



Operation Superhero Support

# T.J.'s Adventures Operation Superhero Support

“Mr. Angel” Ramirez





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SAMPLE

*Because little people can do big things, too.*

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# 1 Lots of Kids



“Come on guys! If we win this game, we move on to the finals!” a third grader reminded her teammates.

“Finals? Ha! Not if we *beat* you!” a second grader from the other team taunted.

Before the third grader could respond, two whistles sounded. That could only mean one thing.

“Five more minutes to go! Bathroom and water! But go slow!”  
Funmaker John announced.

Wondering how I knew what was coming? It’s because we have a school wide whistle system. As in the metal whistles that the staff wear around their necks. Sound strange? I know. But hear me out.

Before Funmaker John came to our school, we didn’t have a whistle system. The only whistle we heard was a single whistle. It could be short. It could be long. But we never knew what it meant! You never knew if the whistle was telling you that recess was over or telling you to stop what you were doing, and because of that, lots of kids would keep playing after the recess whistle was blown. Thankfully, Funmaker John has helped us with this problem. Now we know *exactly* what whistles mean.

If you hear *one* whistle, it means that someone is doing something that they’re not supposed to be doing. Like running on the blacktop. Or jumping off the swings. Or using fallen tree branches to play sword fight. Just *hearing* a single whistle usually gets the attention of *anyone* breaking recess rules. And if that doesn’t work, hearing a single whistle followed by your name or what you’re doing usually gets the job done.

If you hear *two* whistles, that’s the Water Warning whistle. Funmaker John or a supervision aide will blow their whistle twice *and* loudly announce what you just heard Funmaker John shout out: Five more minutes to go! Bathroom and water! But go slow! Even if

you *don't* hear the announcement, you know what two whistles stand for. And since we have a large playground, supervision aides will repeat the double whistle to make sure that *everyone* hears it. Of course, they leave space between whistles so that no one gets confused.

Three whistles mean 'Down and Done'. Notice that I didn't say it meant that recess is over. It *can* mean that recess is over, but that's only during *first* recess. If it's lunch time, then the grade that is at recess kneels and puts their hands on their head, while the grade that is eating lunch gets ready to be released. After that, Funmaker John, or a supervision aide, will call out, 'walking!'. The grade at recess, and the grade eating lunch, respond with 'feet!'. Then the grade whose recess is over, will line up to go back to class. The grade that was eating lunch, will throw away their trash, if they haven't already, and head out to recess.

You might have noticed a pattern and think that the next whistle in the system would be a quadruple whistle. It makes sense. Right? Sorry, but you would be wrong. The final whistle in the system is a single, *long* whistle. If you hear a loud, long whistle, that seems like it's never going to end, it means *emergency*. If you hear the emergency whistle, then you run, and *yes*, I said *run*, to the nearest open room and close the door. It could be a bathroom. It could be a classroom. It could be the ball room. Just get in there, close the door and stay *silent*. Not quiet. *Silent!* And *don't* open the door for *anyone!*

Not even Principal Martinez. He wouldn't tell you to open the door since he has a key that opens *all* the doors! You just *stay* there. Stay there until you hear the Safety Bell ring, or you hear Principal Martinez's voice over the sound system say that everything is safe.

It may seem like a bit much, but it works. And it sure beats the system that we used to have. Instead of a single, confusing whistle, we have four whistles that tell us, *clearly*, what they mean. If *your* school only has one whistle, and it confuses you too, then you know what I mean. If *your* school doesn't have a whistle system, then maybe you can show your principal this chapter and help *your* school like the Recess Revitalization Foundation has helped *our* school!

Funmaker John blew his whistle three times. Guess what's going to happen next? Not sure, go back to a few pages and read it again. Already know? Good. Then keep on reading.

“Down and done!” Funmaker John shouted.

“Down and done!” we echoed.

Everyone on the playground, play structure and on the field took a knee and placed their hands on top of their heads.

“Down and done, Devin!” Marcus yelled.

Well, *almost* everyone.

The only people allowed to move after ‘Down and Done’ is called, are supervision aides, Funmaker John and Future Funmakers. And no one is allowed to move until someone calls out—.

“Walking!” Funmaker John hollered.

“Feet!” everyone responded.

All the second and third graders stood up and walked to their lines. Actually, most people speed walked. While everyone lined up, supervision aides and Future Funmakers made sure all the playground equipment was returned to its proper place for the next recess.

Funmaker John and Erick walked to the line-up area to make sure that classes were ready to head back to class. Teachers usually take a few minutes to come out of the teacher’s lounge, so Funmaker John, Future Funmakers or supervision aides usually lead students in a call and response style song or an echo style song. After singing a song or two, we make sure lines are straight and quiet.

“Peel, banana! Peel, peel banana!” the second and third graders were singing out loud.

“Just one more recess to go!” I shouted, to Future Funmakers, holding up one finger.

“One more pass and it’s back to class!” they shouted back.

Besides bringing the whistle system and games to our school, the Recess Revitalization Foundation has also brought lots of cool sayings that rhyme. Actually, now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure that *all* of their sayings rhyme. Makes them catchy. Kind of like those jingles from television commercials. You know which ones I’m talking about. The ones that get stuck in your head and are playing in your head when you wake up in the middle of the night. Or when you wake up in the morning. Or when you’re supposed to be writing your

spelling words five times each. Yeah, *that* kind of catchy. Wait. Maybe that's *why* all of their sayings rhyme. To help us *remember* them! I can't believe that I was today years old when I realized that!



When Justin, Sammy and I got back to class after the last recess, Mrs. Whiston was in the middle of a question and answer session about her latest assignment for us.

“On *both* sides of our family?” Shanika asked.

“Both sides,” Mrs. Whiston answered.

“How far back?” Zeph asked.

“Three generations,” Mrs. Whiston responded.

“What does *that* mean?” Kyle wondered, out loud.

“That means it should include your parents, grandparents and *great*-grandparents,” Mrs. Whiston clarified.

“I’m sorry,” Justin said, raising his hand while taking his seat, “but I have *no* idea what’s going on.”

I know he raised his hand and all, but he didn’t even *wait* to be called on. In our class, that means an automatic name on the board. But Mrs. Whiston must be in a good mood, because she’s not walking over to write it down.

“We were just discussing your Family Tree Diagram assignment,” Mrs. Whiston explained.

“Oh,” Justin said, putting his hand down. “Okay.”

I can tell by the look on his face, that he's still a bit confused. No worries. I'm sure that Sammy will explain it to him later.

Wait a second! Did she just say 'three generations'? Why *three* generations? That's a lot of people. Why not *two* generations? Or even *one* generation? One generation would be enough. Yeah, I'm sure one generation would be *plenty*.

Now I know what you're probably thinking. You're thinking that I'm overreacting. But I'll tell you why I'm *not* overreacting. In case you've forgotten, or in case you've never read book one, let me remind you of something important. I'm *Mexican*. Still don't understand? Then then let me ask you a question. Do you have *any* idea how many kids that Mexicans like to have? *Lots* of kids. That's how many. Lots, of, kids!



“Who gives homework over Thanksgiving break!” Justin exclaimed, throwing his hands up.

“Technically we have *more* than Thanksgiving break to finish it,” Sammy corrected.

“But *still!*” Justin protested.

Sammy should know better by now. Once Justin gets riled up about something, his mind is pretty much made up. You can try as

hard as you like, but there's *no* use in trying to change it. You'd have an easier time changing a baby's *diaper*!

Thanksgiving Break came sooner than I would have liked, but thankfully, I already have my diagram done. I used a tri-fold poster board to make it. It was the only way to get *all* of my family to fit on the *front* of the diagram! Of course, a diagram is only *one* part of our assignment. We also have to write an essay about our research into our family. You know, what did we do to complete our diagram and stuff. Did we ask our parents? Did we ask our grandparents? Did we research online using Facebook or Ancestry.com? Stuff like that. And believe it or not, I've also finished that, too!

All I have to do is finish preparing the *third* part of our assignment: my oral report. The *third* part of the assignment is to introduce three interesting family members to the class. I already have one person for my report. It's my great Uncle Lupe from my dad's side of the family. Dad told me that great Uncle Lupe is probably where I get my compassion to help people.

Great Uncle Lupe used to live in the United States, but moved to Mexico when he found out that his *tía* had cancer but couldn't afford treatment. When he was still living in the United States, he ran his own chain of fast food restaurants. They're pretty popular where he used to live, but they aren't national.

When he first went to Mexico to help his tía, he found out that she couldn't afford her cancer treatment. But it wasn't just her. Great Uncle Lupe found out that most of the people in her village didn't have *any* health insurance. Why? They couldn't afford it!

After hiring someone to continue running his restaurants, Great Uncle Lupe decided to move to Mexico, *permanently*. He also set up a burger restaurant in a nearby city, but didn't keep any of the profits for himself. Since he was still receiving money from his restaurants in the United States, he used all the profits from his *new* restaurant to set up a non-profit that helps families pay for their medical bills. Not only did he end up receiving a Key to the City from the Mayor, he received a Humanitarian of the Year award from the Governor!



“Time to go!” dad announced. “If we don't leave now, we'll be late for dinner!”

“Make sure to grab a jacket!” mom commanded, holding the spaghetti casserole she had just pulled from the oven.

If you're wondering *where* we're going and *what* a spaghetti casserole is, no worries. I'll explain. First of all, we're going to my Nána's house for Thanksgiving dinner. My Nána is my mom's mom. Second of all, a spaghetti casserole is basically a baking pan, filled with spaghetti, and covered in cheese. I know that it's not *exactly* a Thanksgiving dinner dish, but some of my cousins, *and* Xochitl, are

picky eaters. And one thing that most kids like, picky or not, is spaghetti. But if you bring spaghetti by itself, it doesn't seem like a proper side dish. But make it into a casserole and voila! Proper side dish!

"I get to choose the music!" Xochitl called out.

"No, you don't!" I called back.

"But the calendar says it's *my* turn!" she argued.

"No, it doesn't. It doesn't say it's *anyone's* turn," I rebutted.

"But yesterday was *your* turn. So, that means that today is *my* turn," she fought back.

"That's not how it *works*," I said, putting on my jacket and walking towards the front door.

"Yes, it *does*!" she yelled.

"*I'm* choosing the music," dad said, in a 'I win, and that's *final*' kind of voice.

Xochitl and I didn't *dare* argue with dad. When he uses *that* tone of voice, you do whatever he says, or agree to whatever he's just said. If you have the courage to stand against him, there's almost *definitely* going to be a consequence. *No one* can overrule dad when he uses that voice.

"*Actually*, I've already prepared a 'To Nána's House We Go' playlist," mom said, handing dad her spaghetti casserole. "It has a little bit of music for everyone's taste."

No one except for mom, of course. Everyone always says that ‘the *man* wears the pants in the house’, but my mom has added her part to that saying. ‘The man may wear the pants,’ she says, ‘but *I* wash *and* dry *and* iron *and* hang up the pants!’ In other words, *she* gets the final say so. Most of the time, she agrees with whatever dad says, but occasionally, she opposes him.

“Very well,” dad said, in defeat, “playlist it is! Now get in the car before I leave you all!”

Dad laughed maniacally and scampered to open the front door.

“You’re not going without me!” I exclaimed, rushing to the car.

“Or me!” Xochitl followed up.

“And you wouldn’t *dare* leave without me,” mom said, in the voice she usually uses before giving dad that look. You know which look I’m talking about. The one your mom or dad uses before they stare into each other’s eyes and kiss. I know. Gross! That’s why I didn’t look back.

### 3 I Learned Something



“We’re here!” dad announced, as we pulled onto Nána’s farm.

It’s a little over three hours to Nána’s farm, *without* traffic, so Xochitl and I didn’t exactly wake up from dad’s announcement. When he didn’t get the response he wanted, he decided to try another method. He whispered to mom and turned the volume up on the radio. It didn’t take long before Xochitl and I began covering our ears, begging him to make it stop.

“We’re awake. We’re awake!” I tried to shout, over dad’s song selection.

“What! I can’t hear you over this amazing music!” Dad shouted back, with a *huge* smile on his face.

“Mom! Make him stop!” Xochitl pleaded.

“I’m sorry, dear. The music’s so loud that I can’t hear you clearly,” mom said, shrugging her shoulders and holding her hands up.

I decided to do something that I knew would make the music stop. Well at least temporarily.

“Incoming message from ‘Tomasito’. To hear it, say listen,” the car announced.

“Listen!” I said, loudly, before mom could do anything.

“We are awake,” the car said, in a computerized, female voice. “You can turn the music down now. Would you like to reply? If you would like to reply, say ‘send message’.”

“You can’t pretend you didn’t hear that,” I said, confidently, closing the cover of my tablet.

“Oh yes, I can,” dad said, in a mischievous voice.

“Mom!” Xochitl whined.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already paused the song,” mom reassured her.

“Aw. No fair!” dad pouted.

Mom laughed and shuffled his hair.

When we finally reached the house, there were already seven cars parked in front of it, and *none* of them were Nána's. Dad honked his horn, which led to a scene you would think was meant for a comedy television show. Once the front door opened, a seemingly endless line of people began to exit the house. Actually, it was only forty-two people. *What?* That's not a lot. If you have a family like mine, then you know that forty-two isn't that many people. Especially when you consider that my mom is the youngest of *eleven* children. And if you think *that's* a lot, my dad is the oldest of *fif-teen!*

“Tía!”

“Tío!”

“Prima!”

“Carnal!”

Even though everyone immediately approached our car, they all knew to keep a clearing open for Nána. *She* gets the first hugs. Tío Felipe held on to Nána's arm as he helped her down the stairs and to the car, where Mom exchanged Tío Felipe her spaghetti casserole for a hug from Nána.

“Ay, mi h́jita,” Nána said, holding mom's face in her hands.

“It's so good to see you.”

Nána then kissed mom on both cheeks and gave her a big, strong hug. After mom, the routine followed with dad, me and Xochitl. Once she had finished with us all, we were attacked by the rest of our family. Maybe attacked is the wrong word. Let's just say

that some hugs were bigger than others and some included claps on the back. *Strong* claps. Some embraces even started with a punch to the arm. By the time we finished greeting everyone, which took a good chunk of time, my left bicep was nearly *numb*. And believe it or not, Cousin Maria said that we're still waiting for Tío *Frank's* family!

One *good* thing about having a big family, is that there are *lots* of people you can talk to about your family's history. Since I'm still looking for two interesting people for my oral report, I'm not wasting *any* time before interviewing my aunts and uncles.



After a few failed attempts to find someone I felt was worthy of sharing with the class, I finally found someone I thought they might be interested in. I had learned, earlier this week, that my Great Uncle Lupe was where I probably got my *compassion* from. Now I think I know where I get my *bad luck* from.

When I asked my Tía Suzette if she knew of anyone interesting in our family, she told me of Nána's father. My Great Grandpa Júlio. It seems that although he was someone that *everyone* liked, you know, a person that was always willing to help family, friend or stranger, he could never keep a job. Well, at least not for *long*.

Tía Suzette told me that if it wasn't for my Great Grandma Socorro, who ran a taquería, her and my great grandpa would probably have gone broke! And it wasn't that my Great Grandpa Júlio

wasn't skilled at anything. He was skilled in *lots* of things. He could fix your car. Patch up that whole in your wall. Replace your roof. He could even cut your grass *and* your hair in the same visit! No, his problem wasn't a *lack* of skills, it was a curse. I know. I didn't understand what she meant either.

When I asked my *tía* to explain, she told me that when Great Grandpa Júlio was a teenager, he had gone to see a traveling circus with his family. One of the sideshows that the circus offered, was a woman who could tell your fortune. Great Grandpa Júlio had been in love with Great Grandma Socórro since the sixth grade, and wanted to find out if they would get married and live happily ever after.

When he went to see the fortune teller, she told him that it cost two pennies. He pulled two pennies out of his pocket and showed them to her but said that she would only get them if what she told him made sense. Without asking him what he had come there for, the fortune teller told him that the girl he was in love with, loved him back. Only more. She also told him that they would be married *right* after they finished school and would have a large family. After thanking the fortune teller for her fortune, Great Grandpa Júlio tossed over what the fortune teller thought was two pennies. *But*, just before he was able to exit her tent, the fortune teller told him that he would be cursed for the rest of his life since he had tried to pay her with two penny slugs. Don't know what those are? Do what I did and look it up. Two interesting people down. Just one more to go!



We've already had dinner and dessert and I *still* haven't found another interesting family member to share with my class.

"Tómas!" Cousin Artúro called to me.

"Artie!" I called back.

Artie is sixteen and the captain of his soccer team. I don't get to see him that much, but if his team is playing nearby, my mom makes sure that we get to go see him play. They're just two more wins away from their third straight championship!

"I hear that you're looking for someone interesting for your class project," he said, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"Yeah," I said, trying to reach his shoulders. *Trying* being the keyword. Let's face it, I'll probably *never* be able to reach his shoulders!

"Why don't you tell them about me! I mean, come on. Who else if this family has a shot at making it to the big leagues?" he said, in a 'you know that I'm right' kind of voice.

"I know, I know. But I've already got a story about my Great Uncle Lúpe helping poor people get free health care, and a story about our Great Grandpa Júlio getting cursed for giving fake money to a fortune teller," I answered in a 'don't be mad at me, but I'm looking for a better story' voice.

Cousin Artúro took his arm from around my shoulder and began to slowly scratch his chin while staring at the ceiling. Then he started

to look around the room while making a ‘hmmm’ sound. I wonder if that’s what I look and sound like when *I* stare off into mid-space and think.

