration and that others still had to submit a doctor's note for any medication that they have to take. Without a doctor's note and the original packaging with their name on it, they wouldn't be able to take their medication with them. Some people didn't care because they didn't take any medication, but Ana *did* care. She's *deathly* allergic to peanuts. Just to give you an idea of *how* allergic she is, let me tell you a short story.

A couple of weeks ago, when Ana and Alysia were playing a hand clapping game, Ana's hand suddenly started getting itchy. Then, moments later, a rash started to show! After showing a supervision aide, she gave Ana a note for the nurse. The nurse gave Ana her allergy medication and it made the rash and itching go away.

At first Ana didn't know *why* her hand had gotten itchy. It wasn't until after she came out of the office and saw Alysia eating some peanut butter crackers that she figured it out. Alysia had eaten a couple of peanut butter crackers before playing her hand game with

Ana. Since Alysia hadn't washed her hands, the residue on her hand got transferred to Ana's hand, causing her allergic reaction!

While Mrs. Whiston continued talking, Alejandro started passing out a packet with information we needed to give our parents. Frankie is absent, so it's Alejandro's turn to be Teacher's Assistant.

"Although we will only be staying there for four days and three nights, you may want to pack an extra set of clothes in case of an accident. One year, a student who was focused on a bird flying above, slipped into a shallow bank and got all wet. Luckily, her father was a Boy Scout leader and had packed some extra supplies, including an extra set of clothes," Mrs. Whiston shared, terrifying me in the process.

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I stayed home from school the following day. I convinced my mother that I wasn't feeling well. And when Marcus showed up at my back door, mom told him that I was resting and that I could play when I was feeling well again.

On the second day, when she decided it was time to go to the doctor's office, I told her that I was starting to feel better. She handed me some papers from the packet that Mrs. Whiston had given us and told me to make sure I turned them in.

"There's *no* way you're getting left behind," she said. "Not after someone sponsored your remaining balance to make sure you could

go.”

When I got to school, the guys in the T.J. League all surrounded me and started asking me questions.

“Where have you been?

“What’s wrong?”

“Were you dying?”

“You’re still going to Science Camp, right?”

“Guys. Guys! Let him breathe,” Sammy ordered, pushing everyone back.

“Well?” Justin said, as everyone gave me some space.

“I don’t really feel one hundred percent right now, guys,” I said, walking to the breakfast line.

I felt bad. I *know* that they are just showing that they care, but *I* still haven’t gotten over what I realized two days ago. And until I do, I’m *really* not in the mood for talking.

The rest of the day, I kept to myself. I even asked Funmaker John if I could take a day’s break from Future Funmaker duty I told him that I wasn’t feeling one hundred percent yet. He told me not to worry about it and to come back when I felt better.

Luckily, Marcus got picked up after school because he had a dentist appointment. That prevented an awkward walk home. One that would probably have been full of questions.

When I got home, mom asked me how I felt. I told her that I was okay and went straight to my room to work on my homework.

Afterward, I stayed in my room and worked on my most recent comic. Before I was able to finish, Marcus' voice came over my walkie-talkie.

"Batman. Come in, Batman. This is Captain America. Over."

I sat on my bed, wondering if I should answer.

"Batman. Come in, Batman. This is Captain America. Over."

Again, I didn't move.

"T.J.?" he tried for a third time. "T.J.? Come on. I know you're there. I can see your legs hanging off the bed."

Dang! I forgot we could see part of each other's rooms from our windows. So much for hiding out.

I reached over and grabbed my walkie talkie from my nightstand.

"This is Batman. Over," I said, with as much energy as I could.

"Are you feeling better?" Marcus asked.

"A little. I'd say I'm at seventy five percent," I lied.

"Feeling well enough to come outside and play?" he continued.

"I don't know," I said, "how about a game of Life instead?"

"Your house or mine?" he asked.

"Tree house," I answered.

I walked over to my desk, took my chair, and placed it in front of my closet. My board games are on a shelf above my clothes. After moving some other games over, I grabbed the box, and replaced my

chair. When I got to the tree house, Marcus was sitting on his side of the platform, waiting.

Without saying anything, I took the game out of the box and began setting it up. Marcus helped, *also* without saying anything. It was kind of weird though. The *way* he helped set up the game, told me *everything* he was thinking.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

"For what?" he pretended to ask.

"I think you know what," I said, ashamedly.

"You mean for lying to your best friend?" he said.

"I didn't *mean* to," I said, defensively.

"Kind of hard to believe," he replied, setting up the last piece for our game to begin.

I sighed.

"It's like this."

I explained to Marcus that Mrs. Whiston had reminded us about our upcoming Science Camp trip. And that while she was explaining that we should pack an extra set of clothes because the accident a student once had, she had terrified me. And probably not for the reason you're thinking about.

I wasn't afraid of slipping into a shallow bank. Or a deep bank for that matter. Mom has made sure that Xochitl and I have been taking swimming lessons ever since we turned five years old. Now

that I'm in fifth grade, there aren't any more classes to take. I've passed all the classes the pool offers.

No, it wasn't the fear of falling into water and drowning. What terrified me, was a fact, that for some reason, I had *never* considered. Something *super* important. We are going to be staying *over-night*! And not just *one* night. Not even *two* nights. But *three, whole, nights*! How had I *never* realized that before!

"What's so terrifying about that?" Marcus asked.

"What's so *terrifying*? How about the fact that I've *never* gone more than *two* nights without wetting my disposable underwear!" I said, holding up two fingers on my right hand.

"Is *that* it?" he asked, calmly.

I felt like repeating his question back at him again, but instead, I spun the wheel to take my turn first.

"Nice spin," he said, as I moved my piece. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm kind of scared, too."

"What're we going to do?" I asked, as he spun the same number as I did.

"Not sure what I *can* do," he answered, as he moved his piece next to mine.

"What do you mean?" I asked, spinning again.

"My parents have already paid for me to go," he said, as I took another turn. "And it's too late for a refund."

“Yeah. There’s no *way* my mom would let me drop out,” I said, as I passed by college and chose a career. “She worked extra hours at work to make sure that I could go, and someone sponsored the other half that my dad was supposed to pay before his hours at work were reduced.”

“Mr. Anderson told our class not to worry about certain things, *including* wetting the bed,” Marcus said, as he spun the wheel and graduated college. “He told us that the cabin leaders are good at what they do. Including keeping secrets.”

“I don’t follow,” I said, spinning again.

“He said that if you wet the bed, they have a special code to notify the staff. That way, while you’re eating breakfast and doing activities, they come in and take your sleeping bag and clothes to be cleaned, and put them back before anyone finds out,” he explained, as I moved my piece, just one spot shy of getting married.

“But what about our over*night* protection?” I asked, as he spun and chose a career. “Do we take that with us? Do we leave it at home?”

“If you don’t trust the cabin leaders, just take them,” he answered, as I moved my piece one space forward without spinning. It didn’t matter what number I spun. It was going to stop me at the ‘get married’ space anyway.

“It’s not that I don’t trust the cabin leaders. It’s guys in our *grade* I don’t trust,” I shared.

“Don’t *we* get to choose the people in our cabin?” Marcus asked, taking his turn.

“That’s what Mrs. Whiston said,” I answered, landing on a space that gave me a kid.

“So, why don’t we just choose the guys in the T.J. League?” he asked, still not landing on the ‘get married’ space.

“Telling *you* is one thing. Telling *all* the guys is another,” I explained, *not* taking my turn. “What if they *don’t* have the same problem?”

“So,” was his response.

“So? *So*? So, the only reason I told *you*, is because *you* told me *first*!” I admitted.

“I can understand that,” he said, as we both leaned back, leaving the game alone for the time being. “Either way, we *both* have a choice to make.”

“To *bring*? Or *not* to bring? That is the question,” I posed.

“In*deed*.”

9 Help Me, Please!

We never did finish our game of Life. Instead, we started going over everything we were about to do for our sleepover, since we *just* started planning it two days ago. You know, after that unexpected conversation while washing our hands for breakfast.

You see, Sunday is Marcus' birthday. But since his family goes to church on Sundays, Marcus asked if he could celebrate it on Saturday. His parents said they didn't have a problem with that.

I suggested we have a sleepover. You know, just me and him. Best friends. Staying up *all* night. You see, neither of us have ever hosted or been to a sleepover before. Mainly because of our overnight problem. We were too embarrassed. So, we want this to be the *best* sleepover that anyone has *ever* been to! *But,* it was as we took a break from our game and discussed the details, that Marcus informed me that *other* people would be attending the sleepover. And not just one or two, but *four*! Why hadn't he told me this before?

"You were 'sick'. Plus, it was a last second thing!" Marcus said, trying to calm me down. It's not working.

"But Marcus! We planned this sleepover *specially,* for us!" I pointed out.

"It won't be that bad. I promise!" he said, trying to calm me. Again, not working.

"How can you say that? You don't know what's going to happen. There's no way you can!" I said, standing up and pacing the walkway.

"Relax, T.J. You just have to trust me," he said, standing up with me.

"It's not *you* I don't trust. It's these new *people* I don't trust," I explained.

"They're good guys. Really, they are," Marcus said, trying to get me to stop pacing. Do you think it worked? Nope!

“But it was just supposed to be us!” I exclaimed, as I stopped pacing to look him in the eye.

“I know. I know. And I’m sorry, T.J., *really*, I am,” he apologized. “But everything will be okay.”

“You can’t *know* that, Marcus. You just *can’t*,” I said, pacing again.

Marcus stayed silent as I paced back and forth, trying to find a way to make this better, I guess. But the more I think about it, the worse it becomes. For every *good* scenario I think up, at least three *bad* scenarios pop into my head. I just *can’t* see how this change could be a good one.

As I continued to pace, and Marcus continued to think, Daniel called from Marcus’ bedroom window.

“Dad just got home and said that since we’re eating out tonight that we’re leaving in fifteen minutes,” he relayed.

“Okay. Let me just tell my mom. I’ll be over right now,” I called back, as Marcus and I packed up my board game. Once we finished, I ran back to my house.

I immediately put my shoes on, then grabbed a sweater and quickly packed my overnight bag. I hurried down the hallway and down the stairs into the kitchen where I could smell macaroni and cheese cooking. Mom was emptying a can of corn into a pot on the stove as I entered the kitchen.

“Daniel just said that since we’re going out to eat tonight that they’re leaving in fifteen minutes,” I said, hurriedly. “May I go over, now?”

“Did you finish your homework?” mom asked, putting the empty can into the recycling box.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Any papers I need to sign?” she asked, stirring the corn.

“Nope,” I said, getting a little irritated since I was kind of in a hurry.

“Do you have a sweater?” she asked, opening the oven to check on some dinner rolls.

“Yes,” I said, slowly walking backward towards the back door.

“And a change of clothes?” she continued to interrogate.

“Yup!” I answered, placing my hand on the doorknob.

“Okay,” she finished, as she closed the oven and turned around. “Hey, no kiss goodbye?”

I hustled toward her, just wanting to get to Marcus’ house before they left me behind. Mom bent forward, waiting for her kiss. I gave her a quick peck and rushed to the back door.

“No running in the house!” mom shouted, as I closed the back door and ran to the other side of my back yard. I threw my bag over and jumped the fence with ease and rushed into Marcus’ house.

“I’m here!” I announced.

“T.J.!” Marcus yelled, as he came down the stairs. We did our secret handshake and headed towards the front room.

“So where are we going?” I asked Marcus, plopping down on his living room couch.

“Don’t know. Dad said it was a surprise,” Marcus answered, changing the channel on the television.

We sat there, watching Family Feud, while we waited to leave. Someone had just answered ‘country music’, to the question, ‘what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘American?’’. Everyone was saying ‘good answer,’ as Marcus and I were laughing our heads off. Who listens to country music anymore?

“Into the car, boys,” Marcus’ dad ordered, as he turned off the television.

“Aw, dad,” Marcus said, turning the television back on. “I wanted to see what the survey said.”

“Okay. *You* can stay and find out,” his dad commented, “but *we’re* going to Home Town Buffet.”

“Forget the survey!” Marcus shouted, as he jumped off the couch and ran towards the front door. I stood up slowly and chuckled as I turned off the television and then followed Marcus’ path.

Home Town Buffet is Marcus’ *favorite* place to eat. So much so, that instead of having a birthday party, his parents told him just to make a guest list and they would provide dinner. When Marcus asked

if he could have some more friends over for the sleep over afterward, they approved.

And now I lay here, unable to sleep because I forgot my overnight protection when I hurriedly packed my overnight bag. I had gotten *so* caught up in all the excitement at Home Town Buffet, that I ate *much* more food and gulped down *much* more soda than I had originally planned to. And of *course*, I *also* forgot that Marcus' friends don't know about my overnight problem. I was *supposed* to barely drink anything so I wouldn't have to worry about it. Epic fail.

Of course, to my complete, and unexpected surprise, Marcus had only invited a special group of friends, and didn't tell me about it. Friends from church. I guess he wasn't lying when he said I didn't have to worry. I doubt these guys would make fun of us for our nighttime issue. But it seems that Marcus isn't embarrassed about *his* nighttime problem anymore. I mean, I'm not *either*. At least not with *Marcus*. But there are *other* boys here! *Actually,* now that I think about it, how did he find all these guys so quickly?

When we had gotten back from Home Town Buffet, we spent all of our time in the den, playing games. When it was time to get ready for bed, and we were all getting our sleeping spaces ready, Marcus explained how and *why* he had chosen *these* specific friends to come to our sleepover.

It seems that when I didn't go to church because I was 'sick', Marcus had made a prayer request, for his 'friend' who was having

issues being embarrassed about his ‘overnight problem’. Teacher Jeff had explained that Marcus’ ‘friend’ shouldn’t be embarrassed and added it to their Prayer Request list.

After church, while their parents fellowshipped, some of the boys approached Marcus and shared that *they* had the same issue. It was *then* that Marcus had gotten the idea to invite them to *our* sleepover!

It was actually kind of bizarre. When it came time to change into our pajamas, each boy, including Marcus, pulled out his overnight protection. Seems no two boys used the same exact method.

Joseph had specially padded underwear that looked like *real* underwear. You would never know what they were for unless he told you. He even had special pads that you could insert, for extra protection.

Luke also had special underwear, but his had a wire coming out that attached to a small plastic box. He had to turn the box on and then put it in a small pouch in his underwear. He explained that an alarm would go off and wake him up if it registered even the *smallest* drop of liquid.

Jonathen had a pair of wind breaker pants that had protection inside but were also waterproof. Talk about *no one* ever finding out! But he still wore special underwear sort of like Joseph’s, just in case.

Kevin had what he said was a new kind of medicine that helped his body wake him up when he had to go. So, he didn't need any special underwear, but he still had a pair of disposable underwear because he knew he would be staying up all night, so he was going to be *extra* tired.