“Hey!” he shouted, holding up one finger. “I know someone you can use!”

He grabbed me by the hand and led me to one of Nána’s rooms at the back of the house. I usually just play with my cousins outside or go look at some of the animals with some of my other cousins, so I’ve never really gone into *any* of Nána’s bedrooms.

“I think it’s in here,” he commented, making a quick right turn, almost making me crash into the wall.

Once we were inside, he finally let my hand go and headed straight for a bookshelf in the far corner of the room. While he searched for a specific book on the shelf, I took a look around the room. It was a most interesting room. On every table, wall and shelf, was some sort of newspaper clipping, trophy or handmade project. Hey! That’s the photo frame I made her for Grandparent’s Day last year!

“Here it is!” Cousin Artúro announced, taking a magazine from the bookshelf.

He sat down in a recliner chair in the opposite corner of the room and patted the empty space next to him, motioning for me to join him. Luckily, I’m still tiny, and Cousin Artúro is as thin as he is

tall, so we can both sit, comfortably, on a piece of furniture that is designed for only one person.

“What is it?” I asked, my interest having been piqued by the excitement in his voice.

“It’s a magazine from México,” he said, turning the pages.

“You can read that!” I inquired.

“You can’t!” he asked, still flipping past pages until he found the one he was looking for. He then placed the magazine in my lap.

I was a bit confused at what I was looking at. It was a picture of a clown, with a *huge* smile, holding a rubber chicken. And by clown, I mean full face makeup and rubber red nose. It only showed him from his chest up, but I’m sure if it showed the rest of his body, there would be *huge* shoes on his feet.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“It’s Cousin Cuáutli!” he answered, just as excitedly as before.

“Who’s Cousin Cuáutli?” I asked, genuinely interested in who he was and why he was in a Mexican magazine.

“Cousin Cuáutli is a famous clown in México,” Cousin Arturo explained.

“Famous like Ronald McDonald?” I wondered.

“No!” he responded, quickly. “In México, clowns are popular and *not* scary, like in the United States. Cousin Cuáutli started off as a clown at birthday parties. He did magic tricks, made balloon animals,

and played games with the kids. He even sang popular songs, but in his clown voice, and did comedy, but he always wanted to do more!

“Then he decided to start doing his act at local schools, fairs and carnivals and stuff. Pretty much anywhere they had an open stage. After that, he started getting hired by important people, and it was at a birthday party for the Mayor’s son that he was discovered by a television executive. The television executive just happened to work for *Télemundo!*”

I looked at Cousin Artúro with a ‘what’s *Télemundo*’ look on my face. He responded with a ‘how can you *not* know what *Télemundo* is!’ look on his face.

“*Please* don’t tell me that you’re one of those people who think it’s not important to learn Spanish!” he said, getting up from the recliner and pacing the room. “One of those people who say ‘this is America. People in America speak English. People in America *read* English. Why should I waste my time learning Spanish?’ One of those people who think it isn’t important to remember our heritage. Who think we should leave the past in the past and focus on what’s in front of us? Please tell me you at least *understand* Spanish!”

When he finished talking, he stopped pacing and gave me a very intense look. It was a look that made me uncomfortable. Actually, it was a look that made me not *want* to answer. It was as if he was searching my *soul* for the answer.

“I understand Spanish!” I protested.

“But do you *speak* it?” he rebutted.

“I can if I *want* to!” I redirected.

“Can you *read* it? Can you *write* it? Do you know where the accents go?” he continued.

Before I even had a chance to answer, he came back to the recliner, sat down next to me and grabbed the magazine out of my hands.

“Read it to me!” he commanded, pointing at the first paragraph.

“What?” I asked.

“Read the article to me,” he ordered, forcefully putting the magazine back on my lap. “Go ahead.”

I was afraid to tell him that I have dyslexia and that I would probably have a tough time reading it. I mean, I have a hard enough time reading out loud in *English*! I *doubt* I’ll be able to read this without his help. I picked up the magazine anyway, with as much force as he had used to put it into my lap, and began reading.

Believe it or not, it was much easier for me to read in Spanish, than it is for me to read in English. With an exception for a few words, Cousin Arturo didn’t have to help me at all. Most of the words are pronounced *exactly* the way they look and there weren’t many tricky consonant or vowel combinations. Who knew that I could read Spanish better than I can read English? I sure didn’t! Well, what do you know? I learned something new about myself!



It was way past my bedtime when we finally left Nána's house, so it didn't take long for Xochitl and I to fall asleep in the car. Actually, Xochitl had already fallen asleep on Nána's couch, but mom woke her up so that she could tell everyone goodbye. If you haven't guessed already, it takes *quite* a bit of time to say goodbye when your family is as big as mine. And just consider this, some of mom's brothers and sisters aren't even *here*! If they *were*, it would have taken even *longer*!

When I woke up in the morning, it was already lunch time. Which doesn't surprise me. We didn't get back home until three or four in the morning. At least I *think* that's what time it was. I can't really remember what my Batman clock said. I only glanced at it briefly before turning over onto my stomach to go back to sleep.

Now that I think about it, I'm still in my clothes from yesterday, but how am I not wearing any shoes? Dad must have taken them off me when he put me to bed. Or was it mom? Maybe it *was* mom. It's not like I'm that heavy. She could have just as easily carried me up the stairs. Eh, who knows? It doesn't matter anyways. All that matters is that I *still* have to finish my project. I want to try and finish it today so that I have the *whole* weekend to play!

I took my tablet out of my backpack and made sure to document everything I could remember from yesterday, using my V2T App. V2T stands for Voice to Text. When I push the record button and speak, it takes my words and types them up for me. Then I just have to copy them down onto paper. You may think that I'm cheating, but this helps me make sure that all my words are spelled correctly. And since I still have to write it on paper, I technically have to do *twice* the work.

Now, I'm *still* pretty tired, so I'm fairly sure that I forgot some details. Saying that, I think I'll wait a while before writing it down on paper. That way if I *do* remember something, I can just come back

and add it to my story. Then, when I'm sure that there aren't any more important details to add, I'll write it in pen.



“Don't forget to write your name and classroom number on the back,” mom told me, as I grabbed my tri-fold poster board.

“Thanks mom!” I said, taking a pen out of my backpack and writing my name and room number.

It was a good thing she noticed! Mrs. Whiston automatically deducts *five* percent off your final grade if you don't write your name on your work. She *also* doesn't put your graded work into the Graded bin. That way, when you say that she didn't grade your work, she can watch you write your name on your work. Your *graded* work. And seeing as how she usually reminds us to write our name on our work *before* we turn it in, we can't say that she's being mean. If anyone says that she's being mean, she reminds them why she's not.

‘Am I being *mean*? Or did they *earn* their consequence?’ she asks us. Actually, it's not really a question anymore, since we already know the correct answer. And like it or not, we *all* know that they *earned* their consequence. I've already learned not to call Mrs. Whiston ‘mean’, but every once in a while, someone forgets. And *boy* do I feel sorry for them.

“My turn to choose the music!” Xochitl announced, bumping me as she ran to the front door.

“Is it though?” I said, in a ‘I know it’s your day, but I want to be annoying since you just *bumped* me out of the way for no reason!’ kind of voice.

“Yes! It’s *my* day!” she shouted, at me. “If you don’t believe me then go check the calendar!”

“But it’s so far” I pointed out, lazily holding out my arm towards the kitchen.

“Mom!” Xochitl screamed.

“Tómas Raymundo!” mom called from upstairs.

“I’m not *doing* anything!” I responded, giving my sister the stink eye.

“Yes, he is!” Xochitl argued.

“Tómas Raymundo Olivéra, don’t you lie to me!” she ordered.

“Xochitl’s the one that pushed me for no reason!” I said, stretching the truth a bit.

“No, I didn’t!” Xochitl lied. Sort of.

“Tómas Raymundo Olivéra Barriéntos López Espinósa!” mom said, using my full name. Almost.

Before I could say anything, mom appeared at the top of the stairs.

“You are older and should know better,” she scolded.

“But Xochitl *started* it!” I rebutted.

“Don’t make me *finish* it,” she redirected.

I took a deep breath and gave Xochitl a ‘you’re lucky mom is standing right there looking at us’ look. She’s *always* getting me into trouble for something that *she* did! She is so *infuriating!*

When we got to school, I closed the door behind me before Xochitl could get out. I know I’ll probably have to pay for that later, but I don’t really care right now. She needs to understand that she can’t just get me into trouble for no reason without some sort of consequence. I heard her scream ‘mom’ from inside the car, but I didn’t look back. Luckily, the windows are up. I’m in *no* mood to hear her annoying voice more than I have to.

“*That’s* your family tree diagram!” Sammy asked, taking my project from me, and handing me hers.

“*Yes,*” I answered, having a much easier time holding her small, *no-fold* board, than I was holding my *huge* tri-fold board.

“Why is it so *big?*” she asked.

“Mrs. Whiston said that we had to go back *three* generations on *both* sides of our family,” I reminded her. “Do you have *any* idea how many children Mexicans like to have?”

“I’m getting an idea,” she answered, holding my open project in front of her.

“Why is yours so *small?*” I asked, taking my project back so she wouldn’t mess it up. As you can imagine, it took *forever* to finish.

“I’m an only child,” she answered.

“But that doesn’t explain why–,” I started.

“It must be biological,” she continued. “Both of my parents are only children, so I don’t have any cousins.”

“What about-,” I tried.

“Only children for two generations,” Sammy explained. “Before that, my great-great grandma on my mom’s side had *three* kids and my great-great-grandpa on my dad’s side had *two* kids. *Still* not much more than one.”

“Aren’t *you* lucky!” I commented.

“Not really,” she said.

“How do you figure?” I asked.

“Do you have *any* idea how hard it was to find *three* people, who are *still* alive, with interesting stories to share? *Very* hard!” she said, answering her own question.

“At least *you* didn’t have to get pictures of all your family members and then have to *handwrite* all of their names out,” I countered.

“Why didn’t you just type them out? Wouldn’t that have been easier” she asked.

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” I answered her question with a question.

“What do you mean?” she asked, furrowing her brows.

I opened my project, stood it up on the blacktop and started pointing at my family member’s different names. The smallest

number of names anyone had was five. You know what I mean, right? First name. Middle name. And *multiple* last names.

“Whoa!” Sammy whisper exclaimed.

“Right!” I agreed. “*Plus*, I don’t know how to add all the accents to their names on my computer.”

Sammy shrugged her shoulders as if to say ‘I don’t know how to do that either’. *Wait!* Sammy *doesn’t* know something! I’m *definitely* writing this down somewhere.



“Okay boys and girls, before we go into the classroom, we’re going to take a little trip to the MPR,” Mrs. Whiston told us.

I’ve never understood why people used the phrase ‘little trip.’ When I think of a *little* trip, I think of getting into the car and going somewhere no farther than fifteen or twenty minutes away. When my brain hears the word ‘trip,’ it automatically thinks of driving in a car, riding in a train or flying in a plane. Not *walking*. When my mom says, ‘let’s go for a walk,’ *then* I think of somewhere close, because we can *walk* there!

As we turned the corner, I noticed that Mr. Anderson’s class was coming *out* of the MPR. How’d they *get* there so fast? Now that I think about it, they weren’t at their normal line up spot before the bell rang. Mr. Anderson must have told them to line up at the MPR instead of on their number line.

As Mr. Anderson's class passed by, the T.J. League got together to do our special handshake before our teachers could notice. And that's easier said than done. Our handshake started off as a short three move handshake. You know, something simple. Then, little by little, each of us started adding other moves to the end of it. That includes using other motions and other body parts. But new moves have to be approved by the entire league. At first, moves didn't need approval, but when Justin wanted to add a 'digging for gold' move, we decided it was necessary to add that rule. Now our 'handshake' has a few different claps and we use our elbows, feet and hips. Yes, I said hips.

If we do it right, it takes about fifteen seconds to complete the entire process. But that's only *if* we do it right. Since we're always adding new movements, someone usually messes up and we have to start all over again. And sometimes we mess up because other people jump in and try to join us, usually messing one of us up. Thankfully, no one jumped in and it only took us two tries to get it right this time, so Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston didn't notice.

When we entered the MPR, Mrs. T was cleaning off the breakfast tables. The tables next to those, which were usually only used on rainy days, were covered with the projects from Mr. Anderson's class. Wait. Why did they leave them in the MPR?

"Okay, class," Mrs. Whiston said, getting our attention. "I want you to put your projects onto the empty tables across from Mr. Anderson's class."

As everyone started putting their projects on the tables, we started looking at each other's family trees. Before long, Jefferson let out a small cough. Then he let out a slightly *louder* cough. Finally, he let out a *loud* cough. No, not *that* kind of cough. Not the 'I have a bad cold' cough. Not the 'I have bronchitis' cough. Not even the 'I'm choking on something' cough. He did the 'excuse me, Mrs. Whiston didn't give us permission to do that' cough.

"It's okay, Jefferson," Mrs. Whiston said. "Go ahead and take a look at as many Family Tree diagrams as you like."

Jefferson doesn't look too happy.

"I want you to look at the details that people included on the back of their family tree," she continued, "and I want you to take out a sheet of paper and write down *five* interesting facts that you've learned about your friends."

That last directive made Jefferson smile. Why? I don't know *why*. Because he's *Jefferson*. *That's why!*

I decided to look at the diagrams of everyone in the T.J. League, of course. I know lots about them, especially Marcus, but I don't know much about their extended families. Wait. I wonder if Mr. Anderson's class is going to come back later and do the same? Eh. I have nothing to hide.



I had already written down four interesting facts when I passed by a project that had hand drawn people instead of pictures. And I'm not talking about *nicely* drawn people. Not even people drawn with a big head and small bodies, like the people at amusement parks do. These people were like a step up from stick figures. Everyone had the same stance and hair – short for boys and long for girls - with their hands hidden behind their backs. Boys had pants and a shirt and girls had dresses. *Triangle* dresses. The only difference between each person was the color of their clothes.

When I looked to see whose project it was, I couldn't find a name. Oops! Hopefully, Mr. Anderson doesn't have the same policy as Mrs. Whiston! If he does, this person is about to lose five percent of off their grade! I think I'll read about the three interesting family members of whoever project this is. Perhaps it will give me a clue.

Hmmm. An aunt on their father's side was the first person in their family to graduate college. That's cool. Their great-great grandma on that same side worked in a munition's factory during World War II. Well *that's* different. Wait. Why is the third person's interesting fact longer than the previous two combined?

Whoa! Their great-great grandpa on the other side of their family was a Native American chief? Hold on. Would that make this person like a chieftain princess or prince? Wait! Not only was he a tribal chief, but he served in World War II as something called a 'windtalker.' Wait. It says that a windtalker was a person who was a

secret agent who used a code based on the Navajo language. That's so cool!

SAMPLE



## *What's Secret Santa?*

“Two-minute warning!” Mrs. Whiston announced.

“I’m already finished,” Jefferson announced.

“‘I’m already finished’,” Justin mimicked, softly into my ear.

“Is that a name?” Mrs. Whiston asked.

I had to laugh. Wait. No. Not that Justin almost got into trouble!

I laughed at the *voice* that Justin used when he mocked Jefferson.

“I only have four interesting facts,” Erin told Mrs. Whiston.

“Well, you better hurry up and find one more!” Mrs. Whiston instructed. “You guys have had plenty of time to find some interesting facts.”

“Can I add an interesting fact from my own family?” Erin asked.

“Nope,” Mrs. Whiston answered.

Erin rushed to the nearest family tree project and started to write down words faster than I’ve ever seen anyone write before. Hopefully it’s legible. If Mrs. Whiston can’t read someone’s writing, she doesn’t grade it. She doesn’t take off any points or anything, she just makes you rewrite it. It’s easy if it’s a worksheet with like five or six problems. But, if it’s a handwritten essay that has to be a few pages long, well that’s a whole different story. *Especially* if it’s a front and back essay!



When we got back to class, Mrs. Whiston had us share one of the interesting facts before choosing this week’s teacher’s assistant so that they could collect our papers. She pulled out a name from the Name Jar and guess whose it was? I’ll give you a hint: this is the person that almost didn’t finish in time. Did you Guess Erin? Yup! It was Erin’s! Ironic? I know, right!

Mrs. Whiston then announced that we wouldn’t be doing SSR today. For those who have never read any of my adventures before,

SSR stands for Sustained Silent Reading. Instead of reading, we went straight to the daily prompt. Today's prompt told us to share about something that we were thankful for. Specifically, something that happened during Thanksgiving break. Some people were thinking with their chin or tapping their pencils on the table or on the top of their head. For me, it didn't take long to decide what *I* was thankful for. I only get to see my Nána like once a month, and sometimes even less, so I was *very* thankful to be able to see her. And my cousins, too, of course. But mostly my Nána.

For those of you who have read my *first* adventure, this is the same Nána that handmade my Batman costume for Halloween when I was in kindergarten. She also crochets Christmas sweaters for everyone in the family. Wait. Before I go on, let me make sure you read that last sentence carefully. She makes Christmas sweaters for *everyone* in the family. Not just *my* family. Everyone in *the* family. Do you *remember* how many people are in my family? If not, go back and reread chapter three. I know there's not an *exact* number, but it will give you an idea how long it must take her to crochet *that* many sweaters! Not to mention how much it must *cost* her. That's a *lot* of yarn!

“Okay boys and girls, put your journals away,” Mrs. Whiston instructed, when the timer on the screen signaled that time was up. She then switched the screen over to the Classroom Communication app.