Of course, Marcus had his normal UnderJams. Except the ones he showed us had a new design. I'm not sure where he got them, but they had Captain America's logo on the front. I remember him saying something about a new 'design your own drawers' option online. All you had to do was send a picture for them to print on the front, and they would ship them straight to your house! I guess I shouldn't be surprised about what he chose for his design.

And what did *I* have? Nothing. So, here I am. Lying awake at two o'clock in the morning. Staring at the ceiling. Which I can actually see, by the way. There's enough moonlight coming from outside that it's lighting the room up with a blueish hue. Oh, *why* did I have to drink so much? And *why* don't I have to go to the bathroom yet? I *tried* going before Marcus' mom said, 'lights out', but as hard as I tried, I just *couldn't* go. If I could just *go*, I wouldn't be as worried.

"T.J.?" Marcus whispered, half asleep, "are you awake?"

"Yeah," I answered, "can't sleep."

"Bad dream?" he asked.

"Nah. Just can't sleep," I answered.

“T.J.,” Marcus said, with a hint of ‘you’re hiding something from me,’ in his voice, “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, “I just can’t seem to fall asleep.” Marcus wasn’t falling for it. He raised himself up onto his elbow and rested his head on his hand.

“T.J.,” he repeated, in a sing-song voice.

“Okay. Okay,” I said, knowing he would invoke the ‘friends don’t tell friends lies’ pact we had made, after he shared his secret with me. “I was having so much fun at Home Town Buffet that I forgot I wasn’t supposed to drink a lot,” I began, “but I didn’t know that you were only inviting guys like *us* to the party!”

Marcus just lay there smiling.

“That *and* I forgot my overnight ‘just in case’ protection. *So*, I’ve been keeping myself awake by pinching myself every time I feel myself falling asleep. That way I don’t have an accident,” I explained.

Marcus put his free hand over his mouth to keep his laughter as silent as possible, so he wouldn’t wake anyone. How can he be laughing?

10 Just Between Us

Marcus removed his blanket and stood to his feet. Just then Joseph shifted in his sleep and mumbled something about never getting to be prince charming. Marcus and I muffled our laughter because that is kind of out of the ordinary. Joseph is a tough, rough, ‘let’s do something crazy’, kind of guy. Guess everyone has a part of their life they don’t share with others.

Marcus proceeded to walk toward his staircase and stopped at the bottom step. He turned around and gave me a ‘are you coming or not’ look. I hurriedly got to my feet and followed him as he headed upstairs. It was so quiet in the house that it was almost scary.

Marcus went into his room and I followed. Not knowing what Marcus had planned, I sat on his bed and patiently waited as he shuffled through his underwear drawer like he was looking for a hidden compartment. Believe it or not, that’s *exactly* what he was looking for.

The only thing I wouldn’t help with, when Marcus was cleaning his room, or when his mother put freshly folded clothes on his bed, was underwear. And because of that, I never knew that he had a board at the back of the drawer to hide a stash of his overnight protection. Guess there’s things even *he* wanted to keep secret.

Marcus turned around with a pair of Pull-Ups in his hand. They had Buzz Lightyear and Woody prints on the front. He walked over and handed them to me with a ‘now go to sleep’ look on his face.

“You still *fit* in these?” I whispered.

“Does it *look* like I still fit in those?” Marcus answered my question with another question. “I just happen to keep a few extra pairs because Woody is my favorite Disney character.”

I guess that makes sense. With that said, he turned around and headed back to his dresser, closed his underwear drawer and left me alone in his room.

If you're wondering how in the world these Pull-Ups are going to fit *me* if they don't fit *Marcus*, you have to remember something. I'm *tiny*! Second to third *grade* tiny. Marcus was probably this size back when *he* was in the second or third grade.

Now, with that settled, I'm sitting here, staring at Buzz Lightyear and Woody, deciding whether or not to put them on. In the *bathroom*, of course! I mean, it just feels kind of weird, since they don't belong to me. You get it, right? Shirts, pants and pajamas are one thing, but *this* is totally different.

It was as I sat, trying to decide what I should do, that I *finally* got that tingling sensation in my abdomen. I got up and headed *straight* to the bathroom. I think I'm going to talk to my parents about getting some of the underwear that Joseph has.

◆ ◆ ◆

I woke up dry the next morning to the smell of pancakes, eggs and bacon. At least I *think* they're pancakes. I *had* been wrong the *last* time I thought they were pancakes.

Apparently, I wasn't the last one to wake up. Marcus, Jonathen, Luke and Kevin were drawing on Joseph's face when Marcus's mom came in to tell us to wash up for breakfast. She wasn't too happy when she saw Marcus and the guys using some of her makeup to decorate Joseph's face. She took away her makeup and woke him up, but *not* before Kevin was able to snap a picture with his tablet. You

can imagine how happy, or should I say *unhappy*, Joseph was when he found out he looked like a badly drawn picture of Queen Amidala from Star Wars.

◆ ◆ ◆

After breakfast, we spent most of the morning playing video games. Daniel said he was the best at Super Smash Brothers and was proving his point by beating us one by one. Over and over. That is until Marcus started complaining to his mother that this was supposed to be *his* sleepover and that Daniel was ruining our fun.

Daniel seemed a little upset when his mother asked him to help her with the laundry. Actually, he almost took the game with him, since it *was* his game. Thankfully, his mother told him he had to share, since it was *her* television and since *she* was the one who paid the electric bill.

With Daniel gone, we decided to have a tournament to see who was the best *fifth* grader at Super Smash Brothers. There were some pretty close matches, but in the end, it was down to Marcus and me when his dad told all of us to get dressed so we could go somewhere. I was a bit confused because I had *no* idea we were going anywhere else.

As Marcus, the guys and I, walked toward the car, Daniel was already inside. When Marcus opened the door and asked Daniel to scoot over, he just sat there, staring ahead with his arms crossed. I

guess he's still a bit angry we kind of kicked him out of our fun. Since Daniel didn't want to move over, Marcus and the rest of us walked around to the other side of the car and got in. Luckily, Marcus and Daniel are in sports, so they have a big SUV that fits everyone!

"So, your mom and I decided that since this is a *special* occasion, we should have another special meal together," Marcus' dad explained. "Now, I thought Home Town Buffet would be a good idea, but if I recall, we already had that for dinner *last* night."

"I want Home Town Buffet!" Marcus exclaimed.

"I thought you might," his dad continued, "but then Mom reminded me of a place you'll *all* enjoy. And I agreed that it would be better."

"Where? Where?" Marcus asked, excitedly.

I have to admit. I'm curious, too. Daniel must be interested too, because he's finally broken his stare away from us and is looking at his dad to see what he's going to say next.

"You know, now that you ask, I can't remember the name of it," his dad said, with a smirk on his face, looking *directly* at Marcus through the rearview mirror.

"Dad!" Marcus shouted.

"Marcus," his mom said, in a 'calm down' voice. Marcus slumped in his seat and folded his arms. He is *definitely* not enjoying this.

We drove in silence on the freeway for about fifteen minutes, anxious with delight, until I began to realize where we were going. We're going to Golf Land! I haven't been miniature golfing since the last time Marcus' church group had an excursion that allowed him to invite family and friends.

For those of you who don't know, not only does Golf Land have miniature golf, they also have an arcade, bumper cars, bumper *boats*, go karts, laser tag, and the *best* nachos around. I know, you're probably thinking to yourself, 'nachos are nachos', but trust me, *these* nachos are better than any nachos you've *ever* had.

First of all, they're 'build your own' nachos. Secondly, they have different color cheeses to choose from. My favorite is green because it looks like slime. And for toppings, they boast five different kinds of shredded cheese, guacamole, pico de gallo, four different types of salsa, four different types of meat, including bacon bits, American *and* Mexican sour cream, three different types of beans, including chili beans, and even different types of nacho chips. Plain tortilla chips, salted, cheese flavored, barbeque flavored, sour cream and onion, even salt and vinegar. I *bet* your mouth is watering by now!

First, we had lunch, then we all went to play golf. Marcus and his friends versus Daniel, his mom and his dad. It *was* supposed to be kids versus adults, but Daniel didn't want to be on our team. He

vowed to help his parents beat us for not letting him play with us earlier.

Marcus' mom pointed out that it would be difficult to keep score since the teams were uneven. Then, Marcus' dad came up with a great idea. Instead of counting *everyone's* score, we would only count the person that had the *lowest* score. Everyone agreed it was a great idea.

At first, *we* were winning, but then Daniel kept making all of these *luck* shots. I have *no* idea how he was doing it, but some of those shots were impossible! When it came down to hole eighteen, we were tied. This was it. The *last* hole. Whoever had the lowest score would win. At least that's what we *thought*. Marcus' dad announced that on *this* hole, we would add the lowest score *and* the highest score. To make it more interesting.

Since it was Marcus' birthday, he went first. He hit his ball and missed the middle slot that guaranteed your ball would be near the hole. Daniel was next. He made it in the middle, no problem. So, did everyone else. Everyone else except for Marcus' mom, that is. *I* think she missed on purpose. Daniel sunk his ball in the hole on his next shot. So, did everyone else. That left it down to Marcus and his mom.

Every time Marcus would miss, so would his mom. Like I said before, I think she missed on purpose. They kept missing for the next five shots. It was his mom's turn when his dad declared it was a tie. Daniel was *not* happy, but the guys and I understood what his mom

was doing, and we were okay with it. With that finally over, we handed in our clubs, since hole eighteen keeps the ball after you make it, and headed back to the truck.

"Same spots!" Daniel declared, and once again refused to move over.

On the way home, I could feel sleep coming on. *Hard*. I'm not surprised, though. I mean, I *had* gone to sleep after *two o'clock* in the morning! Normally, I would be too embarrassed to sleep in front of all the guys, but when I heard Joseph softly announce that *he* wanted to be prince, I realized that everyone else had *already* fallen asleep. Even Marcus. I shifted my body, adjusted my seat belt, and rested my head on Marcus' shoulder.

◆ ◆ ◆

We were all awakened when Marcus' dad announced that we had arrived at Kevin's house. He started climbing over the middle seat to get out of the truck when Marcus told him to wait.

"What for?" Jonathen asked.

"Before anyone leaves, we have to make a deal," Marcus announced.

"What *kind* of a deal?" Luke asked.

"The kind that *nobody* can break," Marcus said, in a serious voice.

“Just tell us already,” Kevin ordered, “my mom is waiting for me at the front door.”

“Okay. It’s like this. I invited all of you to my sleepover for *one* reason. And I *think* you all know what that reason is,” Marcus said.

“Yeah.”

“I know why.”

“Pretty much.”

“Just get on with it already.”

“Okay. Okay. The deal is, we keep it *just* between us,” he declared, making eye contact with all of us, one by one. “*Nobody* tells *anyone* else. No matter *how* angry we might get with each other. Our lips stay sealed. Just. Between. Us. Deal?”

“Deal,” everyone said, in unison.

“Good.”

ELEVEN

It's My Fault

After Marcus' dad finished dropping everyone off at home, we went back to his house for a smaller family celebration.

It was weird. Since it was a last-minute sleep over for all his friends from church, his mom told their moms not to bring any presents. It was the first birthday party I had ever gone to where we didn't open presents or have cake and ice cream!

"Okay, boys, go wash up so we can sing happy birthday and have some cake and ice cream," Marcus' mom said, as we entered his

house.

“Can T.J.’s mom and dad and sister come?” Marcus asked his dad.

“If that’s what you want,” his dad said, looking at his mom, who nodded her head and shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ll go call them,” Marcus said, hurrying to the back door. I stayed with Daniel and washed my hands. I was in no hurry to see Xochitl. Mom and Dad maybe. *Not* Xochitl. It took a few minutes for Marcus to return, but Xochitl was right behind him, of course. Mom and dad came through the back door shortly after.

Now, I *may* have forgotten to mention this, but after I sprained my ankle awhile back, jumping our backyard fence, we installed a gate. Luckily, dad has had some extra time lately.

After shaking hands and exchanging hugs, Mom and dad followed Marcus’ mom and dad into the dining room, where Marcus, Daniel, Xochitl and I were waiting around the table.

Marcus’ dad closed the curtains while his mom put the candles on his cake. Then we all stood around the table while Marcus sat in front of his cake as we waited for his dad to light the candles.

“Dad, I would like to say something,” Marcus said, in the almost complete darkness, before his dad could light his candles.

“Okay,” his dad responded, backing away from the cake.

“I just want to say that it was about a year ago that my dad found out that his job would be moving. A year ago, that I found out

that I would have to leave *everything* I *ever* knew. And it was about a year ago that I made a wish before blowing out my birthday candles. A wish, I'm glad to say, didn't come true," Marcus said, with a somber voice.

"What?" I asked, confused. Usually, we're happy when our wish *does* come true.

"Let's just say that at first, I wasn't too happy about moving away from our old neighborhood and my old school," Marcus said, looking intently at his cake, "but I'm glad that we did."

He then looked at his mom and his dad and finally at Daniel.

"I was happy at our old home. Even though Daniel and I were sharing a room and the people living above us would be loud sometimes, we were happy. My old teacher would give us a piece of candy if we turned in our homework on time. The park had a spray pool you could play in when it was hot outside. And our house was close enough to the coffee shop to get free Wi-Fi.

"When we moved here, I didn't know if there would be any kids my age who lived nearby. I didn't know if my teacher would be nice. And I didn't know if I would make any friends at school like the ones I already had.

"Then, I was challenged to a race," Marcus continued.

"Hey! You challenged *me*!" I corrected.

"Either way, that race was the best thing to ever happen to me. Now, I have my own room. There are *plenty* of kids around. And I've

made the bestest friend anyone could *ever* ask for," Marcus said, as he stood up and gave me a hug, which I gladly returned.

When he sat back down, Marcus' dad lit the candles on his cake, and we all sang happy birthday. I'm not sure what he wished for this time, but I'm glad that his last wish *didn't* come true.

◆ ◆ ◆

When we got to school on Monday, as usual, Justin was, how should I put this, LOUD!

"How *could* you!" he shouted at me, before I even made it to the breakfast line.

"How could I *what*?" I asked, *completely* confused.

"Don't act dumb with me!" he said.

"I have *no* idea what you're talking about!" I said, moving him out of the way so I could get my breakfast.

"Dude! They *tagged* you!" he continued to shout, shoving his phone in my face.

It was a picture of me at Marcus' sleepover. We were posing behind Joseph in his Queen Amidala makeover. Actually, there were more. Justin took the next few seconds, to swipe through a handful of pictures he had taken screen shots of.

Now, *I* don't have a phone yet, so I have *no* idea what app these pictures were posted on. Who am I kidding? If you're a kid, or a

parent who knows *anything* about social media, you know that you don't have to own a phone to have social media.