Well, this is different. She usually only does that on Friday mornings to show us how close we are to our weekly points goal. You know, to earn a special activity or extra play time. I wonder why she's doing it on a Monday morning. Especially since we haven't really had any time to earn points yet.

"I know that some of you are probably a little confused right now," she commented, "but I'm going to use the Classroom Communication app to do something I've never done before. Actually, before Thanksgiving break, I didn't even know that it could *do this*. I'm going to be using it to pair you guys up."

"Aw, man!" Gio exclaimed. "Don't tell me we're doing another *project*. We just *finished* one!"

"Yes!" Jefferson whispered, getting excited. Surprised? If you are, then you don't know Jefferson that well.

"No, Giovanni," Mrs. Whiston answered. "This isn't for another project. But if you interrupt me by shouting out again, that'll be a name."

Mrs. Whiston gave Gio a 'you should know better by now' look, which made him cower with his hands up.

"As I was saying," she continued, "I will be pairing you up with a someone from Mr. Anderson's class. But before that, I'm going to have Erin pass these out, so that you can write your partner's name on it. And before anyone asks, they are interview papers."

Interview papers? What are we going to be interviewing for? We're too young to work. I know that *high* schoolers do mock interviews because Cousin Álvaro practiced with mom and dad last year when he had to do one at school. But if we're not interviewing for work, then what are we going to be interviewing for?

“You will use these interview papers to interview your partner. Don't worry, there's nothing terribly difficult to answer. They're mostly simple questions like ‘what's your favorite color?’ or ‘what's your favorite sports team?’. Questions like that. There are a couple of more challenging questions, but nothing you shouldn't be able to answer. Try to be as specific as possible. These interviews will be used for something important later.”

Later? What does she mean by that? Opening the Classroom Communication app on a Monday morning has already confused me enough. And ever since then, everything she's said, has only made my brain hurt more and more. But wait. What's happening? The mouse on Mrs. Whiston's screen is starting to move! I know what you're thinking, ‘what's so scary about that?’, right? What if I told you that Mrs. Whiston is nowhere *near* her computer!

“Mrs. Whiston! I think someone's hacking your laptop! The mouse is moving on its own!” Gio shouted out.

I guess that he's already forgotten Mrs. Whiston's promise to write his name on the board if he interrupted her by shouting out.

“Oh! Well, what do you know? My mouse *is* moving,” she said, in a calm voice.

“How can you be so calm?” Gio continued. “What if they download a virus and destroy your computer!”

“Hmmm. That *is* a possibility,” Mrs. Whiston said, in a ‘faking interest’ voice.

You know which one I’m talking about. The one you use on your sister when she’s telling you something ‘interesting’ and you pretend to care, but you really just want to get back to what you were doing. Yeah, *that* kind of fake interest voice.

“Mrs. Whiston!” Gio exclaimed, with a face that matched the fear in his voice.

Mrs. Whiston chuckled, which caused even *more* confusion in my brain and *more* fear on Gio’s face. Actually, I’m not sure it’s possible, but if he opens his eyes any wider, I think they might pop out of their *sockets*!

“Everything is okay, Giovanni,” Mrs. Whiston assured him, putting one hand on top of his head and the other on his shoulder. “It’s just Mr. Anderson.”

“Mr. Anderson?” Gio said, as his face morphed from fear into confusion and disbelief.

“Yes, Giovanni, it’s Mr. Anderson,” she reassured him. “Mr. Anderson has connected his laptop to mine so that we can pair you guys up. Right now, everyone in Mr. Anderson’s class has the same

interview paper that you have. We're going to take turns using the Classroom Communication app until everyone has a partner."

"But Mr. Anderson's class has thirty-two kids and we have thirty-one," Maggie pointed out.

"You're right, Maggie," Mrs. Whiston confirmed, "and Mr. Anderson and I took that into consideration when we planned this activity. The one extra person at the end will either pair up with Mr. Anderson or me."

"You mean *they* get to choose their partner, but *we* don't?" Billy asked.

"Not *exactly*," Mrs. Whiston answered. "If the extra person is from Mr. *Anderson's* class, then they will be *my* partner. But if the extra person is from *our* class, then they will partner up with Mr. Anderson!"

"But then you or Mr. Anderson won't have a partner," Jefferson said, in a 'how is that being fair' kind of voice.

"That's okay, Jefferson. I'm sure we'll survive," Mrs. Whiston said, with a smile.

After pairing everyone together, Mrs. Whiston had Alejandro line us up so that we could meet Mr. Anderson's class at the floor map on the blacktop. Alejandro is the line monitor this week.

When we finished our interviews, Mr. Anderson instructed us to take a seat so that he and Mrs. Whiston could explain why we had just used the last fifteen minutes to interview each other.

“I know that we just came back from Thanksgiving break, but Mrs. Whiston and I want to make sure that everyone has enough time for this project,” Mr. Anderson began.

“I knew it!” Gio yelled.

“Knew what?” Mr. Anderson asked.

“I told Mrs. Whiston that this was going to lead to another project, and she said that it wasn’t,” Gio explained.

“Well, she wasn’t exactly *wrong*,” Mr. Anderson defended.

“But that means she’s wasn’t exactly telling the *truth*, either!” Gio exclaimed.

Mrs. Whiston isn’t saying it with her mouth, but the look on her face is telling us that if Gio shouts out one more time, then writing his name on the board won’t be the *only* consequence that he’ll be receiving. Luckily, his partner, Amari, gave him a ‘you’re about to get in trouble’ look while gently elbowing him in the arm. Gio returned her look with an intense ‘what!’ look, which only caused Amari to purse her lips and point toward Mrs. Whiston. After making eye contact, Gio’s eyes got big, like earlier, but this time his face said, ‘sorry, sorry. I won’t do it again.’

“So, to clarify, this isn’t *exactly* a project, but it may feel like one,” Mr. Anderson started over. “Since we only have about three weeks until winter break, you will have two weeks to complete this assignment. And the more thought and effort that you put into it, the more fun it can be.”

‘Can be’? What does he mean by that? I am so confusion.

“We’ve never done this before, but we’ve decided that you guys have reached an age where you should be able to use your critical thinking skills to make the most out of this activity” Mrs. Whiston added.

Wait. Is this an assignment or an activity? My brain can’t take much more of this.

“So, you guys are going to take the interview papers and turn them back in so that we can pair you up again,” Mr. Anderson told us.

Turn them back *in*? Pair us up *again*? Does that mean we were going to be interviewing someone *else*? How many times were we going to *do* this? My brain is *dangerously* close to the ‘overload’ level!

“And no, you won’t be interviewing someone else,” Mrs. Whiston clarified. “When I tell you to, you are going to line up by class, single file. Mr. Anderson’s class will line up in front of me and my class will line up in front of Mr. Anderson.”

“I will be passing out interview papers from my class to someone in Mrs. Whiston’s class and vice versa,” Mr. Anderson told us. “You are *not* allowed to show anyone your paper. Your partner is to remain a secret.”

“But why?” Cayden asked.

“Because the person you get is for *your, eyes, only*,” he answered, in a creepy voice with matching stare that gave me the

chills. “Plus, if someone finds out who your partner is, it will ruin the whole Secret Santa vibe.”

Secret Santa! Did he just say, ‘Secret Santa’! Wait. What’s Secret Santa?

SAMPLE

## 6 Just Tell Me!



“Um, what’s Secret Santa?” JoJo asked.

“Good question, Joel,” Mr. Anderson answered. “But to answer that, I need everyone to take a knee.”

Take a knee? This just keeps getting more and more strange. But here I am, taking a knee, and I feel like it’s *just* going to get weirder.

“Okay, boys and girls, by the power vested in me, by Mr. Martinez, I now dub you all Santa Claus,” Mr. Anderson declared, sweeping his imaginary sword from left to right, as if he was knighting us before a battle.

“I’m still confused,” JoJo commented.

“Now that you are all officially Santa, when you get your interview paper, it will be *your* job to check your list to see what your secret partner likes. And don’t forget to check it *twice!*” Mr. Anderson instructed.

“Two weeks from Friday, we will celebrate the holidays with a fifth grade party, where we will all exchange gifts. That is the day that you will bring the gift that you got for your partner. But *remember*, it’s called *Secret Santa*. That means that you can’t tell *anyone* who you got. As Mr. Anderson said, that will only ruin the whole Secret Santa vibe,” Mrs. Whiston explained.

“How much do we have to spend?” Bethany asked, a question I’m pretty sure we were *all* thinking of.

“How much you decide to spend is up to you,” Mrs. Whiston stated, “but it is not to exceed *fifteen* dollars.”

“Only fifteen dollars?” Justin asked.

“It may not seem like much,” Mr. Anderson said, “but there are many families that struggle with the essentials every day. And during the holiday season, many families struggle with money even more. With that said, let me restate what Mrs. Whiston just said. You can

spend as *much* as you want, as long as you *don't* go over fifteen dollars.

“Please listen carefully to what I am about to say. This is *not* a competition to see who can get the best gift. We will be sending a contract home, for you and your parents to sign, stating that you agree to keep your partner a *secret* and that you agree *not* to go over fifteen dollars on your gift.”

“To add to what Mr. Anderson just said,” Mrs. Whiston interjected, “you can get one *large* item worth fifteen dollars *or* you can get many *smaller* items. Just as long as the total doesn't go over fifteen dollars.”

There wasn't much more to explain, so, when Mrs. Whiston told us to, Mr. Anderson's class lined up in front of her, and our class lined up in front of Mr. Anderson. Oh, how I hope I get Marcus! I know *exactly* what to get him! Actually, I've already asked my mom and dad if I can do some extra chores around the house so that I can make sure I have enough money to afford it. Not that it would go over fifteen dollars. It's just that I also have to get something for mom and dad. Oh, and Xochitl. Sigh. Yes, even Xochitl.



When we all received our Secret Santa interview papers, we lined back up to go back to class. Mrs. Whiston reminded us that

hallways are zero volume zones, which led Alejandro to get his clipboard and pen ready.

“But we’re on the blacktop,” Shanika pointed out.

“That’s a name,” Alejandro said, putting his pen to his paper.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Mrs. Whiston said, with a ‘you should’ve known that was coming’ smile.

After that, no one dared speak. Of course, that didn’t stop anyone from finding other ways to communicate. Some people were trying to mouth the words, but that didn’t work too well. Let’s just say that if we ever play the whisper challenge, there are certain people that I’m *not* choosing to be my partner. Other people were trying to ‘write’ words in midair using their fingers. That didn’t work out much better.

Justin kept trying to get my attention, but I purposely evaded his gaze. Knowing Justin, he’s going to do whatever he can to get me to tell him who I got. It’s times like these that I use the same high quality ignoring skills that I use on Xochitl. Well, what do you know? Xochitl is *actually* coming in handy for something? Who would have thought?



“Come on guys,” Justin whined, as we set up playground equipment for recess.

“We’ve already told you no,” Paul said, in a ‘give it up’ voice.

“But I told you guys who *I* got!” he shouted.

“And that’s exactly what you *weren’t* supposed to do!” Erick exclaimed.

“But I haven’t signed any contract, yet!” Justin argued.

“It doesn’t matter,” Erick shot back.

“Sure, it does,” Sammy said. “It’s called *Secret Santa*. When Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston told us that we were supposed to keep our partner a secret, it was like creating a verbal contract. And in some cases, a verbal contract is legally binding.”

Have I mentioned lately how smart Sammy is?

“It’s not just that,” Marcus added, “it’s the principle of it.”

“What does this have to do with Principal Martinez?” Justin asked.

“Not Principal *Martinez*,” Marcus said in a ‘can somebody please help me get through to him’ voice.

“I think what Marcus is trying to say,” I said, taking Justin by the shoulders, “is that if you told us a *secret*, you would want us to *keep* that secret. Right?”

“Yeah. Of course, I would,” Justin agreed.

“Okay. Well, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston want *us* to keep our partner a *secret*,” I said, slowly so he couldn’t misunderstand what I was saying. “Just like you would want *us* to keep *your* secret for *you*. Get it?”

“I guess so,” he answered.

I let go of his shoulders and started to walk away so that I could help finish setting up the playground equipment. But I should have known, from experience, that it was *not* going to be that easy. I should have realized that Justin was just agreeing with me so that I would let go of his shoulders. I should have remembered that out of *everyone* in the T.J. League, Justin has the thickest skull. I should have remembered that the *only* person that gives Xochitl competition in the broken ears department, is Justin. I *should* have known better. I *really* should have. But I think my brain is still a bit overloaded from all the confusion of this morning's activities, because when I was no more than five feet away from him, Justin shouted out what he had been telling us for the past five minutes.

“Just tell me!”

## 7 One More Word



I think that Justin has finally come to understand that none of us are going to tell him who our Secret Santa partner is, because he hasn't bugged me *once* since recess.

"What're *those* for?" Joseph asked, as we passed by the office on the way to lunch.

There was a new hand painted poster just below the office windows. Something Student Council probably put up. It said that

there were angels and boxes in the office. There was an angel and a shoebox taped to the poster.

“Oh, those are for the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child,” Zeph explained.

Zeph is on the student council, so I’m not surprised he knows.

“*Still* not exactly sure what they’re for,” Joseph told Zeph.

“Well, flyers should be going home today, but I’ll gladly explain it for you guys,” he said. Zeph is *always* polite. “Let’s start off with the Angel Tree Project. If you want, you can donate a dollar, or more if you want, to support the Angel Tree Program. And when you do, you get to write your name on one of those angels.”

“But what do you do with the money?” Lauren asked.

“I don’t do anything with it,” Zeph explained. “But the money that we collect goes to the Angel Tree Program.”

“And what do *they* do with it?” Lauren asked.

“They use it to purchase gifts for children of families who are having a hard time at Christmas time. Families can fill out a form for themselves or you can nominate a family you think would appreciate some support,” Zeph clarified.

“That’s cool,” Joseph, commented. “What about Operation Christmas Child? And what’s with the shoeboxes?”

“The shoeboxes are essential for Operation Christmas Child,” Zeph said, with intensity. “You put a toy or sports ball, with a pump, or something like that, with some essential items, and turn it in.”

“Then what happens?” I asked, honestly becoming intrigued.

“Then we turn them in at a drop off location,” Zeph went on. “Which reminds me, you have to include nine dollars with your shoebox.”

“Why?” Joseph asked.

“That’s how much it costs to ship your shoebox,” Zeph said.

“Ship your shoebox?” Lauren said, visually confused.

“Yes,” Zeph confirmed. “After you turn in your shoebox, it’s mailed to another country so that it can be given to an underprivileged child!”

“That’s so cool!” Lauren exclaimed.

“I know, right!” Zeph agreed.

I’m going to ask mom and dad if we can donate to the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child. Or at least one of them. I’ll even do some extra, *extra* chores to help out. But first, I have to get a gift for my Secret Santa partner. I’m not exactly sure what I’m going to get yet, but I have a few ideas.



“Okay Leaguers, here’s today’s scenario,” I said, as Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul, Sammy and I all huddled together. “This will be our first *off* world mission. Last night I received a distress signal from one of my long range, deep space sensors. It seems the Ruthless Resource Repressor has begun her attack on planet JLYJ-316.”

“Wait. Aren’t those people just simple, nomadic farmers?” Sammy asked, adding another detail to my scenario. Luckily, it wouldn’t drastically change the focus of the mission.

“Yes. Which means that not only have the soils and natural resources all been kept in optimum form, but the precious metals and rocks have been left alone,” I continued. “I think that’s why the Ruthless Resource Repressor has chosen this planet as her next target.”

“So, what are we going to do?” Justin asked, in a ‘hurry up and get to the point’ voice.

“Well, it’s not that easy,” I continued. “It seems that she’s not working alone. She’s teamed up with the Time Trapper.”

“The Time Trapper?” Paul repeated.

“Yes, Paul, the Time Trapper,” I confirmed. “The Time Trapper can trap time, in an area the size of Los Angeles County, for up to twenty four hours.”

“What does that mean?” Marcus asked.

“That means that she can pause time so that the sun stays in the peak spot in the sky, for people to work overtime, in the fields and mines,” I explained. “With The Ruthless Resource Repressor eyeing JLYJ-316’s precious metals and jewels, she can have the Time Trapper pause time to force the natives to work around the clock, until the whole planet has been wiped out!”

“That’s terrible!” Marcus chimed in.

“I know! But that’s not the worst part!” I explained.

“What do you mean?” Justin asked.

“The Ruthless Resource Repressor’s modus operandi is to destroy the planet once she’s done with it!” I proclaimed.

“What?”

“No way!”

“Not cool, man!”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me!”

“And that’s why we have to stop them!” I shouted, extending my hand to the center of our huddle. Everyone quickly followed my lead.

“We protect and serve all living things! The T.J. League reigns supreme!”



“Let’s go guys! Into the car!” mom ordered.

“Coming!” Xochitl yelled, from upstairs.

“Mom, do I *have* to go?” I whined.

Yes. I said ‘whined’. Not only has Xochitl taught me how to *ignore* people, she’s also taught me how to *whine* pretty well!

“For the last time, *yes*, T.J., you have to go,” mom answered.

“But I can just go to Marcus’ house until you come back,” I pleaded.

“‘*But I can go to Marcus’ house*’,” Xochitl mimicked me.

“Shut up!” I ordered.

“Don’t tell your sister to shut up,” mom commanded.

“But why can’t I just go to Marcus’?” I asked.

“They aren’t home, T.J. Daniel had a dentist appointment,”  
mom explained.

“But, mom!” I griped, in my best ‘please, just let me stay home’  
voice.

“I’m pretty sure I spoke in a language you understand,” mom  
said, in a calm, cool voice.

“Can we at least go to the mall after, so I can find a gift for my  
Secret Santa partner?” I asked, in a calm, cool voice.

“You have plenty of time to find a gift,” mom pointed out.

“But you always get busier and busier the closer we get to  
Christmas,” I rebutted.

“Tómas,” mom said, in her ‘if you say *one more word*’ voice,  
with fists clenched, eyes closed, and head turned to the side.

That’s all it took. I’ve learned better than to take matters past  
*that* combination. The *hard* way.

## 8 To The Mall



This is so boring. They just keeping doing the same thing *over and over*. All because one of the girls can't remember to do something called a pleeyay instead of a relevay. At least that what it *sounds* like her yelling teacher is saying. How much longer do I have to *suffer* through this?

“Mom, how much longer do we have to be here?” I asked.

“We’ve only been here fifteen minutes,” mom answered.

“So, like fifteen more minutes?” I tried.

“More like forty five,” mom corrected.

Forty five? *Forty five!* What am I supposed to do for *forty five minutes!*

“Don’t you have any homework you can be doing?” mom asked.

“I left my backpack at home,” I answered.

“Well that wasn’t very intelligent, was it?” mom taunted.

Man! If I at least had my tablet, I could be doing *something* less boring than this. Why did Daniel have to have a dentist appointment today? Why couldn’t it have been tomorrow. Or Yesterday. Or next week! This is almost like a punishment. Except I didn’t *do* anything to deserve one!

Maybe I’ll just close my eyes and rest. Who knows, maybe I’ll even fall asleep, that way I don’t have to keep hearing this lady’s voice. All she ever does is yell! How did she even become a teacher? *Why* did she even become a teacher?

“Here you go,” mom said, handing me her phone.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“You can do your reading for your reading log,” she answered.

“But what do I read?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Find something free on Kindle or Scholastic or something.”

“Can’t I just play games and read when we get home?” I suggested.

“You can either read or sit there bored. Those are your options,” she answered, holding her hand out for me to give her back her phone.

I sat there wondering if I would get in trouble for handing the phone back. Like, was this a test that I could fail? And would I get in trouble if I *did* fail? To read or to sleep? To read or to sleep? Hmmm?

“Really!” Xochitl’s teacher yelled, for the umpteenth time.

Mom turned her focus from me to the teacher and I kept the phone from her reaching hand. Better to be safe than sorry, you know?

As I opened the Kindle app to try and find something to read, Xochitl’s teacher announced a water break. After only fifteen minutes? They had barely done anything!

“Here you go, sweetie,” mom said, handing Xochitl her water bottle.

“How come *he* gets to play on your phone?” she asked.

“I’m *reading*,” I said, answering for mom.

“*Sure*, you are,” Xochitl said, rolling her eyes like she always did.

Mom gave her a light smack on the side of her head. That’s what you *get*!

“What have I told you about those eyes?” mom asked.

“That one day I’ll roll them too hard and they’ll get stuck in the back of my head,” she answered.

“That’s right,” mom confirmed. “And if they don’t get stuck back there on their own, I might just *help* them.”

Xochitl apologized and gave mom her water bottle back before taking a seat on mom’s lap. Sometimes I get in trouble for what *she* does. And sometimes, *sometimes*, she gets herself in trouble. And boy am I *glad* when I’m there to witness it!

Luckily, mom has Kindle Unlimited, so finding a ‘free’ book to read proved an easy task. I ended up choosing a fiction book about a kid named Nate. The hand drawn cover reminded me of the comics I draw. I’m glad I stumbled across it.

It didn’t take long before it captured and kept my attention. The main character, Nate, reminds me of myself. He has a *great* imagination! The only difference between the two of us, is that *his* imagination comes to life! How cool would *that* be! Even for just *one* day! I ended up getting so immersed in the story, that when mom took her phone back, I hadn’t even realized that Xochitl’s class was over.

“Aw, mom! Can’t I finish reading?” I asked, reaching for her phone.

“Not right now,” she answered.

“But I was right in the middle of a good part!” I begged.

“You downloaded it onto my phone, right?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, as politely as I could, hoping it would sway her to let me keep reading.

“I’ll send it to your tablet, so you can read it later,” she said, picking up Xochitl’s gym bag.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I’ll send it to you tablet,” she repeated.

“You can do that?” I wondered, out loud.

“Yes, T.J., I can do that,” she answered.

“Can I at least finish the page I was on?” I asked.

“Look, you *can* keep bugging me,” she said, “but that means it will just take us *that* much longer to get to the mall.”

“The mall?” I asked, *completely* confused.

“Yes, T.J. The mall,” she answered. “Xochitl’s ballet instructor just said that everyone needs to have rainbow leggings for their upcoming recital and you’re sister has grown out of hers.”

“Xochitl has *grown*?” I asked.

How come *she* keeps growing, but *I* still fit into the same clothes from third grade?

“Weren’t *you* the one who was begging to go to the mall before we came here?” mom said, more as a statement than a question.

“Yes,” I answered, in more of a question than a statement.

“Well, then let’s get going so we can get home before the meat I left in the sink goes bad,” mom instructed.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, taking Xochitl’s gym bag from her.

Well, what do you know? Coming to Xochitl's dumb practice ended up working out for me! Here we go. To the mall!

SAMPLE

## 9 Only Fifteen Dollars?



The mall parking lot was *packed* when we got there. Not only is it the afternoon, so most people are out of work and able to shop, but Christmas is just a few weeks away! We ended up parking half way across the wrong side of the mall. That means that not only do we have to walk half way across the overcrowded mall, trying not to bump into people, but we also have to walk all the way back!

“Let’s just get in and out,” Mom said, holding Xochitl in one hand and me in the other.

“But what about my Secret Santa gift?” I asked.

“I don’t know, T.J.,” she started, “it depends on how long it takes for us to get sister her leggings.”

“So, if it doesn’t take too long, I can look around?” I asked, hopeful.

“I don’t know, baby,” she answered. “We’ll see.”

“Please don’t take too long. Please don’t take too long. Please don’t take too long,” I whispered, crossing my fingers with my eyes closed.

It felt like the right thing to do but proved otherwise. Since I couldn’t see where I was going with my eyes closed, I ended up bumping into an elderly lady, causing her to drop her bags.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” I repeated, over and over, helping her to pick up her bags.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” mom said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m sure I’ll be okay,” she answered, with a smile, taking her bags back. “Are you okay, little bear?”

“I’m okay,” I assured her.

“Merry Christmas,” she told me, shuffling my hair, then continued on her way.

“You *have* to watch where you’re walking, T.J.,” mom commanded.

“Sorry, mom. She just came out of nowhere!” I lied.

Note to reader. Not only do I *not* encourage lying to your mother, I actually encourage the *complete* opposite. *Not* lying. Period. It just ends up coming back to bite you in the butt! Now, back to our story.

“Come on, we still have like ten more stores to pass before we’re even there,” Mom commented, taking our hands again, pulling us a bit quicker than she was before.

When we finally made it to the store, there was hardly *anyone* in there. Yes! That means we can get in and out and have time to go shopping for my Secret Santa partner.

“Excuse me, where can I find girl’s rainbow leggings,” mom asked the clerk near the front of the store.

“They should be on the left wall, just past the unitards,” she answered.

“Thank you,” mom said.

I’m not sure she’s realized this, but mom is still pulling us along like a dog taking their owner for a walk. *No*, I did *not* misspeak. I *meant* to say a dog taking their owner for a walk. You know what I’m talking about right? Like when you see someone taking their dog for a walk, but it’s actually the other way around. The dog is so excited to go for a walk that they’re actually *pulling* their master along for the ride. Yeah. That’s what mom’s kind of doing to us right now!

She finally released us when she spotted the rainbow leggings. Thank you! I looked at my hand and realized that not only was it red because mom was holding it so tightly, but it was probably also the reason I had lost feeling in it!

“Come on medium. Where are the mediums?” mom asked, out loud, while shuffling through the hangars, checking the tags.

Medium? *Medium?* I’m a medium!

“Here’s one,” she announced, taking it off the wall.

“Don’t I have to try them on?” Xochitl asked, as mom turned to head for the cash register.

“Not leggings, sweetie,” she answered. “They’re stretchy, so you should be fine.”

“If you say so,” Xochitl commented, with attitude.

*Bad idea!* Mom stopped in her tracks, slowly turned around and gave Xochitl a ‘*what did you just say to me?*’ look. Xochitl’s eyes almost popped out of her eye sockets. Similar to the way Gio’s did earlier. Mom slowly walked towards her and took her by the hand. Luckily, mom was holding Xochitl’s leggings in her other hand, so she couldn’t grab *my* hand.

“Let’s get going,” mom ordered, staring Xochitl straight in the eyes, in a whisper that not only scared me, but probably made Xochitl pee in her pants a little. I mean *I* just almost peed my pants, and she wasn’t even *talking* to me!

Xochitl didn't say anything this time. She just slowly nodded her head, *not* rolling her eyes. Actually, from my perspective, it looked really weird. Xochitl's *entire* head moved up and down, but her eyes stayed *completely* still. I don't think I've ever seen that happen before.

It didn't take long for mom to pay for the leggings since there were only two people in line. Now I was faced with a new dilemma. Mom hasn't been in the best mood since we left the house. Should I ask her if there's time for me to go shopping for my Secret Santa gift? What would *you* do if you were in my shoes?

We were coming up to the store I wanted check out, so I took a deep breath and used the calmest, most pleasant voice I could muster.

"Um, mom," I started, "is there enough time for me to look for my Secret Santa gift?"

Mom stopped speed walking, released my hand, and checked her watch.

"How long do you think it'll take?" she asked. "We still have to get home so I can cook the meat in the sink."

"It shouldn't take longer than twenty minutes," I answered, still using my 'I don't want to get in trouble' voice.

"You have fifteen. Which store did you want to go to?" she asked.

"This one," I answered, pointing to the store just ahead of us, to our left.

“Are you sure?” mom questioned.

“Yes,” I answered.

“But you always whine when we go in that store to get Xochitl something,” mom commented.

“But mom, I’m not buying something for *me*. I’m buying something for my Secret *Santa* partner,” I reminded her.

“And you’re sure they’ll want something from here?” she continued to interrogate.

I reached into my pocket, unfolded the interview paper from earlier this morning, and handed it to mom. She quickly glanced at it, folded it back up and handed it back to me.

“Let’s go,” she ordered, taking my hand again.

I wasn’t one hundred percent sure what I was going to get, but I had a few ideas in my mind.

Once we entered the store, I headed straight for the school supplies section. Mrs. Whiston had pointed out that we could get one *large* item worth fifteen dollars or that we could get lots of *little* items that add up to fifteen dollars. I had decided that I was going to get lots of *little* items. This store has a dollar section. That means that I can get fifteen things for my Secret Santa partner.

Now I know what you’re probably thinking. You’re probably thinking that I’m forgetting about the sales tax that’s added at the register. But I’m not. When Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Whiston were explaining Secret Santa to us earlier, Enrique had asked if he bought

something for \$14.99, and it went over because of taxes, would that count as over fifteen dollars. Mrs. Whiston had looked at Mr. Anderson, who shrugged his shoulders and gestured back towards Mrs. Whiston, as if giving her the final say so. Mrs. Whiston had turned back to Enrique and said that it would be okay.

“What about this?” Xochitl asked, shoving a kiddie toy in my face.

“No, Xochitl,” I answered. “My partner is in *fifth* grade, not *second*.”

She hurried away as I started to grab a few of the dollar items I thought my partner might like. But before I could even grab five, she was back.

“They might like this,” she said, placing a different toy in my hand, making me drop what I was holding.

“No, Xochitl!” I said, handing it back so I could pick up what I had dropped.

Once again, she hurried away. I had only grabbed two more items before she returned for a third time.

“They’ll *definitely* love this!” she urged, showing me a different toy.

It took all the patience I had *not* to scream at her.

“Mom!” I shouted.

“What is it?” mom asked, coming around the corner, with a few things in her hands.

“Xochitl keeps shoving toys in my face and won’t let me shop!”

I said, intensely, staring Xochitl in the eyes.

“I’m just trying to help him!” Xochitl claimed.

“I know honey. Why don’t you go find something you think Cousin Cristina would like,” mom told Xochitl, who quickly left me alone and rushed down a nearby aisle.

“So how much do you have to spend, again?” mom asked.

“We’re not allowed to spend more than fifteen dollars,” I answered.

“Only fifteen dollars?” mom asked.

I just nodded my head.



After choosing what I thought would be the *perfect* fifteen items for my Secret Santa partner, we got into the slightly longer line at this store. Actually, there were two registers open, but seven people in front of us. Luckily, the cashiers were quick, so it didn't take long for us to get to the front of the line.

As the cashier, Martha, rang up the school supplies, I took out my wallet. Any guess to what logo is on it? If it doesn't pop into your head right away, then you probably haven't read any of my other

adventures. And if that's the case, then since it's the time of the year when kindness and generosity are the focus, I'll just tell you who's logo it is. Batman's! It's actually an all-black wallet with a metal bat on the front that's painted yellow. I've had it for years, and you can tell by the wear and tear, but I'm going to use this thing until it falls apart!

Once we got out of the store, it was back into the clutches of mom's hands, being dragged through the crowd so we could get back before the meat in the sink could go bad. Now that I think about it, why doesn't mom just call dad and tell him to put it into the refrigerator? He should be home by now. Oh, well. I got my Secret Santa gift and that's all that matters. Everyone else will be fretting over the next couple of weeks and I'm all done. Thank, you, mom!



“Homework time!” mom announced, as soon as we entered the house.

“Can I at least get changed?” Xochitl asked.

“Yes,” mom answered. “But then it's straight to work!”

“Okie dokie!” she said, sprite like, as she skipped towards and up the stairs.

“Can you send me that book I was reading, to my Kindle app, so I can finish?” I asked.

“Don’t you only have to read for twenty minutes each night,” mom asked, taking the meat from the sink and putting in into a pan.

“Yes. Why?” I asked.

“Well, you read for over *thirty* minutes at Xochitl’s practice,” she explained. “I’ll do it later, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, in a ‘I guess so’ voice.

“Now go put that Secret Santa gift away before your sister decides to claim some of it for herself,” she instructed.

“There’s no *way* she’s getting any of this!” I declared, holding the bag up.

“I don’t know,” mom said, in a mischievous voice. “You know your little sister. She can be sneaky.”

“Uh uh! Not *this* time!” I argued. “I’m putting this into my Batman safe!”

“Well you better get going then!” she directed, turning me around by my shoulders, as if telling me to hurry up.



I had *just* finished my homework when mom called us down for dinner. Mmm. Breakfast for dinner. There aren’t many things on this planet that can beat the flavor and simplicity of a chorizo and egg burrito. The way the scent envelops not only the kitchen but reaches every corner of the house. And oh, how the flavors complement each other. And don’t forget the texture. Exquisite!

Please excuse my food jargon. I know it's not usually the way I talk, but mom has been streaming some food shows and I found this one where *kids* are the chefs. I'm not saying that I'm addicted to it or anything. I'm just saying that it's cool to see kids getting recognition for something that most adults don't think kids can do!

"So, mom was telling me that your class is doing a Secret Santa," dad said, as we ate dinner.

"Yes," I confirmed.

"And you've already chosen your gift?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, I have," I answered, proudly.

"Decisiveness. I like that," he lauded.

I smiled as I chewed the food in mouth. Dad doesn't give out many compliments, so when he does, they mean just that much more.

"Our school is also supporting the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child," I shared, after swallowing my food.

Talking with food in your mouth is *not* allowed at the table. That, and chewing with your mouth open, are like *asking* to be smacked upside the head!

"I know what the Angel Tree Program is," dad commented, "we support them at work. But what's Operation Christmas Child?"

"May I please be excused to get the flyer?" I requested.

"You mean there was a paper you were supposed to give me?" mom asked, with her eyebrow raised.

“Well, yeah, but Xochitl’s practice threw me off!” I said, trying to shift the blame.

“You’re excused,” dad said, setting me free from mom’s *mom* stare.

You know which one I’m talking about, right? The one that seems like she’s peering into your soul. The one that makes you think that she automatically knows *every* bad thing you’ve *ever* done. And knows *every* lie you’ve *ever* told. The one that doesn’t just work on *you*, but it works on your *friends*, too! The one that, even when you’re at your friend’s house, and *they’re* getting the mom stare from *their* mom, *you* feel sorry for everything bad *you’ve* ever done? *That* mom stare!

I quickly made my way upstairs, took the flyers from my folder, and returned to the kitchen. I handed mom the Angel Tree Program flyer, with the attached angel stapled to it. Then I handed dad the Operation Christmas Child flyer.

“Shoe boxes, huh?” he thought, out loud, while reading the flyer. “And we can just pick one up from the school. Nine dollars shipping. That’s not so bad. All around the world! T.J., do you mind if I take this flyer and share it with my boss at work?”

“Nope. Go ahead,” I answered. “Our school always keeps extra flyers in the front office.

“How much do you think we should give to the Angel Tree Program?” mom asked dad.

“Maybe I should take that one, too,” he suggested. “Maybe I can get my job to make a business donation. That way they can help more kids. I remember us getting Angel Tree gifts when I was little.”

Omg! That stands for ‘oh my goodness’ for those of you who don’t know. I can’t believe what’s happening! I was willing to do extra chores so that *I* could do something for the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child. Now it seems like dad might be able to get his job to do more than *I* ever could. Isn’t that awesome! This afternoon may have started off a bit rough, but this *evening* is starting off *great*! I can’t wait to tell Marcus all about it!