Mom and dad said I can't have a social media account yet, but *all* my friends have one. Except for Marcus of course. And I didn't *mean* to disobey my parents, but at Marcus' sleepover, one of his friends said that since he couldn't *text* me the pictures, he had set up an account for me so he could tag me in them. And *technically*, I haven't downloaded the app on my tablet. Yet.

"Are you going to tell me you have *no* idea about *these*?" Justin asked, angrily pulling his phone away from my face.

"Can you just let me get some breakfast first?" I asked, joining the back of the line.

"Fine," he answered, "but don't think this is over, yet!"

Normally, I would eat *outside* with the guys, at our table, but I think I'll eat *inside* today. Seems safer for some reason.

"T.J., what are you doing in here?" Xochitl asked, as I sat at the table next to the table that she was sitting at.

"What? I can eat inside if I want to," I responded, opening my cereal bowl.

"But you *never* eat inside," she pointed out.

"So, what! I just feel like eating inside today," I said, pouring milk into my cereal.

Luckily, you can only come into the cafeteria if you're going to eat breakfast or add money to your account, so Justin couldn't come

inside to continue berating me. But wait! What if he's out there berating Marcus? Oh, great. Well, guess I'm going to have to answer to Justin sooner or later. Actually, I'm sure that the rest of the T.J. League have seen the pictures, too.

First, Marcus saved me from that bully. Then, he saved me with Woody and Buzz Lightyear at his sleepover. *And* he called me the bestest friend *anyone* could ask for. Sigh. Guess I have no choice. I just hope I can make it outside without spilling my cereal.

As I walked towards the exit, something unexpected happened. The fire alarm started blaring. Everyone in the cafeteria started screaming, upsetting the supervision aide and cafeteria manager.

We've never had a fire drill *before* school has started, but I guess all the ones we've had *during* school have paid off. *Everyone* just headed to their normal meeting spots, including the teachers. The only person who seems panicked is the custodian. *She* ran across the blacktop, toward the three hundred wing.

Just as she reached one of the side rooms, Principal Martinez's voice boomed over the outside speakers, while the alarm continued to ring.

"Staff and students. Thank you for your quick and safe response to the fire alarm. Fortunately, it's a false alarm and we can set it to mute, so everyone is safe. *Unfortunately*, we're having technical difficulties shutting it off, so we won't hear the school bell ring in a

few minutes. I will make an announcement when it is time to head to class, so no one misses out on learning."

Aw, man! And I've already thrown away my breakfast!

"T.J.!" came a voice from behind me. "T.J., we've got to hide!"

"Marcus? Why do we have to hide?" I asked.

"The whole T.J. League is after us!" he declared, grabbing my wrist and wrenching me towards the four hundred wing.

"After us? Why?" I asked, still thinking about the breakfast I had just missed out on.

"The sleepover. Duh!" he shouted, as we hurried across the blacktop.

"There they are!" Sammy cried, blocking our path to the four hundred wing bathroom.

"Don't let 'em get away!" Justin shouted, coming from our left.

"I've got this side!" Paul yelled from our right.

"They won't escape!" Erick hollered, as we turned around to make our escape.

"They've got us surrounded!" Marcus yelled.

"Um, I think you're forgetting that we're the two fastest people at this school," I reminded Marcus. "If we wanted to, we could split up and they would *never* catch us!"

"You're right!" he said, excitedly.

"Then let's go!" I exclaimed.

“But then we’ll have to run again at recess. And lunch recess. And after school. And tomorrow. And—.”

“Okay. Okay. I get it!” I said, covering his mouth before he could continue.

“We might as well face them now,” he said, removing my hand from his face.

“If you say so,” I resigned.

“We got you!” Justin shouted, as the T.J. League encircled us.

“*Actually*, we let you catch us,” I pointed out.

“Whatever,” Erick said.

“So, what do you guys have to say for yourselves?” Paul said.

“Don’t get mad at Marcus,” I said. “It’s all my fault.”

“What do you mean?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah, what do you mean?” Marcus asked, just as confused as Sammy.

12 The Winner Is!

I know all the guys, and Sammy, were in a hurry to find out why it was *my* fault, but I promised to tell them *why* during lunch recess, *if* they didn't bother Marcus or me until then. They didn't look very happy, but they all agreed to my terms anyway. And that made *me* happy. Why? Because I have *no* idea what I'm going to tell them. Yet.

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“After calculating everyone’s votes, we have a winner for the best story written, for our creative writing assignment,” Mrs. Whiston announced, as we all took our seats. “And it seems like we have a *landslide* decision from *both* classes!”

Everyone in the class started whispering to each other, trying to guess whose story had won the contest. Justin looked at me, as if I knew the answer, but I have *no* idea who it is. Carissa’s story *was* pretty good. And I didn’t vote for myself because I couldn’t!

“But!” Mrs. Whiston said loudly, trying to regain our attention, “we won’t be announcing our winner until *just* before lunch.”

Everyone started groaning, except for Jefferson, who was too busy changing the date on the board since Jessica had forgotten to. Ever since Mrs. Whiston and Mr. Anderson announced that the prize for the winner was a special lunch with Principal Martinez, a rumor had been going around, that he had a personal chef that cooked him *whatever* he wanted for lunch. No matter *how* special or exotic.

“Until then, we’ll be getting together with Mr. Anderson’s class to figure out cabin groups.”

Groans quickly turned to cheers, except for Jefferson, again. He’s too busy organizing his pencil box to join in our celebration. The only thing I’ve ever seen him celebrate are perfect scores on a test or when Mrs. Whiston announces a project or essay.

“Okay. Okay. Bring it back down,” Mrs. Whiston ordered. “Before you all start making plans, please keep in mind that Mr.

Anderson and I have to approve your groups before we send them to the camp directors."

"Why?" some people asked.

"Because we know you guys," she answered, "and although we love you—."

"'We don't trust you as much as we love you'," we all said together, finishing a saying she's been telling us since kindergarten.

"Okay, let's get attendance done quickly, so we can meet Mr. Anderson's class at the play structure," Mrs. Whiston said.

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"If you can hear me, clap once," Mr. Anderson instructed. Most people clapped. "If you can hear me, clap twice." More people clapped after his second instruction.

"Boys and girls, we are going to give you a few minutes to get together and create groups of no more than six people," Mrs. Whiston explained. "Once you have your group, please send a representative to grab a pencil and a clip board so you can write your names down on a cabin sheet."

"Please remember," Mr. Anderson started, "*all* groups must be approved by Mrs. Whiston or myself." Some students groaned while others didn't care. "If you do not have a group, please come to us and we will help you find one."

“Any questions?” Mrs. Whiston asked. Nobody raised their hand.

“Okay. Let’s go,” Mr. Anderson said, motioning with his hands.

The T.J. League, minus Sammy, made a bee line for each other. I’m pretty sure that it was a no-brainer to our teachers that we would all be together for our cabin group.

“T.J., you might as well go and get the clipboard,” Erick said, clapping me on the back.

“And don’t think we forgot about what you said earlier!” Justin called, as I walked toward Mrs. Whiston.

“Well, that was quick,” Mr. Anderson commented, as I approached him for a clipboard.

“I’m not surprised,” Mrs. Whiston said.

“Make sure you write the first *and* last name of everyone in your group,” Mr. Anderson instructed.

“I will,” I said.

“So, who’s going to do the writing?” Paul asked. “My handwriting is too sloppy.”

“I’ll do it,” Marcus offered.

After writing everyone’s name on our paper, I returned the clipboard to Mrs. Whiston. Before I even made it back to my group, Mr. Anderson blew his whistle because some people had started playing on the play structure.

“This is not recess. If you’d like, we can take minutes *off* your recess,” Mr. Anderson announced, in a loud voice, so that everyone could hear.

People immediately got off the slides and swings, while others rushed off the jungle gym and bridge.

“If you have already set up your group and have turned in your cabin group sheet, please sit in a circle with your cabin mates,” Mrs. Whiston instructed.

“What are we supposed to do?” Alysia asked.

“You can begin discussing some of the things you are looking forward to doing at camp,” she answered.

“All right, T.J.,” Justin started.

“Uh uh,” I interrupted.

“Aw, c’mon!” Paul said.

“I told you. If anyone bothers us before lunch—.”

“But—,” Erick started.

“Buh, buh, buh!” I interrupted, holding my finger up to his lips. “One more time and I won’t tell you my deepest, darkest secret!”

Everyone, except for Marcus, crossed their arms and gave me a ‘how dare you’ look. I shrugged my shoulders, shook my head and gave them an ‘I already told you’ look.

To keep themselves from asking about the pictures, Erick, Justin, Paul and Sammy are keeping their distance from Marcus and

me during recess. At least I *think* that's why they're not with us. That *better* be the reason they're staying away from us.

"You're not going to break your promise? You're not going to tell them are you!" Marcus asked, as we sat, *not* swinging on the swings.

"Of course not!" I answered.

"So, what are you planning on telling them?" he asked.

"My biggest, darkest secret," I said, confidently.

"You mean that there's something so big and dark that you haven't even told me yet?" Marcus asked. "What happened to 'best friends don't keep secrets'?"

"They don't," I said.

"*Then*," he said, with a 'are you going to tell me or what?' look on his face.

"You already know," I said, in a 'duh, do you really think I'd break a promise' voice, as I stood up from my swing and started walking towards the Buddy Bench.

"T.J.!" Marcus called, hurrying to catch up with me. I didn't stop to wait. I just kept walking until I reached the Buddy Bench. After sitting down, Marcus joined me, sitting *right* beside me.

"I'm confused," he said, turning to face me.

"I'm not," I said, scanning the blacktop. "I spy with my little eye—."

“You’re not seriously trying to change the subject, are you?” Marcus asked, with a ‘c’mon dude’ voice.

“Milk shakes,” I said, *still* scanning the blacktop.

“‘Milk shakes?’”

“‘Milk shakes’,” I repeated.

For those of you who don’t know. Marcus and I have a secret language that we use sometimes. We usually use it when we don’t want the people around us to know what we’re talking about. Usually kids we don’t know, our teachers or our parents. We don’t do it be mischievous. We usually do it just to make sure that we’re on the same page.

‘Milk shakes’ means ‘trust me.’ And not just *any* kind of trust. The highest kind of trust there is. The kind of trust that you don’t second guess. The kind of trust that means I’m *one hundred* percent sure. The kind of trust that is unbreakable.

“Okay, T.J. I’m trusting you,” Marcus said, facing forward.

“I spy with my little eye—.”

◆ ◆ ◆

When we came in from recess, we started working on our Amplify the Artist project. Amplify the Artist is a program where someone comes to our school and teaches us about a famous artist from history. You know, about their childhood, about how they became an artist, and why they are important to art history. Then, a

few days later, the people come into our classroom and teach us how to make art like the artist did. It's pretty cool. I may not be any good at sports, but I *do* enjoy art.

This month's artist is Van Goh, so we're doing the Starry Night painting. Well, we don't *have* to do Starry Night. We can do something else, as long as it's in the same *style* as the Starry Night. So, of course, I'm doing Batman! Well, not *all* of Batman. Just his logo. When the commissioner turns on the Bat Signal. You know, the way it looks when it's coming from the top of the Gotham City Police Department building? Like that. I've actually already done a sketch of what I want it to look like. All I have to do is recreate it using the paints they're supplying for us.

As we were working on our artwork, the phone rang.

"This is Mrs. Whiston. Yes. They're in the middle of their Amplify the Artist project. Yes, I'm sure they can finish it later. Okay. Will do. Bye," Mrs. Whiston said, as we all stared at her, wondering who she was talking to and what she was talking about. Well, everyone except Jefferson, of course. He's too focused on trying to make his project as perfect as he can.

"That was Principal Martinez. Seems it's time to announce the winner of our creative writing assignment," she announced. "The winner is…"

13 That Was It?

"T.J.!" Mrs. Whiston said, with a big smile on her face.

"What?"

"Huh!"

"I knew it!"

The whole class began to cheer so loudly that the teacher next door opened the door connecting our classrooms to see what was going on.

“Sorry,” Mrs. Whiston apologized. “The class just found out who won a special lunch with Mr. Martinez for their creative writing story.”

“Who won?” she asked.

“T.J.!” everyone shouted. Everyone except for Jefferson. Am I surprised? Nope.

“Congratulations, T.J.!” she exclaimed.

“Thanks, ma’am,” I said, as people came and patted me on my back.

“What about our deal?” Justin whispered, into my right ear.

That’s a good question. I didn’t know that *my* story would be voted the best when I made my deal with the T.J. League. Then again, I *could* use this as a way to get out of telling the guys. Nah. It won’t work. I’ll still have to tell them in the end. I think I’m going to have to make a deal with Principal Martinez so that I can keep my promise.

“Go ahead, T.J.,” Mrs. Whiston instructed, “you can finish your project another time.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, pushing in my chair.

As I walked to the office, I wondered what I was going to tell Principal Martinez. I mean, I really *was* excited to find out if he had a personal chef that would cook him *anything* he wanted. But was it worth the guys being upset with me? It’s bad enough they’re angry that they weren’t invited to the sleepover. Sorry Principal Martinez, we’re *definitely* going to have to reschedule our lunch.

“T.J.!” Mr. Ellis greeted, as I entered the office. “I heard the news. Congratulations!”

“Thank you, Mr. Ellis,” I said, shaking his outstretched hand.

“Go on into Mr. Martinez’s office,” he instructed.

I walked past the front desk and obliged Mrs. Kelley with a high five as she held up her hand.

“T.J.!” Principal Martinez said, echoing Mr. Ellis. “Congratulations! I read your story and I must agree with your peers. It was frightening but fantastic!”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, excited, but a bit embarrassed.

“Go ahead and take a seat,” he said, gesturing to a chair.

“Before we get started, there’s something I have to say,” I told principal Martinez.

“Okay,” he said, leaning against his desk, while sounding concerned.

“I kind of promised the T.J. League that I would tell them something important at lunchtime, so I was wondering if we could reschedule our special lunch?” I said, honestly, while looking down.

Principal Martinez didn’t say anything for a few seconds, so I looked up to see what he was doing. He just sat there, smiling at me.

“T.J., you *never* cease to renew my confidence in humanity,” he commented.

“What?” I said, confused as to what he meant by ‘renew my confidence in humanity’.

“I don’t know how that heart stays inside of your chest, T.J. I truly don’t. I just know that the world needs a lot more T.J.’s,” he said.

Now, I *still* don’t know what he means, but he also still hasn’t answered my first question.

“So, does that mean we can reschedule?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he answered. “In fact, I’m going to let you choose what we’re going to eat.”

“Huh?” I said.

“*You* tell me what you want to eat, and *I’ll* make sure it’s ready when you arrive,” he explained.

“So, you *do* have your own private chef!” I said, excitedly, standing up from my chair.