After we finished eating dinner, it was shower time. Thankfully, it’s Xochitl’s turn to go first, which means I have time to tell Marcus everything that happened at dinner and show him the gift I bought! I headed straight to my room and grabbed my walkie talkie.

“Captain America. This is Batman. Come in, Captain America,” I called.

At first there was no answer, so I went to my window to see if Marcus was in his room. The light was off, so I tried again.

“Captain America. This is Batman. Come *in*, Captain America,” I tried again, and again, no response.

I was about to try for a third time when I saw the light in Marcus’ room turn on.

“This is Captain America. What is it? Over.” Marcus asked.

“Come out to the tree house. Over,” I said.

“What for? It’s cold outside. Over,” he asked.

“I have something I want to show you. Over,” I relayed.

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow? Over.” Marcus offered.

“Please!” I begged.

There was a short pause before he responded.

“Okay, okay. Just let me get a sweater on. Over,” he responded.

“Be right out! Over!” I said, joyfully.

I decided that grabbing a sweater wasn’t such a bad idea, so Marcus was already on the platform when I got there.

“What was so important that it couldn’t wait until tomorrow?” Marcus asked, with his hands tucked underneath his arms.

“You know how our school is supporting the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child?” I asked.

“Yeah. So?” he asked.

He must *really* be cold, because I don’t think I’ve ever heard him say that before, so I’ll just ignore it.

“Well, my dad just said that he’s going to share the Operation Christmas Child flyer with his boss and he’s also going to see if his job will make a business donation to the Angel Tree Program,” I explained, gleefully. “Isn’t that great!”

“I’ll admit, that is pretty cool. What about the bag?” he asked, pointing at the bag I was holding in my hand.

“It’s the gift I got for my Secret Santa partner. After reading the interview paper, I knew *exactly* what to get!” I answered.

“Well, let’s see it then?” he said, blowing hot air into his hands, putting them back into his pockets when they were warm enough.

I opened the bag so he could see what was inside. He leaned forward and peered inside.

“It’s perfect! Right?” I asked.

Marcus then leaned back, into an upright position and stared at me. He didn’t say a word. He just stood there, staring at me. The cold may be to blame, but I can’t figure out why Marcus isn’t as excited as I am!



“Say something already!” I ordered.

“It’s cold,” he stated, coldly. “Can I go inside now?”

I didn’t know what to say. I mean *I* thought it was the perfect gift. Why didn’t Marcus think so? I know! Maybe it’s because he hasn’t seen my interview paper, yet!

“Here,” I said, reaching into my back pocket, “take a look at this and then tell me what you think.”

He didn't look too enthused, but he took his right hand out of his pocket and reached for the paper. He unfolded the paper, with one hand, and looked it over. Then he folded it back up and handed it to me. And he did all this in complete silence. I had come out here full of excitement and now I feel like I've done something worthy of punishment.

"Well?" I said, sheepishly.

"I think it will be well received," he commented. "Can I go inside now?"

"Sure," I answered, timidly. "See you tomorrow."

The walk back to my window felt like a walk of shame. I couldn't figure out why, but it did! I mean, I'm not sure what I had done, but Marcus wasn't excited at all! He almost acted like I had been wasting his time. He's never acted like that with me before. I hope everything's okay. That's it! Maybe something had happened before he came out and he just took it out on me! Oh, well. I won't let it bother me. He *is* my best friend, after all.

"There you are!" Xochitl yelled, as I climbed back into my room. "Mom! T.J. was in his treehouse! Did you even say he could go outside?"

"Get out of my room!" I ordered.

"You're in trouble! You were supposed to get in the shower when I was done!" she taunted.

"Get out!" I repeated.

“T.J.!” mom called, from somewhere in the house. “Shower. Now.”

Xochitl stuck her tongue out at me while wagging her head.

“Out!” I yelled.

“Xochitl! Leave your brother alone!” mom instructed.

She turned around and shook her butt at me before giggling and hurrying to her own room. Ugh! Even when she’s *leaving*, she can be annoying!



When I woke up in the morning, I realized that I hadn’t bought a gift bag or any wrapping paper to wrap my partner’s gift.

Thankfully, I still have *lot’s* of time to get something, so I’m not worried.

“Please be sure that you let me know *every* time you go out onto the tree house,” mom told me, the next morning as I was brushing my teeth.

She came out of nowhere and almost made me choke on my toothpaste! I nodded my head and grunted in agreement. I don’t know how she does that! She just sneaks up on me and I don’t even hear her. It’s like she’s a ninja!

“You’re not in trouble for last night. I just want to make sure that you and Marcus are safe,” she explained.

I nodded my head to show that I understood and spit out my toothpaste. When I turned around to apologize for not telling her about last night, she wasn't there. I didn't even hear her leave. How *does she do that!*

I know that she's always saying that when I was born she inherited mom wisdom and secret skills and stuff, but I'm not sure ninja skills were a part of that package. Spidey mom senses when there's something wrong, *maybe*. Special mom kisses to make the pain go away, *maybe*. Santa Claus' personal email, *maybe*. But ninja skills? That may be a bit of a stretch. What do you think? Does *your* mom ever sneak up on you without you knowing? Does *she* ever disappear without you hearing? Does *your* mom have secret ninja skills? It may be hard for me to fully believe, but I think my mom does!

When I got to my room, my Future Funmaker shirt was hanging from my doorknob. I almost forgot that I was on Future Funmaker duty today. Thank you, mom! If she hadn't washed my shirt, I would have to wear a loaner shirt, and those things smell! Funmaker John says that he washes them, but he either doesn't know how to wash clothes, or all the smells from the equipment room attack those poor, newly washed shirts!

After changing my shirt, I finished getting ready for school like I normally did and waited on the living room sofa for mom to announce it was time to go. I sat wondering what could have made

Marcus act the way he did last night. I may have a great imagination when it comes to creating scenarios for the T.J. League to overcome. And writing comics comes pretty easily to me as well. But for *some* reason, I just can't think of *what* could have happened to him. He's usually so polite and kind. But last night he wasn't.

"Mom-o-zine ready to go," mom announced. "Next stop, school!"

"Don't leave without me!" Xochitl yelled, from the top of the stairs. "I'm tying my shoe!"

"You know the rules," mom said. "If you're not in the car by the time it leaves, you're getting left behind!"

Then mom did something that she's really good at. And when I say, 'really good,' I mean *really* good. She doesn't do it very often, but when she does, it always sends chills down my spine. Wondering what it is? She did an evil witch's cackle. You know what I'm talking about right? The kind they use at Halloween in those witch toys. Except mom's is even more creepy than *those*. Just *thinking* about it makes me shudder!

"No! I'm coming!" Xochitl pleaded.

"I'm out the door!" mom called out, as she walked through the opened door, with me close behind.

"Moom!" Xochitl cried out.

And when I say 'cried,' I mean *cried*. As in, she was *cry-ing*. I think she should know by now that mom can't leave her behind

because *she's* the one that has to lock the door. I mean, come on, Xochitl! You're in second *grade* for goodness sake! You're always boasting about how smart you are, but you still fall for things like this? Sad. Just sad. Wait! Now, I'm going to have to listen to her sniffle the entire way to school. Ugh!



When we got to school, I got my breakfast and headed to our normal table. The rest of the T.J. League was already there and talking amongst themselves.

“Hey guys,” I said, as I sat down.

“Hey, T.J.,” they greeted, in unison.

“Sorry, about last night,” I apologized, to Marcus.

“No worries,” he responded.

“Was everything okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?” he asked.

“Oh, no reason,” I answered.

“Then why ask?” he questioned.

“I just thought you would be excited,” I said.

“Excited about what?” Justin asked.

“Oh, I showed Marcus the gift that I got for my Secret Santa partner,” I said, casually, then took a bite of my sweet bread.

“I thought you guys weren't telling anyone who your partner was!” Justin said, hotly.

“We *aren't*,” Sammy said.

“Then why is T.J. allowed to tell Marcus?” he asked.

“He didn't tell me anything,” Marcus said, in a ‘dude chill out’ voice.

“But he just said!” Justin said, raising his voice.

“He said what?” Paul asked.

“He just said that he showed Marcus the gift he got for his Secret Santa partner!” Justin proclaimed.

“*Exactly*,” Erick said.

“‘Exactly’?” Justin said, changing the volume and tone of his voice.

“Exactly,” Erick repeated.

“I'm confused,” Justin stated.

“Let me explain,” Sammy said, in her ‘I'll handle this,’ voice.

Everyone nodded and Erick did a sweeping motion with his hand, as if gesturing ‘go for it’.

“Okay, Justin, it's like this,” Sammy said, taking Justin by the shoulders and making direct eye contact with him. “T.J. said he *showed* Marcus the gift he bought for his partner. He never said that he *told* Marcus who his Secret Santa partner *is*. Get it?”

“Oh!” Justin exclaimed. “I get it, now! He just *showed* Marcus!”

“Yes, Justin. Good job!” Sammy praised, patting Justin on the shoulders as she released her grip on them.

“Wait,” Justin immediately followed up.

Everyone groaned. Have I mentioned how difficult it can be to convince Justin of something?

“No, seriously,” Justin said, in a ‘just hear me out’ voice. “I totally understand that T.J. didn’t tell Marcus who his partner is. But there’s something else.”

“Wha?” I asked, with sweet bread in my mouth.

“You’re already done?” he asked.

SAMPLE



“Wha thoo you mean?” I asked back.

“You already bought your Secret Santa gift?” he asked, in a ‘are you *kidding* me’ voice.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked, after taking a drink of chocolate milk.

“How in the world did you already buy a gift?” Justin asked.

“We had to go to the mall after Xochitl’s ballet practice because she needed new leggings,” I explained.

“But that doesn’t explain how you already bought a gift,” Paul pointed out.

“We were *at* the mall,” I said. “What’s not to understand.”

“But it hasn’t even been twenty four hours since we’ve gotten our interview papers,” Erick chimed in.

“Yeah. So?” I asked.

“So, that’s not a long time,” he commented.

“What’s wrong with that?” I inquired.

“That just doesn’t seem like a long time to put much thought into a gift,” Sammy said.

“What does *that* have to do with anything?” I asked, defensively.

“It just seems like you may have rushed the whole thing,” she answered.

“I read the interview sheet. I looked it over. *Well*. And it gave me a couple of good ideas,” I pleaded my case.

“And?” Justin said

“And one of the stores in the mall just happened to have one of the gifts that I was considering,” I said, standing up to throw my trash way.

“Where are you going?” Justin asked.

“I was thinking of throwing my trash away,” I said, stopping in my tracks and turning around to face him. “But wait. I’m not sure

I've thought about it long enough. How long would *you* suggest I consider it before I'm able to decide if it's a good idea or not?"

"T.J.," Marcus said, calmly.

"What?" I asked. "I was so excited as I was picking out my gift. I couldn't *wait* to see the expression on my partner's face. I was so excited that I tried to share my experience with *you*. And now I feel like I'm getting put on trial for doing something wrong when I didn't do anything wrong!"

"We're not putting you on trial," Erick said.

"Then why are you all ganging up on me?" I asked, still holding my trash in my hands.

"We're not ganging up on you, T.J.," Paul said.

"Well, it sure *feels* like it!" I said, feeling tears start to collect in the corners of my eyes.

Sometimes when I get angry, it makes me cry. Let me repeat that. *Sometimes* when I get angry. It's like my emotions go into overdrive or something. And for some strange reason, if I'm not able to calm down, it makes me cry. I mean, it doesn't *always* lead to full out crying and all. Sometimes the tears just stay in the corner of my eyes. It depends on the situation, really. But once those tears start falling, *boy* is it hard to make them stop! Which can be *really* embarrassing! When it happens at home, that's one thing. But when it happens at *school*! Let's just say that when it *does* happen, having the power of invisibility would come in handy!

“I’m sorry, T.J.,” Marcus said, standing up from his seat, to walk over to me. “You’re right. You *didn’t* do anything wrong. The guys were just sharing their opinions,” he said, turning around to look at all of them.

They each nodded their head in agreement, looking at me and then at each other and then at me again. Their quick response didn’t convince me, but the looks on their faces matched their actions and seemed to say, ‘we’re sorry for making you feel bad’.

“The gift you got your partner *is* great,” Marcus said, taking my trash for me.

I dabbed the tears from the corners of my eyes and put my backpack over my right shoulder.

He might not have had the response I was looking for last night, but at least he still has my back. If he hadn’t stopped the guys, I would have been doing *more* than just dabbing at tears!

“So, since you’ve already bought your gift, you can tell us who your partner is. Right?” Justin asked.

“Justin!” everyone said, in unison, the way Mrs. Frizzle’s class says ‘Carlos’ when he tells a bad joke.

For some reason, their response made me laugh. And just like that, everything was back to normal. We may not always see eye to eye on everything, but I’ve got the *best* group of friends!



After breakfast, no one questioned me about buying my gift so quickly anymore. Justin's even stopped bugging everyone to tell him who their partner is. Again.

"Hey guys?" Sammy said, after the final recess, as we were putting all the playground equipment in the equipment room.

"Yeah?" we responded.

"Did you notice that Leah was wearing the same shirt that she had on yesterday?" she asked.

"What?" Erick asked back.

"Yeah," Sammy started. "She was sitting at the Buddy Bench yesterday, so I invited her to join us in a game of four square, and today, she was sitting at the Buddy Bench again, wearing the same shirt."

"Well, I was running two on two basketball, so I was nowhere *near* the buddy bench," Erick commented.

"And I was running soccer," Paul said. "So, I didn't get a chance to look."

"Well, I was running Heroes and Villains, so I spent all my time on the field," I shared.

"I've been running dodge ball," Justin told us, "so I've had my back to the Buddy Bench all recess."

"I *did* see her sitting at the Buddy Bench," Marcus answered. "But I didn't notice what shirt she was wearing."

"I'm *telling* you guys. It was the same shirt!" Sammy implored.

“You sure it wasn’t just the same color?” Paul asked.

“I’m pretty sure,” Sammy answered.

“How do you know?” Erick asked.

“Because not only was it the same *color*, but it had the same unicorn on the front!” Sammy declared.

“I guess that *would* be hard to miss,” Marcus said.

“Maybe she just has two identical shirts,” Justin commented, offering a solution.

“But why would she wear them two days in a row?” Sammy asked.

“I don’t know?” he answered.

“Maybe she’s doing some new social media challenge,” Paul suggested.

“The ‘wear the same shirt two days in a *row* challenge’?” Sammy asked, in a ‘are you *kidding* me’ voice.

“Maybe you have to wear the same shirt as long as you can before your mom makes you change it,” Erick said.

“*Really?*” Sammy asked.

“Hey! People have done some pretty dumb challenges in the past!” I pointed out.

“True,” Marcus agreed.

“I don’t think that’s what this is,” Sammy argued.

“Well, I think you’re just overreacting,” Justin remarked.



THIRTEEN

## *Maybe She's Right*

“Great! Now *I’m* getting put on trial!” Sammy exclaimed.

“No, you’re not,” Marcus said, in the same voice he had used with me at breakfast. “We’re just sharing our differences of opinion.”

“Well, it sure feels like it!” Sammy said, *slamming* the equipment door.

I *totally* felt her frustration.

“Sorry.”

“Sorry, Sammy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“Is everything okay?” Funmaker John asked.

“Everything’s okay,” Erick said. “Sammy just didn’t realize how strong she’s become!”

“Whoa!” Funmaker John said, holding his arms up. “Well, just try and turn down the volume on your muscles next time and remember we’re on the same team!”

We all laughed and headed back to class.



When we got back to class, Mrs. Whiston was answering some of the questions that she had gotten through the Classroom Communication app and through her email.

“So, remember, the gift bag, tissue paper and wrapping paper do *not* count towards the fifteen dollar limit on your gift,” she explained.

Whew! I’m glad I didn’t miss *that* one. I almost asked her that earlier, and it would have been a bit embarrassing to raise my hand and ask a question that she had already answered.

“And finally,” she continued, “if your family is unable to participate at this time, don’t worry. Just let me know, and I’ll make sure that your partner still gets a gift. You can even tell me what you think a good gift would be, and I’ll let you sign your name!”

If I haven't shared this in my previous adventures, let me make sure that I say it in this one. I am so glad that I got Mrs. Whiston as my teacher way back in kindergarten. And I'm so glad that our school makes us keep the same teacher for all our years of elementary school. Even though she gives us some difficult projects sometimes. And even though she holds us responsible for our actions, even when we wish she would just let us slide, since we're kids. And even though sometimes she makes us cringe when she tries to do the latest dance move or says things to try and be cool. You can throw all of that out the window, because no matter *what* any of us may say when we're angry at her, she has the *best* heart.

After answering all the questions about Secret Santa, she paired us up again, except this time she used her 'invisible' bag of shticks. I know what you're asking yourself. What do I mean by 'invisible'? That's what Mrs. Whiston says. And no, I did *not* misspeak when I said, 'shticks'. She says that, too. It's basically a camouflage pencil case with popsicle sticks inside. I think she pretends it's invisible because the bag is camouflage. Cringe? Eh. We've gotten used to it. Oh, and as for the shticks, each popsicle stick had a number written on it. One number for every person in our class. Mrs. Whiston has *lots* of different ways to call on people. This is just another one of her ways.

"Now, we've done self-portraits in the past, but I want to switch things up a bit," Mrs. Whiston announced.

Great! I wonder what ‘switch things up’ means *this* time!

“This time I want you to draw your partner,” she said.

That didn’t sound to hard.

“But not just from their shoulders up,” she continued. “I want you to draw their whole body. And I want you to draw them wherever they say they want to spend winter break.”

Okay. That’s going to be a bit harder. Not *that* much harder, really. Actually, it’s going to be more time consuming than hard. I get enough practice drawing when I work on my comics.

“I want you to use the next fifteen minutes to work on your portrait,” she said. “And if you need extra time, you can finish it for homework.”

“What do we have to use for our drawing?” Leo asked.

“I have some drawing paper in the back,” Mrs. Whiston answered.

“No,” Leo said. “I mean, do we use crayons? Color pencils?”

“Markers? Watercolors?” Mrs. Whiston continued for him. “It’s up to you. If you just want to do a nice pencil sketch, that’s fine, too!”

“Do we have to do it in any particular style?” Jefferson asked.

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Whiston asked.

“Do we have to do it like one of the artists we’ve learned from our Amplify the Artist projects?” he clarified.

“You may, if you’d like,” she answered, “but it’s not a requirement. You can make your portrait however you like. Be

creative!”

Yes! That means I can draw him like I draw my comics! Actually, I’m not exactly sure how that’s going to work, since he’s not a superhero, but I’m sure that I can think of something.

“Any other questions?” Mrs. Whiston asked. “No? Okay. Go ahead and get started!”

I grabbed one of my sketching pencils from my pencil box and headed to Leo’s desk, since he was grabbing some drawing paper from the back of the class. I figure that I can do my base sketching in class and then add color and more detail later when I get home.

Now, you probably don’t know this, but Leo has a twin. It’s kind of weird but also kind of cool. Usually, when I think of someone having a twin, I think of them being an *identical* twin. Or at least two *boys* or two *girls*. But Leo’s twin is neither *identical* nor a *boy*. Leo’s twin is a *girl*. I know, right! When I first found out, it blew my mind. I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. Leo’s twin sister is Leah. As in Lee-uh, not Lay-uh like the princess from Star Wars. Wait. Now that I think about it, she’s the same Leah that Sammy was asking us about earlier. Strange the way some things work, huh?

“I just want to apologize in advance,” Leo said, as he put a blank drawing page in front of me.

“For what?” I asked.

“I was *not* born to be an artist,” he commented.

“No worries. We’re all good at *something*, but we don’t have to be good at *everything*,” I reassured him.

“Thanks, T.J.,” he said, with a smile as he sat down in his seat.

“Plus, I *like* drawing, so maybe I can give you some pointers,” I suggested.

“Really?” Leo asked, excitedly.

“Sure!” I answered, matching his excitement at the thought.

Leo suggested that I draw him first so that he could see how I did it and then maybe he would try to copy my process. I asked him what he wanted to do during winter break, and he said he would like to be somewhere tropical. That made it simple for me. After drawing him, all I would have to do was add a beach and palms trees in the background.

I asked him to stand up so that I could get a good look at him. I don’t know about you, but I like to *lightly* sketch the frame of someone’s body first and then add the details, little by little, in a slightly darker sketch. Then, once I’m happy with what I see, I’ll either darken the lines with my pencil or add color. It depends on what I want my final product to look like.

As I looked at Leo, I realized that I was going to have to use my imagination a bit. He said he wanted to be in a tropical place, but he’s currently wearing cargo sweats, a long sleeve shirt and hiking boots. He looks more like he’s about to go hiking or out to the snow. Changing his pants to shorts should be easy. I can change his long

sleeve into a tank top, easily. Changing his shoes to flip flops is probably going to be the most difficult, but I think I'll let him keep his shoes on when I draw his feet.

“Do you want to be building a sandcastle or surfing?” I asked him.

“You can do that?” he asked.

“Sure!” I answered. “It’s not going to be professional, but I figured it would be better than just having you stand there, on a beach!”

“If you can draw me surfing, that would be cool!” he said, pretending to surf on his chair.

“Make good choices,” Mrs. Whiston said, from her desk.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Leo responded.

He and I laughed after he got down from his chair. I think this ‘switch it up’ is going to be more fun than I originally thought.

After getting his face just right, I drew his tank top, which was pretty easy to do. I wanted to draw him in cargo shorts. You know, the kind that the Crocodile Hunter wears? Like that! It was a good thing he was wearing cargo sweats. All I had to do was stop drawing them at the knee level.

Then I noticed something. It was something that was on Leo’s sweats. And it was right *above* where his left knee would be. I’m pretty sure it’s a stain. I may be imagining things, but I remember Noah spilling some of his teriyaki chicken on Leo, yesterday, at lunch

time. I remember it because Noah kept apologizing *over* and *over* and *over* again. Leo told him that it was okay, but he just wouldn't listen. He had taken his napkin to try and clean it off, and when that didn't work, he started taking other people's napkins. One of the supervision aides had to come and calm him down since he was kind of creating a scene.

I looked up at Leo's shirt and tried to remember if that was the same shirt he wore yesterday. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't remember.

"Everything okay? T.J.?" he asked, in a sing song voice while waving his hand in front of my face.

"Huh? What?" I stuttered, as I snapped out of my unexpected gaze. "Oh, yeah. I was just trying to think of what I should draw on your shirt. A deserted island, a shark or sea turtle?"

"A shark!" Leo exclaimed.

I know. I know. I *just* said that I didn't promote lying earlier, but I didn't want to embarrass him. I mean, what if he *is* wearing the same clothes from yesterday? That could totally change the mood. We're having so much fun right now and I don't want to ruin it!

Hmmm. First, Sammy said that she thought that Leah, Leo's twin sister, was wearing the same *shirt* from yesterday. And now it looks like Leo is wearing the same *sweats* from yesterday. I know that we didn't fully believe Sammy, but maybe she's right.



FOURTEEN

## *Maybe She's Wrong*

I kept drawing Leo as if nothing was wrong, but I can't help but wonder if Sammy is on to something. What that something is, I have *no* idea, but it gives me a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

After I finished my sketch of him, I helped Leo with his drawing of me. When he asked me where I wanted to be for winter break, I told him that I wanted to be in the Bat Cave. Then I thought it over when I realized that it would probably be too difficult to draw, so I told him that I wanted to go back to my Nána's farm. That should be

a little bit easier. All he has to do is draw a house, a barn and some hay.

You're probably thinking that I forgot about the animals. And if you are, then *you're* probably forgetting something! Leo said he isn't that great of an artist! You don't have to draw animals to know that it's a farm. As long as there's a barn and some hay, people should get it. If he wants to, he can add some corn rows, but he doesn't have to.



“These taconadas are *good!*” Justin exclaimed, as we ate lunch.

“They're the same as they always are,” Erick pointed out.

“Nuh uh,” Justin responded. “I don't know why, but these are even *better* than usual.”

“The wrapper *is* different,” Paul noticed.

“Maybe the district has changed distributors,” Sammy offered.

We all stopped eating and stared at her.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “You guys *have* to know that the district has contracts with certain food distributors that provide us with the food for our breakfasts and lunches.”

No one moved, so she explained in her ‘speaking to a toddler’ voice.

“District person in charge of food has friends that she buys food from. Sometimes district person meets a new friend that has better

food or better prices. Maybe these new taconadas are from a new friend!”

We stayed frozen.

“Come on, Marcus. *You* at least should have understood *that* explanation!” Sammy said, gesturing towards him.

“I did,” he said. “I’m just trying to decide whether or not I’m offended at the style of explanation you decided to use.”

“Oh, my goodness. Whatever!” she responded.

“T.J., are you feeling okay?” Paul asked.

“Huh?” I answered.

“You’ve been staring off into space since *before* Sammy’s food explanation,” he commented.

“I’ve just been thinking,” I said.

“About what?” Marcus asked.

“You know the art project that Mrs. Whiston gave us?” I asked Sammy.

“Yeah. What about it?” she asked.

“I think you might be right about Leah,” I answered.

“Time out. Flag on the play!” Justin called out, forming a ‘T’ with his hands, followed by some strange hand movements. “Illegal changing of topics without proper notice or transition sentence.”

“Yeah,” Paul said. “*What* art project?”

“Not *that*!” Justin responded.

“Then *what*?” Marcus asked.

“I *know* about the art project. I’m in the same class, remember?” Justin pointed out. “I was wondering how in the world the art project we were working on has *anything* to do with what Sammy told us earlier about Leah?”

“I *will* admit,” Sammy said. “You have *definitely* whetted my appetite.”

“Time out. Flag on the play!” Justin repeated, hand signs and all. “Illegal use of unknown words, leading to pain in the brain.”

“Well *that* doesn’t take much, does it?” Sammy whispered, under her breath.

“What was that?” Justin asked.

“Whetted my appetite? Piqued my curiosity?” Sammy tried, but seemed to be getting nowhere. “Gotten my interest? Grabbed my attention!”

“Oh!” Justin exclaimed. “Well, why didn’t you just say that in the *first* place!”

Sammy just placed her hand over her face and shook her head in disbelief.

“If it’s okay with you guys, I’m going to continue my explanation,” I interrupted, sarcastically.

“Oh, yeah,” Justin approved.

“After recess, Sammy said that she thought Leah had worn the same shirt two days in a row, right?” I started.

“Right,” Sammy confirmed.

“Well, Mrs. Whiston paired us up for an art project, where we had to draw our partner,” I continued. “And not just their face, but their *whole* body.”

“And?” Erick asked.

“*And*, Mrs. Whiston just happened to pair me up with Leo,” I said.

“That’s Leah’s brother,” Paul pointed out.

“Right,” I verified. “Well, as I was drawing Leo surfing—.”

“Surfing?” Erick interrupted.

“We were supposed to draw our partner wherever they wanted to spend winter break,” I clarified. “And while I was drawing his pants, well shorts, but that’s not important. What’s important, is that while I was looking at his pants, I noticed a stain above his knee.”

“And that’s important *because*?” Sammy asked, obviously dissatisfied with the level of interest I was providing her.

“Do you guys remember what happened at lunch yesterday?” I asked.

“You mean me going undefeated in handball?” Justin asked.

“No. Not during lunch *recess*!” I answered. “I mean during *lunch*.”

“What happened during lunch?” Justin asked.

“Remember when Noah spilled his teriyaki chicken on Leo?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah!” Paul answered. “He made that *huge* fuss over trying to clean Leo’s pants!”

“Right!” I said, excitedly.

“You’re going somewhere with this, right?” Sammy asked, still not satisfied.

“Yes,” I answered. “The stain on Leo’s pants was Noah’s teriyaki chicken mishap! Which means he *had* to have worn the same pants two days in a row!”

“Just like Leah!” Sammy exclaimed, finally seeming satisfied.

“I *told* you guys!”

“Okay, okay. So, they wore the same clothes two days in a row,” Justin admitted. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Sammy and I said, in unison.

“*Actually*, it could be *three* days in a row,” Marcus added to the conversation.

“What?” Erick asked.

“Today could be the third day in a row. Or even the fourth,” he commented.

“What do you mean?” Justin asked.

“We don’t know what they wore over the weekend,” Marcus said. “So, for all we know, today could be the third or fourth day they’ve worn the same clothes.”

“Whoa!”

“That’s right!”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But what does it mean?”

“I think it means that something’s wrong,” Sammy shared.

“But what?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Sammy answered.

“Maybe we should tell someone,” Marcus offered.

“But what would we tell them?” I asked.

“Everything we know,” Marcus answered.

“And what do we know?” I asked.

“That Leah and Leo have been wearing the same clothes for the past two days. Maybe even the past *four* days!” Marcus said.

“I agree with Marcus,” Paul commented.

“But I don’t think that’s enough,” Sammy argued.

“How is that not enough?” Justin asked. “*You* were the one who came to us worried about Leah.”

“I know I did,” Sammy agreed, “but I just don’t think we have enough information to share yet.”

“Of *course*, we do!” Erick chimed in.

“I agree with Sammy,” I said.

“How!” Erick asked.

“If we try and tell someone, they’ll probably just tell us that it’s most likely nothing and not to worry about it,” I explained.

“But they *might* take us seriously and help us figure out what’s wrong!” Justin contended.

“Yeah!”

“Not necessarily!”

“How can you say that!”

“Guys!”

Everyone started talking over each other, which just led to yelling, which led to Mrs. Lender asking us to calm down before we were put on clean up duty. After everyone calmed down, I suggested that we not tell anyone, yet. And before anyone could start arguing again, I put my hand up, as if to say ‘wait, there’s more.’ Then I said, that if Leah and Leo wore the same clothes tomorrow, we would *definitely* tell someone. Everyone agreed to wait. Some more easily than others.

For the rest of the day, I couldn’t fully concentrate on anything I was supposed to be working on. All that was on my mind, was trying to figure out what wearing the same clothes two, three or even *four* days in a row could mean. It could mean something, but it could also mean nothing. Ugh! My brain is starting to hurt!



“Hey guys!” Justin whisper shouted, out of breath, as we waited in line for school to start.

“Have you been running?” Sammy asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” he said, between breaths.

“What *does* matter?” I asked.

“Leah and Leo are wearing different clothes today,” he shared.

“Are you sure?” Erick asked.

“No. I’m *not* sure. I just decided to run from the front of the school and across the *entire* blacktop because I wanted to get my heartrate up!” Justin answered, sarcastically.

“So, they’re *not* wearing the same clothes from yesterday?” Erick asked.

“Nope,” Justin answered.

“Well, what does that mean?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know!” Justin answered.

“I was *asking* Sammy!” Paul exclaimed.

“Well, *sorry*,” Justin shouted back.

The guys started talking over each other again, causing complete chaos. I know that as the leader of the T.J. League, I should probably be mediating all of this, but *I’m* trying to figure out what this might mean. Again, it could mean something. Something important. Then again, it could mean nothing. But then again, Sammy isn’t wrong that often. But then again, she’s not perfect. Maybe she’s right. Maybe she’s wrong.

## 15 What To Do



“If you took your artwork home to finish it, please make sure to put it in the Homework Bin so it can be graded,” Mrs. Whiston instructed, as we put our backpacks on the backpack rack. “And make sure that your name is written on it somewhere.”

I had taken mine home, so I made sure to drop it off on my way in. I’m pretty pleased with the way it came out. It’s a piece of work that I’ll probably add to my ‘Favorites’ portfolio. It’s kind of like

folder you have on your computer or phone. A folder of pictures you like more than the others. Well, I have a *physical* folder that I keep all my favorite artwork in. And like I said, it's a piece that I will *probably* add to my portfolio. I haven't decided yet. I *really* like it, but I'm also considering putting it in a frame and giving it to Leo for Christmas. You know, seeing as how I got his sister for my Secret Santa partner.

Today's daily prompt is asking us what our favorite part of the holiday season is. I know that most people will probably answer that receiving gifts is their favorite part, and normally, so would I, but my parents do Christmas a little bit differently in my house. What do I mean? Let me explain. In my house, we are each allowed to get *one* gift from each other. My mom puts all our names in a hat and we each draw one. If we pull out our own name, we put it back and take another. Of course, mom makes us *show* her what name we've pulled out to make sure that we're not lying because we wanted to get someone else. I'm not saying that I've done it before, but I *am* saying that if she didn't check, I probably would have put Xochitl's name back last year.

Of course, whatever presents we get from our family members, like aunts and uncles and stuff, she lets us accept. She says that she can't control what we get from Nána, or Tía Socorro and stuff, but she doesn't want Christmas to be all about receiving. She said that she prefers it to be about giving. And to make sure that it *is*, she has

us choose three people to get a gift for. Preferably someone in need. It could be a friend, a teacher or someone else. But we can't tell the people we choose that we're going to buy something for them. It has to be a surprise, that way they can't try and get us something in return. Again, the whole focus is to *give*, not to receive.



After this morning's events, my mind was put at ease regarding Leah and Leo wearing the same clothes two days in a row. I know. I know. It could have been four. But maybe it *was* only two days. Maybe their mom just didn't get a chance to do laundry. Maybe there was a family emergency and they came home *extra* late, so they woke up *extra* late and just decided to stay in the same clothes. Maybe... maybe... I don't know! Maybe it was nothing after all!

"So, are we just supposed to pretend that nothing happened?" Justin asked, as we set up the playground equipment.

"They changed their clothes," I said.

"I know, but what if they hadn't," Erick asked.

"But they *did*," Sammy pointed out.

"I just can't help but think that something's wrong," Marcus said.

"Maybe their mom just didn't get a chance to do the laundry," I suggested.

"Then why didn't their dad?" Justin asked.

“Their dad doesn’t live with them,” Sammy answered.

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” Justin admitted, shamefully.

“Why doesn’t their dad live with them?” Erick asked.

“Not that it’s important to our conversation, but he died when we they were little,” Sammy shared.

“Oh. Sorry,” Erick apologized, in the same shameful voice that Justin had just used.

“But that *still* doesn’t mean that something’s not wrong,” Paul pointed out.

“Guys, we could argue about this all day,” I said, “but it’s not going to get us anywhere.”

“I just can’t believe it,” Erick said.

“Believe what?” Sammy asked.

“I just can’t believe that it was you and T.J. that first made a big thing about this, and now you two are the ones telling us to leave it alone!” he answered.

“Guys, we had a deal,” I reminded them.

“Yeah,” Sammy backed me up. “If they had worn the same clothes again today, we would have told someone.”

“But they *could* have,” Justin argued.

“But they didn’t,” I rebutted.

“But still–,” Paul started.

“But nothing,” Sammy said, in her ‘and that’s final!’ voice.