“What?” Principal Martinez said, with a confused smile on his face.

“I heard that you have your own private chef that cooks you whatever you want. No matter *how* exotic!” I exclaimed.

Principal Martinez started chuckling. Then he started laughing. Then he started crying. From laughter. I just stood there. Completely confused.

“I’ve heard some pretty outlandish rumors while being the principal of this school, but this one takes the cake,” he said, between breaths and quiet laughter.

“So, you *don’t* have your own personal chef?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no, I don’t, but let’s just keep that between us. I kind of like that one,” he said, wiping away one last laughter tear.

“Okay, I will,” I agreed.

“So, any ideas on what you would like to eat?” he asked, taking a seat, then grabbing a notepad and pen.

“Does it have to be something that the cafeteria can make, or can it be something like fast food,” I asked.

“Whichever you prefer,” was his response.

Whichever I prefer? Whichever I prefer. Cafeteria or fast food. I stroked my chin while thinking of the perfect meal for our special lunch. As I scanned the room, slowly walking in a circle, the answer popped into my head.

“I know what I want!”

◆ ◆ ◆

“I thought you were supposed to be having your special lunch with Principal Martinez,” Erick said, as we ate our cafeteria lunch.

“Yeah. Does he *really* have his own personal chef!” Paul asked.

“You guys *seriously* believe that?” Sammy asked.

“What? It could be true!” Paul said, confidently.

“There’s *no way* that there’s money in the budget for a personal chef for *anyone* at this school,” Sammy said, confidently.

I wasn’t sure if she was right about the whole budget thing, but I wasn’t one to doubt her intelligence. At least not that often. Plus, it

kept me from having to answer the question.

“Personal chef or not, don’t think we’ve forgotten about our deal,” Justin said, getting straight to the point as usual.

Marcus gave me a look of terror which surprised me because he isn’t easily frightened. I mouthed the words ‘milk shakes’ to try and help calm his nerves. He took a deep breath and continued eating his fries.

“Don’t worry,” I said, looking Justin straight in the eyes, “why do you think I’m here instead of with Principal Martinez?”

“What?” Erick asked.

“Yeah,” I said, shifting my gaze to Erick. “I explained to Principal Martinez that I had made a deal with you guys and he let me reschedule our lunch.”

“You really did that?” Sammy asked. “For us?”

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t keep my promises?” I asked, looking each T.J. League member directly in the eyes.

“So, are you going to tell us or not?” Justin asked, crossing his arms.

“All in due time, Justin. All in due time,” I said, taking a bite of my black bean veggie burger.

I can honestly say that I *never* thought that I would like *anything* vegetarian. But these new black bean veggie burgers, they’re actually pretty good.

◆ ◆ ◆

After we finished our lunch, we headed to the Big Tree. We still aren't allowed to wander the field, and Heroes and Villains has been rotated out of available games to play. Luckily, Frisbees have been rotated in, so we can toss it back in forth to each other on the field, while discussing personal matters, far away from other people's ears.

"So, I know you guys are upset that Marcus didn't invite you to his sleepover," I started, "but it wasn't *meant* to be a big sleepover. It was meant to be just *me*."

"So, how did all of those other kids end up at his house?" Paul asked.

I took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and exhaled slowly. Here goes. I just hope the guys don't make fun of me. Or even worse. I hope they don't disband the T.J. League!

"It's like this—."

I explained how I was afraid of sleeping *three whole nights* at Science Camp. When they asked why, I told them my deepest darkest secret. I told them that even though I'm a *fifth-grade* student, I *still* wet the bed. Nobody said anything at first. Which was terrifying. But the fact that nobody laughed, made it a bit better. Sort of.

"I *still* don't understand how that led to all those people at Marcus' house for a sleepover," Paul said.

I then explained how Marcus had offered a prayer request at church, for his friend at school, who was embarrassed about still wetting the bed. And how some of his church friends had come up to

him after church and explained that I shouldn't be embarrassed because *they* still wet the bed, too.

Oops! I think I just broke our pact!

Then I told them how Marcus *re*-organized the sleepover at the last minute. And how thankful I was that he would take the focus off himself for his most important day of the year. And how because of his selflessness, I now have the courage to not only share my secret with the rest of the T.J. League, but I am now unafraid of going to Science Camp.

Once again, everyone stayed quiet. We just tossed the Frisbee around in silence for a moment or so. Instead of being peaceful, it's actually the most nerve-wracking moment or so of my life! Finally, Justin broke the silence.

"That was it?" he asked.

14 Off We Go!

‘That was it?’ What did he *mean* ‘that was it’? That was the *most difficult* thing that I’ve ever had to do!

If you would have told me *last* week that by *this* week I would be sharing my deepest, darkest secret with my best friend, a group of church friends, and the *entire* T.J. League, I would have told you to check your crystal ball again. I would have called you crazy. I would

have said that it was a secret that I was going to take to the grave. There is *no way* that I *ever* planned to tell *anyone*. No one. Ever.

An unexpected thing happened, though. After Justin said, 'that's it?', Marcus told the guys about *his* nighttime nemesis. He told them how he wears disposable overnight underwear because *he* still wets the bed. *I* had told the guys that I wet the bed, but *Marcus* took it a step further and basically admitted to still wearing diapers. For big kids that is. I couldn't let him go it alone, so I walked over to Marcus, put my arm around his shoulder, and admitted it, too.

Erick, Paul, Justin and Sammy all exchanged blank glances before finally looking back at us. Then an even *stranger* thing happened. Justin walked over and decided to tell us *his* deepest darkest secret. That led to Erick, Paul and Sammy sharing *their* deepest darkest secrets. It seems that Marcus' and my courage has created an air of trust that the T.J. League has never experienced before. A trust you don't second guess. A trust that says, 'I'm *one hundred* percent okay with telling you this because you won't tell anyone else'. A trust that knows that *whatever* your secret is, you won't be made fun of. A trust that says, 'when you're done telling us, we'll *still* be friends'. An *unbreakable* trust.

Justin told us that although he *really* likes basketball, he *loves* water polo. None of us understood how that qualified as a deep, dark, secret. Before continuing on, he took the same kind of deep breath *I* had taken before telling the guys that I still wet the bed.

Justin clarified that just like with every sport, water polo has a specific uniform. I have never seen water polo, so I have *no* idea what he's talking about. He told us that it was the *smallest* uniform of *all* the sports, except for diving. He said that the uniforms for diving and water polo were similar, but they had one thing in common. Speedos.

Sammy was quick to correct him by telling him that Speedos was a brand. She told him that what he meant to say was that he wears a 'swim brief'. When Marcus said that he didn't know what Speedos *or* swim briefs were, Justin explained that they were just like underwear briefs, except they were made for swimming in the pool. Once again Sammy corrected him. She explained that outside of the United States, the most common bathing suit boys wore at pools *and* beaches, were swim briefs.

After telling him that there's *nothing* wrong with his uniform, we asked why we had never been invited to any of his games.

"I was embarrassed. Duh!" was his answer.

After some laughter, Erick said that even though he and Victor had come in second place during the annual dance off, using a hip-hop dance routine, his favorite type of dance is ballet. He then revealed that he's actually been taking ballet classes since he was six years old, after his grandmother took him to see the Nutcracker ballet at Christmas time. He said that he's so good that he actually got a solo in last year's production of the Nutcracker!

Paul said that he didn't believe him, so Erick did what he said was called a triple pirouette. I'm not sure what 'pirouette' means. All I know is that first, he put his arms in front of him and made a circle, as if he was carrying an invisible ball. Then, he placed one leg behind the other and spun around three times before landing *exactly* the way that he started. We all tried to imitate his motions, but most of us ended up in the grass, laughing, because we could only spin one time before falling on our butts.

We all agreed that if Erick didn't invite us to his next show, or recital as Sammy pointed out, he would be officially disbanded from the T.J. League.

After we all got up and dusted ourselves off, Sammy told us that even though a lot of people think that she is the smartest person in fifth grade, she doubts herself all the time. She said that it gives her a lot of anxiety and that's why she's always reading and studying. To make sure that she doesn't let other people down. Especially her parents. She explained that she gets in trouble if she gets anything lower than an A on an assignment or test.

"I even get in trouble for A minuses!" she told us.

'They're almost B's!' her father would say. She explained that her mother never went to college and that her dad didn't even finish high school. Luckily, his first job was sweeping floors and taking out the trash for a local comic book store. Her parents just want to make sure that she goes to college and becomes successful.

We told her that it was okay to make mistakes. *We* make them all the time. It's what proves that we're human and not mindless robots. We all gave her a group hug when her eyes started filling up with tears. To everyone who's reading this, always remember, nobody's perfect. Everyone makes mistakes.

Then, Paul explained that although we know him for being a video game aficionado, he actually has a secret stash of dolls. Disney princesses and princes to be more precise. At his grandma's house. His grandma has secretly gotten him one for Christmas and his birthday every year, ever since he wanted to be Cinderella for Halloween, back in kindergarten. He made us promise to keep it a secret, because his dad doesn't know and wouldn't approve.

He told us that he also has a sketchbook where he keeps his drawings and fashion designs. He said that he's even drawn each Disney princess and prince as if they lived in our times. You know, with different hair styles and wearing the types of clothes that we do. He shared that last part with excitement in his voice and a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

We told him that there was nothing wrong with playing with dolls and promised not to tell his dad about them, but we insisted that the next sleepover be at his house. We were all interested in seeing his sketchbook!

When Funmaker John blew his whistle and shouted, 'down and done,' the whole T.J. League obeyed. After blowing his whistle for us

to line up, we all walked together, our arms around each other's shoulders. You see, something has just happened. Something important. Something none of us saw coming. Our friendship has leveled up. Who knew that sharing the most horrifying facts about our lives would bring us closer than ever before? I sure didn't. When we stepped off the grass and onto the blacktop, we took our first step as the new and improved T.J. League.

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Well, my bags are packed and I'm ready for Science Camp. After our Frisbee toss time during lunch, I'm no longer afraid or embarrassed about bringing my overnight protection. Knowing that I'll be in a cabin full of trustworthy friends, I have no reason to be. All I'm focused on is the fun things that we'll be doing. Going on hikes. Playing games. Rock climbing. Archery. I'm even looking forward to the night hike, even though I'm usually a bit afraid of the dark. Okay, maybe a *lot* afraid. But knowing that the T.J. League will be there to have my back, I'm okay. It also helps to know that some of them are just as anxious about the night hike as I am.

When I got to school, some people were already there with their parents. Some people had *huge* luggage cases and some people had gym bags or backpacks. I have a special Batman suitcase that my grandma bought me for Christmas a couple of years ago. We *all* have a sleeping bag and a pillow.

“T.J.!” I heard Paul shout, as my mom and dad walked me to the meeting spot in front of the school. Xochitl was clinging to mom and crying. Although her favorite pastime is annoying me and tattling on me, it seems she’s going to miss me while I’m gone.

“Paul!” I shouted back, dropping my pillow and running to give him a hug. He opened his backpack a smidge to reveal a purple sketchbook with tattered corners. I gave him an intense ‘is that what I *think* it is?’ look. He raised his eyebrows, gave me a massive smile, then closed his backpack.

“You dropped something back there, T.J.,” my dad said, handing me back my Batman pillow. You know, the one that was on top of my bookshelf. The one I only use for special occasions. Yeah, *that* Batman pillow. You see, there’s a strict ‘no stuffed animals’ policy, but *technically* Batman isn’t a stuffed animal. He’s a character pillow!

Little by little more people showed up. Eventually, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston joined us at the meeting spot. Mr. Anderson was passing out tape and markers for people who had forgotten to mark their bags while Mrs. Whiston was collecting last minute permission slips and medications.

Finally, after the tardy bell rang, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston had us line up so that they could take attendance. Even though Science Camp is open to *all* fifth graders, some people have opted not to go.

“Erick,” Mr. Anderson called out for a third time.

Man! Erick is *always* late!

“I’m here!” came a voice from behind us. It was Erick, running as fast as he could, while carrying his gym bag, sleeping bag and pillow. His mother wasn’t too far behind, waving a paper above her head. It seems Erick was one of the people who hadn’t turned in their permission slip yet.

“I was just about to call home,” Mr. Anderson said, taking Erick’s permission slip and adding it to his clipboard.

“Is everyone ready for a trip they’ll remember for the rest of their lives!” Principal Martinez’s voice boomed, as we saw the buses turn the corner.

“Yeah!” we all said.

“I don’t know Mrs. Whiston. I’m not sure I heard anything,” he commented.

“Yeah!” we all shouted, in excitement.

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” he said, with a huge smile on his face. “Remember, not only will you be representing our school, so I expect you to be on your best behavior, you will also be learning important life-long skills. *But*, I also expect a few more things from you.”

‘A few more things’? What did he mean, ‘a few more things’? Aw, man. Don’t tell me he’s going to do one of those ‘you should know what I’m talking about’ speeches that my dad does, because I truly have *no* idea what he’s talking about.

“I expect three things from you,” he said holding up three fingers. “Number one: take *lots* of pictures. Number two: make *lots* of great memories. And number three—.”

Number three? What’s number three? Why are you just standing there in silence? Say something!

“HAVE FUN!” he shouted, using both hands to create a megaphone.

Rule number three caused all of us to jump up and down while screaming our heads off. We didn’t notice it, but all of our parents had pulled out their phones and were recording everything Principal Martinez had said. Most of them had huge smiles on their faces, but some were wiping tears from their eyes.

As soon as the bus drivers opened the luggage compartments, Mr. Anderson asked dads to help load them. While they did that, Mrs. Whiston instructed parents to get one last photo and one last kiss goodbye before we had to get on our bus.

I heard someone’s parent tell them that they could still change their mind about going as I ran to my mom and dad and gave them each a huge hug and kiss. Mom and dad had kept Xochitl with them so that she could see me off, so I gave her a hug and kiss, too. It feels weird to say it, but I think I’m going to miss her. A little.

After all the luggage was loaded, Mrs. Whiston announced that it was time for students to get onto the buses. Most of us gave our parents and siblings one last hug before rushing to get on the bus.

Our bus driver had lowered all the windows on our bus so that we could do something that we weren't normally allowed to do.

"Go ahead and stick your heads out and wave goodbye!" he told us. "You'll probably never get another chance again. Because once I start this bus, it's all body parts and loose items *inside* the bus at *all times*!"

He didn't have to tell us twice! We stuck our heads out of the windows and waved goodbye to our families as they waved back. Some of the parents rushed to the other side of bus so that they could see their own kid. Most of them were taking pictures or recording us with their phones.

Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul, Sammy and I were all sitting in adjacent seats, so all of our parents were standing together as we took our final waves goodbye.

"We protect and serve all living things!" our parents shouted at us.

"The T.J. League reigns supreme!"

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!

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 Frienships

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 - 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