No one said anything after that. I know that I've mentioned plenty of times how smart Sammy is, but if I haven't mentioned it lately, out of all of us, she's also the *toughest!*

No one mentioned Leah and Leo for the rest of the day. They may not have agreed with Sammy and me, but they were probably too afraid to say anything. At least to one of us.

"Great news!" dad exclaimed, as I met him at the door.

"What?" I asked.

"I shared your Operation Christmas Child flyer with my boss, and they said that they're going to look into it!"

"That's awesome!" I shouted.

"I know!" dad agreed, dropping his workbag to pick me up and spin me around.

"And there's more!" he added, as he stopped spinning.

"What?" I asked.

"You get to go to work with me tomorrow," he answered.

"Why?" I wondered.

"My job is having a 'take your child to work' day," he explained.

"Daddy!" Xochitl yelled with glee, from the top of the stairs.

"Baby!" dad called back, putting me down so he could pick *her* up.

*Man!* She's *always* ruining things!



“Won’t he miss school?” mom asked, at dinner.

“I already messaged Mrs. Whiston and sent an email to the school,” dad answered.

“And?” I asked. The *only* person that can shut down dad *and* Mrs. Whiston, is mom.

“Mrs. Whiston was excited and said that since it’s going to be a minimum day, that T.J. won’t be missing much. Seems Thursdays are when they go to the library and the computer lab,” dad explained.

“But won’t T.J. miss out on his computer lab work?” mom continued to question.

“Mrs. Whiston said that he can do it on his tablet,” he answered.

“I can!” I agreed. “Mrs. Whiston showed us how to download the app and how to sign in and everything!”

Mom didn’t ask dad any questions. But she also didn’t respond to what I had just said. Is she going to let me go or not!

“So?” dad asked, looking at mom, then at me, then at mom again.

Again, she sat, silently.

“If T.J. gets to miss a day at school, then *I* get to miss a day,” Xochitl proclaimed.

“It doesn’t work that way,” mom declared.

Come on! You responded to Xochitl! Can you *please* respond to dad now! Dad gave mom a ‘so?’ look with raised shoulders. Once

again, she said nothing. Ugh! The suspense is killing me!

“It’ll be *your* job to make sure he logs in and gets his work done,” mom told dad.

“No problem,” he responded, with a smile.

“And *you*, are to be on your *best* behavior,” she instructed me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I agreed.

“Mom will do fine,” she corrected.

“Yes, mom,” I responded.

“Of course, ‘yes, my queen’, ‘yes, your majesty’, and ‘yes, kisser of boo boos’ will also suffice,” she said, with an air of supremacy, curtsy included.

No one said anything for a moment, but we couldn’t contain ourselves. We all laughed so hard, dad started coughing, Xochitl almost fell out of her chair and I almost peed my pants. Almost!



“This is my office,” dad said, as he opened a door to a small room. And when I say ‘small’, I mean smaller than my bedroom. All that was inside of it was a computer on a computer desk, a file cabinet with a printer on top and a board on the wall that was half cork board half white board,.

“What exactly do you *do* in here?” I asked.

“Well, T.J.,” dad answered, “this is where I meet with people who want to volunteer with our program.”

“And how do they do that?” I wondered.

“Well, volunteers can help with food preparation and distribution, janitorial services, they can help with receiving—,” dad started.

“Receiving?” I asked.

“Yeah. Like when we receive deliveries. Volunteers can help us unload the cargo and organize the shipments,” dad clarified.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“Believe it or not, there’s more,” dad said.

“Like what?” I inquired.

“For example,” dad said, “this past weekend, our washing machine broke down. Instead of having to pay a company to come out and fix it, which could have cost hundreds, one of our long-time volunteers, who owns his own maintenance business, came in Monday and fixed it. For free!”

“That’s so cool!” I exclaimed.

“Right! And it was a good thing he did!” dad said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because we have a wash schedule,” he answered.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Well, it’s like this. The women and children who stay in this shelter have certain needs that we try to meet. One of the most important needs, besides providing a room and food, is the ability to have clean clothes. And in order to make sure that everyone has equal

access to the washer and dryer, we created a schedule for everyone to follow.”

“Oh,” I said, a bit less confused.

“And since our washer wasn’t working, some of our families didn’t get the opportunity to wash their clothes,” dad continued.

“When Mr. Frank fixed our machine, families were able to wash their clothes again. Of course, we have *amazing* volunteers who stayed past normal hours, so that families that couldn’t wash their clothes this past weekend, would have clean clothes!”

“Those people are *awesome!*” I commented.

“I’m always boasting that we have the *best* volunteers!” dad said, raising his hand for a high five, which I happily obliged.

I spent the rest of the day shadowing dad as he worked with volunteers and staff to make sure that the women and children’s shelter was running smoothly. I helped where I could, like carrying smaller, lighter boxes into the warehouse. Or helping sweep leaves that had fallen from a tree. Or putting on gloves so that I could help separate and prepare the snack that kids would get to eat when they came home from school. ‘Home’. That word definitely meant something a little different to the people living here than it probably does to me.

I have to say that my level of respect for my dad grew greater and greater as I saw how his job helped people. And not just *any* people. People in need. People who were missing things that I

sometimes take for granted. Things we *all* probably take for granted at one time or another.

I asked my dad if I could play with some of the kids on the play structure they had, since I hadn't taken a break all day. Well, except when we ate lunch. But I would normally have had recess at school, and since I've been helping dad all day, I haven't had the chance to play. Not that I'm complaining! It's been a *great* experience!

"Go ahead," he answered. "If you need me, I'll be in my office."

I ran to the play structure, where a little boy and his sister were being watched by their mother.

"Is it okay if I play with you?" I asked them.

They looked at their mom, who nodded her head in approval.

"Thank you!" I exclaimed.

We played tag, I spy with my little eye and even cloud watched. You know, when you say what a cloud looks like. Like 'that cloud looks like a bunny' or 'that cloud looks like a dragon'. That game.

After a while, their mom said it was time to go inside. I gave each of them a high five and thanked them for letting me play with them. As I walked back to dad's office, a familiar voice made me stop in my tracks. And before I could turn around, it was followed by *another* familiar voice.

"I bet you that I can swing higher than you!" the first familiar voice said.

“Not in a million years!” the second voice argued.

“We’ll see!”

I turned around to see something that I never thought I’d see. I mean, when dad invited me to go to work with him, it never even crossed my mind that I would see people I *knew* living in his shelter. Well, not *his* shelter, but the shelter he works at. You know what I mean!

I took off my glasses and wiped my eyes to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. Maybe I was just imagining it. After putting them back on, I realized that the people I was seeing, were real. It wasn’t my mind playing tricks on me. It was *really* them. Just a hundred feet or so in front of me, were Leah and Leo.

I didn’t mean to stare, but I was in a state of shock! How could I *not* know that they were living here? Wait! *Why* are they living here? I mean, what happened that made them *have* to live here? Didn’t they have any family they could stay with? And if not, they could stay with us! Leah could stay in Xochitl’s room and Leo could stay in *my* room. I would even be willing to sleep on the floor!

When I finally got a hold of myself, I *ran* to my dad’s office. I *had* to ask him. I wanted to know how I could help them. And not only *them*, but *everyone* who’s staying here. There’s *got* to be something I can do. But what? What to do? What to do?

## 16 Tell Us Already!



“Hey, dad,” I called, as I got closer to his office.

“T.J.!” he responded, getting up from his desk.

“Do you know those kids over there?” I asked, pointing towards the play structure.

Dad stepped out of his office to get a better look.

“Oh, yeah! That’s Leah and Leo,” dad answered. “Why?”

“Why are they living here?” I asked.

“The same reason everyone else is living here,” he answered.

“Really? What’s that?” I asked.

“Because they’re in need of some help,” he answered, not exactly helping.

“No! I mean *why* are they living here,” I tried again.

“Oh, you mean the *exact* reason?” dad asked.

“Yeah!” I answered.

“Sorry, T.J., but we’re not allowed to share that kind of information,” he apologized. “We have to respect people’s right to privacy, you know?”

“Oh. Sure,” I responded, not exactly getting the response I was hoping for.

“Oh, wait a second. Do you know Leah and Leo?” dad asked me.

“Yeah, they go to my school,” I answered.

“Ohhh! Now I understand,” dad said, ushering me back into his office and closing the door.

He motioned for me to sit in the wooden chair in front of his desk and then took his computer chair from behind his desk and placed it in front of me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes, and no,” dad answered, taking a deep breath. “Living in a shelter can be embarrassing for most people and we do everything we can to keep that part of their lives private. We even have individual

addresses for each family here, so they don't have to be embarrassed when they apply for a job or enroll their kids in school. And if it were to get around school that Leah and Leo live in a shelter, it could do quite a bit of harm."

"Don't worry dad, I won't say anything," I promised.

"There's a good boy," dad commented, shuffling my hair.

When I asked dad if there was anything that I could do to help them, someone knocked on the door, interrupting our conversation.

"Come in," dad responded.

Unfortunately, that someone needed dad's help, so we never got to finish our conversation. I guess we can just talk more about it later.



As much as I was looking forward to talking with dad on the way home, it never happened. An emergency came up and dad had to stay late. That meant that mom had to pick me up, and I wasn't sure if I should talk to her about it or not. I *had* told dad that I would keep Leah and Leo's secret, so I decided not to mention it. Which was probably for the best, seeing as how Xochitl, the world's biggest blabbermouth, is sitting just an arm's reach away from me. If *she* found out about Leah and Leo, the whole *school* would know about it before the first bell rang tomorrow morning!

Of course, mom asked me how my day went, and I told her all about how I was able to help dad and the other people who worked

and volunteered at the shelter. I also told her how I got the chance to play with a brother and sister on the play structure. She asked me what my favorite part of the day was, and I told her being made an honorary volunteer so that I could help prepare the food for the kids' after school snack. Just knowing that I was doing something that would bring them joy, made me feel good inside.

When we got home, mom reminded me that I still had to do my computer lab work on my tablet. I was going to ask if I could do it later, because I was tired, but I already knew what the answer would be. Mom has a 'homework comes first' policy. She even has a momism for it: do what you have to do *now* so you can do what you want to do *later*. I can even hear her voice in my head as I say it to you!

After finishing my homework, I walked Marcus and told him to meet me at the treehouse. Then I used my tablet to send out a T.J. League all call. Since we all have a tablet or cell phone, all I have to do is send a one-word text message to our group chat. And what word is that? The same word I always use to call an emergency meeting: Leaguers!

It took a little while for everyone to join the video chat, but when we were all finally on, I started our meeting.

"I hereby call this emergency meeting to order," I said.

"What is it, T.J.?" Justin asked.

"I need your guy's help with something," I answered.

“Does it have to do with why you were absent today?” Erick asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Oh, my goodness! Is everything okay?” Paul questioned.

“Yes, and no,” I answered.

“What’s wrong?” Marcus asked.

“Let me explain what happened today, first,” I instructed.

I told the guys how I got to go to work with my dad today, and since most of the them don’t know what my dad does, I told them. Then I explained how I got to help out at the shelter and how awesome it was. I even suggested that we all volunteer once a month, as the T.J. League. Everyone agreed it was a good idea.

“But what does that have to do with the emergency meeting?” Justin interrupted.

“I guess I’ll just get straight to the point,” I answered.

I *know* I told dad that I wouldn’t reveal Leah’s and Leo’s secret, so I have to be careful with the words I use. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, then explained why I had called them all here.

“I can’t go too much into detail, but while I was there, I saw some people from our school,” I said.

“You mean they were *also* volunteering there?” Paul asked.

“Not really,” I answered.

“Not really? What does that mean?” Sammy asked. “They were either volunteering or they weren’t. There’s no in between.”

Leave it to Sammy to keep things straight.

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“So, what were they doing?” Erick asked.

The next words that came out of my mouth were slow and chosen before I had even called this emergency meeting.

“They’re *living* there,” I said.

“They’re *living* at the shelter!” Marcus asked.

“Yes,” I answered, my eyes closed.

I know that I didn’t exactly break my promise to dad, but it sure *feels* like it! Once the words came out of my mouth, it felt like someone had taken my insides and twisted them, like they were trying to wring out a wet washcloth.

“Who is it!” Justin asked.

“He’s not going to tell you!” Erick told him.

“How do *you* know?” Justin asked.

“He wouldn’t even tell you who his Secret Santa partner was, remember?” Erick answered.

“Ugh! All these secrets! Why won’t he just tell us who it is?” Justin yelled, through the screen.

“Justin! You better take it down a notch! You’re gonna run up my light bill!” we heard his mother shout, from somewhere in his house.

“Why can’t he just tell us who it is?” Justin whispered, angrily.

“I don’t think that question is appropriate,” Sammy answered, for me.

And thank goodness she did, because I’m beginning to feel so sick to my stomach that I’m going to sit down and give Marcus my tablet.

“Why not?” Justin asked.

“If *you* were living in a shelter, would *you* want people to know that you were living there?” Sammy asked, in a ‘if you say anything but ‘no’ I’m going to jump through my screen and clobber you’ voice.

“Well, I guess not,” Justin answered.

“*Exactly!*” Sammy exclaimed.

“But wait,” Marcus said, “if you knew you couldn’t tell us, why did you call this meeting?”

“Yeah!”

“Seriously!”

“Come on!”

“Tell us, already!”

## 17 Is This Enough?



Marcus turned around and handed me the tablet. I was *really* starting to wish I hadn't called this meeting at all. But then I remembered why I did. It wasn't about me. It wasn't about the way *I* felt. It was about what I wanted to *do*. I wanted to help, not only Leah and Leo, but *all* the people staying in the shelter. And somehow, after I remembered that, I got this sudden spike of energy. The kind that people in the movies get when all seems lost. Or the kind that

wrestlers get when you think they're down for the count, but they're not ready to give up. Or the kind mom gets when she isn't feeling well, but it's almost dinner time, so she gets up and cooks us dinner anyway.

“Okay guys,” I said, confidently, “it's like this.”



“Good morning, T.J. Good morning, Mr. Espinosa,” Principal Martinez greeted us, as we entered his office. “Please, take a seat. I must admit, I've been looking forward to this meeting.”

“Thank you for meeting with us,” dad said.

“Any time,” Principal Martinez responded. “So, what's this big idea you have?”

“What do you say, boss?” dad asked me.

I took my notebook out from my backpack and placed it on the table between us. After turning to the right page, I turned it around, so Principal Martinez could have a look.

As he looked over my notes and sketches, I explained to him the day I had spent at my dad's job. I explained how it takes a team of staff and dedicated volunteers, coming together, to make sure that all the families staying there had everything they needed. Then I told him how even though our school was supporting the Angel Tree Program and Operation Christmas Child, I thought we could still do more. Specifically, for shelters, like dad's.

When Principal Martinez asked me what I had in mind, I explained what the T.J. League and I had come up with. We wanted to host a food and clothing drive at the school. Principal Martinez reminded me that we just had a food drive for Thanksgiving, and that it might be a bit much to ask families to do another one, but I wasn't about to give up. There was too much at stake.

I told Principal Martinez that our food drive for Thanksgiving was only a *food* drive. This would be a food *and* clothing drive. Specifically, sweaters, jackets, and winter coats. I told him how lots of people would be getting new ones soon, and probably had some in their closet that no longer fitted, or had some that they didn't really use anymore anyways. I told him that, with help from the T.J. League, and dad, of course, we would go to local grocery stores and ask for food donations. That way the families wouldn't feel overwhelmed.

Dad said that he would also reach out to his volunteer families so that they could get the word out to make sure that the food and clothing drive would be a success. He told Principal Martinez that he had already told his boss about it, and that she had approved his shelter's participation, especially since it meant that some of the donations collected would be shared with the families at the shelter.

He even told Principal Martinez something he hadn't told me before. Dad told him that he had already prepared a flyer and shared it with our whole family. Mom *and* dad's side! Do you know how many people that is? I told dad 'thank you' and gave him a *huge* hug.

“Well, it looks like all the necessary parts are already in place. It seems like all you need me to do is approve a drop-off location,” he commented, scratching his chin. “I would want to get our PTA involved, of course.”

“Of course,” I responded.

“And I’ll have to get the word out to my superiors,” Principal Martinez continued.

“I understand,” dad agreed.

“We might even be able to get the Recess Revitalization Foundation involved,” he thought, out loud.

“That would be great!” I commented.

“So, is that a yes?” dad asked.

“I have to make a few phone calls, first,” Principal Martinez said, “but I don’t see why not!”

I gave dad another hug for helping me and thanked Principal Martinez more than I’ve ever thanked him for anything before. I can’t believe it. It’s going to happen. I have to tell the guys!

After giving dad a hug and kiss goodbye, I *ran* to the blacktop so that I could tell everyone in the T.J. League that Principal Martinez was going to let us have a food and clothing drive. Everyone was so excited that we did our secret handshake as a sort of victory dance.

Sammy, being the most organized out of all of us, had already created a flyer using a free app on her tablet. She showed it to us and said that she would share it with all of us and that she would also

email it to Principal Martinez. She also told us that we had to share the flyer with *everyone*. Even on social media. She said that she would make sure that her dad would post it in his comic book store so that customers could donate food and clothes, too!



Starting the following Wednesday – we had to give the office time to print flyers and send them home – our school started collecting food and clothes from families. I had told Principal Martinez that the T.J. League would lead the collection, so Sammy came up with a daily schedule to make sure that one of us was at the drop off location, before *and* after school. She also created a schedule for us to visit local grocery stores for food donations and every *other* kind of store to post our flyers.

For one whole week, we were so focused on this drive, that we didn't even play T.J. League. Not even *once*! Of course, we still honored our Future Funmaker duties, because we had committed to that first. But during our lunch recess, we helped to organize the food, drinks and clothes. Lots of people donated really nice clothes, although we *did* receive some *not* so gently used clothing. Luckily, Principal Martinez told us that one of the high school track teams collects used clothing as a fundraiser. He said that he would be happy to take the unused clothing to the high school track coach, so that it

could be used for another worthy cause. We all agreed that was a great solution.



“Can you believe that today is already the last day of the drive?” Justin asked.

“I know! It went by so fast!” Erick commented.

“We’ve collected twice as much food as the food drive from Thanksgiving,” Sammy pointed out.

“At *least* twice as much,” Marcus argued.

“And to think,” Paul added, “people could still bring more after school!”

“Yeah!”

“That’s right!”

“Let’s go!”

“Are you okay?”

“What?” Justin asked.

“Look at T.J.,” Erick said, “He’s the one who started all this, and he doesn’t even look excited.”

“Yeah,” Paul agreed. “Is everything okay T.J.?”

“Yeah. Of course!” I lied.

Marcus gave me the ‘best friends don’t lie to each other’ look. He usually only did that when we were alone. This was the first time he used it when other people were around.

“Come on, T.J.,” Sammy urged. “You can tell us anything. We’re your friends.”

“Yeah, T.J.,” Paul joined in. “You can trust us.”

“And no matter what, we’re still friends” Marcus encouraged, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t be mad at me,” I began , “but I was starting to wonder something.”

“Wonder what?” Justin asked.

“I mean, we *have* collected a lot of food and clothes,” I lauded, “but do you think the drive was too short?”

“What do you mean?” Sammy asked.

“I mean, maybe we should have run it until Friday,” I explained. “Or, maybe even next Wednesday! One week is just starting to feel kind of short.”

“Oh!” Marcus said. “I understand what you’re getting at.”

“You do?” I asked.

“Yeah, T.J.,” Paul agreed, “we understand.”

“So, do you guys think we should have run it longer?” I asked.

“I think one week was just fine,” Sammy answered, shocking everyone.

“How could you *say* that!” Justin asked.

“Just hear me out,” Sammy ordered. “People are always bringing in late donations. So even though the drive officially ends

today, people will still be bringing in donations tomorrow and Friday.”

“They will?” I asked.

“I’m positive,” Sammy answered, confidently. “Not only that, but we still have to take down all the flyers that we put up at the stores, remember.”

“What’s *that* have to do with anything?” Erick asked.

“Wow! You guys really *do* have short memories, don’t you?” Sammy asked. “I’ll have to show you an app that can help with that.”

“Get to the point!” Justin commanded.

“Oh, my goodness!” Sammy sighed, throwing her hands up in frustration. “Guys! Did you *really* forget that we left boxes at the stores that let us put up our flyers?”

“So that they could collect donations for us!” Marcus remembered.

“*Thank* you, Marcus,” Sammy praised. “At least *one* of you remembered!”

“Well, I couldn’t *go* to the stores, remember?” Justin reminded her, with much attitude.

“But we *talked* about it when we went over the schedule I created, *remember?*” Sammy shot back.

“No,” was Justin’s shy answer.

“Well, we *did*,” Sammy said. “Leave boxes at the stores that is.”

“So, when we collect them, we’ll have even more!” Paul exclaimed.

“You got it!” Sammy said.

“T.J.” Marcus said. “Why don’t you look happy, yet?”

“I was just wondering something else,” I answered.

“Wondering what?” Justin asked.

“I’m glad that we could help the shelters this month and all—” I paused.

“But?” Erick asked.

“But what about next month?” I asked. “And the month after that? And the month after that? And the month after that? I mean, is this really enough?”



EIGHTEEN

## *It's Our Pleasure*

“T.J, you *do* realize that without *you*, your dad’s shelter wouldn’t be getting *any* of the donations we’ve received,” Marcus said.

“Marcus is right,” Justin agreed.

“I couldn’t have done it without all of you guys,” I pointed out.

“No, T.J.,” Sammy corrected. “We couldn’t have done it without our fearless leader.”

“She’s right, you know,” Erick said.

“You were the one who saw a need and wanted to fill it,” Marcus said.

“*You* were the one who called the emergency meeting,” Sammy continued.

“If it weren’t for you, T.J., this past week and half of our lives would have been *totally* different,” Paul added.

“*You* were the one who inspired us to do more,” Justin finished.

“How about we finish this food and clothing drive off strong? Then, if you want, we can meet during winter break and see what else we can do?” Marcus suggested. “Does that sound good, T.J.?”

“Yeah, Marcus. That sounds good,” I answered, beginning to feel a little bit better.



We used another one of Sammy’s schedules to work together and collect donations from all of the stores where we had put up our flyers. It felt so good, leaving each store with more food and clothes for the shelters. It was a good thing that Sammy had us split up, because there is *no way* it would all have fit in dad’s trunk. By the time we got to the last store, we had so many donations that we had to put the box from the last store in the front seat!

All of the food donations were organized into four equal portions, with the help of PTA volunteers, the Student Council, volunteers from the Recess Revitalization Foundation, and the T.J.

League, of course. The clothes had been organized by sizes, depending on the need for each shelter. And all the clothes that we had decided wouldn't be right to share, were separated for Principal Martinez to donate to the high school track team's fundraiser.

Thankfully, dad's shelter let him borrow one of their box trucks to collect all of the donations from our school. And since some of the donations would be going to *his* shelter, his boss even let him deliver everything during his normal work hours. And with less effort than before, mom agreed to let me miss another day of school to help dad with the deliveries.

"You've earned it, mi amor," mom said, with teary eyes and a kiss goodbye.

I climbed into the truck, with dad's help. Hey! That truck is big! Plus, the door was too heavy for me open. Have you really forgotten how small I am compared to my peers?

It's weird. Just a couple of weeks ago, I couldn't *wait* to ask dad what we could do to help the people at his shelter, and now I'm so nervous that I can't even speak.

"I'm very proud of you, T.J.," dad said, breaking the silence.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm very proud of you," he repeated.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why? For all of this!" he said. "You wanted to help people and did everything you could to make it happen!"

“But it’s not really that much,” I said.

“Wow! You don’t really know how much you’ve done, do you? Maybe after all these deliveries, you’ll have a better idea,” he commented, shuffling my hair.

Over the next few hours, dad and I visited three shelters. At each shelter, staff, volunteers and families were waiting for our arrival. I don’t think I’ve heard so many ‘thank you’s in my entire life. Of course, we couldn’t just drop off the donations and go. Each shelter had prepared some sort of celebration for us.

The first shelter we visited had important people, dressed in fancy clothes, waiting for us. We were introduced to each one and asked to take a picture with them. They told me things, like how setting a positive example for young people was such an important thing, or how they wished more young people would be as ambitious as I was. Things like that.

The second shelter had a cookie and punch reception waiting for us. I didn’t even get to help take down any of the donations from the truck. We were immediately whisked away to a room where families, staff and volunteers were waiting for us. They had decorated the room in our honor and even presented us with a special certificate of thanks, in a fancy, expensive looking frame.

The third shelter had organized a press conference, with local reporters and everything. We had to wait to take the donations down because they wanted to take pictures and get video of us handing the

boxes to staff and families staying at the shelter. The ones who didn't mind of course. Then, one by one, they all interviewed us. Dad kept redirecting his questions to me, calling me the mastermind behind the project. There were a few questions he couldn't dodge of course. Like 'how does it feel to have a son that believes giving back is important?' or 'would you say that this is your proudest moment as a father?'. You know, questions like that.

When we finally got to dad's shelter, I felt like I had run a marathon. As we got closer, dad told me not to expect anything like the last shelter. He said that most of the families at his shelter were either in school or at work. I was okay with that. The attention I received at the last shelter was enough for a lifetime.

When we pulled up to the receiving dock, there were a pair of people I wasn't expecting to see. I thought that they would be at school. Wait a second! Why *aren't* they at school?

"Hey, T.J.," Leo said, shyly.

"Hey," I answered, just as shyly. "What are *you* doing here?"

"It's okay, T.J.," Leah assured me, "your dad told us."

"Told you what?" I feigned ignorance.

"He told us that he brought you to work a couple of weeks ago," she continued.

"And that you saw us playing on the play structure," Leo continued.

"And we're okay with it," Leah finished.

“You are?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Leo answered. “We were kind of freaked out at first–.”

“But every day that went on, we worried less and less,” Leah explained.

“And after a whole week went by,” Leo went on.

“We realized that our secret was safe with you,” Leah shared.

It was starting to weird me out. Leah and Leo kept beginning and finishing each other’s sentences. Just like twins on television and in the movies do.

“But how did you know I would be here *today*?” I asked.

“We didn’t at first,” Leah answered.

“I don’t get it,” I admitted.

“Our mom told us that we had to make a thank you card for some donations that we were going to get,” Leo told me.

“And when we asked her who to address them to, she told us that they were coming from our school,” Leah explained.

“And it didn’t take long to realize that the donations would be coming from the food and clothing drive that the T.J. League was leading,” Leo said.

“*Still* doesn’t explain how you knew I was going to be here today,” I said, crossing my arms.

“When we found out that the delivery would be today–,” Leah started.

“Wait, how did you find *that* out?” I asked.

“It wasn’t that hard,” Leo stated. “Mom reminded us that we had to turn in our thank you cards by yesterday.”

“Because the donations would be delivered today,” Leah said.

“Still not understanding,” I said in a ‘get to the point’ kind of voice.

“We just asked your dad,” Leo said, pointing at my dad, who had been standing behind me this whole time.

“But why aren’t you in school?” I asked.

“We figured that this was the only way we would be able to thank you in person without having anyone asking questions,” Leah answered.

“Yeah,” Leo agreed, “and not just for the donations.”

“I am confused,” I admitted.

“For keeping our secret,” Leo explained.

“It’s hard enough telling people that we can’t have friends over, or that our birthday party will be at the park,” Leah shared.

“Or telling people that they can hand deliver an invitation because we don’t want to give people our address, or that we’re delivering gifts to needy children if people catch us coming out of the Angel Tree Program office building,” Leo finished.

“Wow. I never thought about any of that,” I confessed. “Guess there’s a lot of things that I take for granted. Really makes me feel like I should have done more.”

“Don’t! You just helped *four* shelters!” Leah commented.

“Seriously! We should be thanking you with a parade!” Leo said, marching around me while imitating a drum major.

“But I—,” I started, but was interrupted by dad’s ‘you’re doing it wrong’ cough.

After the first shelter we visited, dad had a little talk with me in the truck. When people kept thanking me, I had kept telling them ‘don’t thank me’ or that ‘it was nothing’. Apparently, those were the wrong answers.

“I kind of noticed something back there,” dad had said.

“What?” I asked.

“You didn’t say ‘thank you’ once,” he said.

“I didn’t?” I asked.

“Nope,” he answered.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“I know it can feel awkward when lots of people are thanking you,” dad admitted.

“You can say *that* again!” I replied.

“I know it can feel awkward when lots of people are thanking you,” dad repeated, followed by a chuckle and a hand on my shoulder.

I probably should have seen *that* coming.

I told dad that it just didn’t feel right saying thank you. It felt like I was taking credit for everyone else’s hard work. Dad said he understood what I was saying and told me that there was a better way

to respond to people's praise. And I think that the fake cough he just used was his way of reminding me.

"Are you okay, Mr. Espinosa?" Leah and Leo asked, in unison.

"Yes. Just had a tickle in my throat," dad answered. "T.J., were you about to reply to Leo and Leah's praise?"

"It's our pleasure," I responded, putting my arm around dad's waist.

SAMPLE

## 19 Operation Superhero Support



After we finished unloading the donations, Leah and Leo presented me with a box of ‘Thank You!’ cards from everyone in the shelter. Then Leo and Leah invited me to their room for something a little extra. Actually, it looked more like an apartment. If you didn’t know any better, that’s probably what you would think it is. Now that I think about it, it probably *used* to be an apartment complex that got turned into a shelter.

When we got inside, they presented me with a manila envelope filled with thank you cards that they had made for each member of the T.J. League. I thanked them, on behalf of the T.J. League, and gave them each a hug. For some reason, it was much easier to receive compliments from friends than it was from complete strangers. I then went to my dad's office so that I could add it to the box of thank you notes, with Leah and Leo close behind me.

"Ready to go home?" dad asked me.

"Awww. Already?" I asked.

"*Actually*," Leo said.

"Yes, Leo?" dad asked.

"We were wondering if T.J. could play with us on the playground," Leah answered.

"Please!" they pleaded together.

"It *is* minimum day," I reminded him, standing next to Leo and Leah, making the same puppy dog face they were making.

He squinted his eyes, as if thinking, before answering with a big smile.

"Sure."

Leah, Leo and I ran as fast as we could to the playground.

"I bet you that I can swing higher than you!" Leah challenged.

"Not in a million years!" Leo accepted.

"We'll see!" I chimed in.



When we got to school the next day, I called another emergency meeting, except this time, Leah and Leo were with me. After some time playing with Leah and Leo on the playground, I had realized that if I delivered their thank you notes to the T.J. League, someone would figure out that they lived at a shelter. Someone named Sammy. Yeah. It would most definitely be Sammy. When I told Leah and Leo, they looked at each other and told me they hadn't considered that. I told them that I could just give the cards back, but then they surprised me. They told me they were tired of being ashamed, and that telling the guys in the T.J. League could be a start to getting over it. I told them that if they wanted to keep it a secret, that the guys were *great* at keeping secrets. If you don't believe me, go back and read my adventure against The Nighttime Nemesis. No one in school has learned about my nighttime issues or about Erick's *non-hip-hop* dance skills. Or any of the other stuff we shared with each other for that matter.

“What are Leah and Leo doing at our emergency meeting?”

Justin asked.

“*Actually*, they're the reason I called this meeting,” I explained.

“What?”

“I'm confused.”

“I don't get it.”

“Would you mind elaborating?”

“Take it away guys,” I said, pretending to hand them a microphone.

“We wanted to give you guys these,” Leah said, taking their thank you cards from the manila envelope and handing them out.

“What are these?” Paul asked.

“Thank you, cards,” Leo answered.

“For what?” Erick asked.

“For helping T.J. with the donation drive,” Leah answered.

“But what does that have to do with you?” Marcus asked.

“Wait! Are *they* the people you wanted to help?” Sammy asked.

*See!* I *told* you Sammy would be the one to figure it out!

“Yes, Sammy,” I answered, giving Leah and Leo an ‘I’m sorry’ look.

“It’s okay, T.J.,” Leah said. “You kept our secret and we didn’t even ask you to.”

“Yeah. And because of him, we’re ready to tell you guys,” Leo agreed, motioning to the rest of the T.J. League.

“T.J. told us that you guys are experts at keeping secrets,” Leah commented.

“Well, *most* of us,” Paul said.

“Hey! I don’t tell *other* people what *you* tell me!” Justin defended. “I only tell *you* guys what *other* people tell me!”

Everyone crossed their arms and gave Justin an ‘are you serious?’ look.



“Our next community member is Tomas Espinosa,” the Vice Mayor announced. “You have three minutes, speaker”

“Thank you,” I responded. “Madam Mayor, Vice Mayor, members of the council, distinguished guests. This past December, while attending my dad’s job’s Take Your Child to Work Day, I learned a very valuable lesson. You see, my dad works at a women’s and children’s shelter, where he’s the Volunteer Coordinator. As I shadowed my dad throughout the day, I had the opportunity to work alongside dedicated staff and volunteers, to help enhance the lives of the families staying at the shelter. I even got the chance to play with two young siblings on the play structure. But that’s not why I’m here.

“I’m here because of something that happened as I left the play area. Just as I was about to reach my dad’s office, I heard two familiar voices behind me. They were the voices of my classmates. A twin brother and sister. Luckily, they didn’t see me, or they might have been embarrassed. When I asked my dad why they were staying there, he explained how important it is to provide privacy for families in shelters. I understood, but got a strange feeling in my stomach. A feeling that urged me to do something to help my friends *and* the people at my dad’s shelter.

“After consulting with the T.J. League, that’s the name of the superhero group my friends and I created, we came up with an idea to have our school host a food and clothing drive to support my dad’s

shelter. With the help of my dad, my principal, our PTA, student council, Recess Revitalization Foundation, and dedicated community members, we were able to collect enough donations to support *four* different shelters.”

“Congratulations,” the Mayor complimented.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I responded. “But even after I helped my dad deliver all of the donations, that feeling in my stomach was still there, as if telling me that there was still more work to be done. And that’s what has brought me here tonight. After speaking with my principal and the Board of Education of my school district, I stand before you now with a request. With the support of our school district, the T.J. League—,” I motioned for the guys to join me at the podium, “the T.J. League knows, that with the added support of this illustrious City Council, we could reach a greater audience to support our local shelters.”

“What exactly do you young people have in mind?” the Vice Mayor asked.

“Instead of only remembering to give during the winter holidays, we would like to set up *monthly* food and clothing donations from our school sites, as well as from local businesses, to support our local shelters, because once a year is not enough,” I stated, firmly.

“Here, here!” one of the council members exclaimed.

“And how do you envision we do this?” the Mayor asked.

“Well, during our school donation drive, we visited all of our local grocery stores and businesses and asked if we could put up a flyer in their stores. We also asked if we could leave a donation box for people to put their donations in. The grocery stores said it would be easier for the store to make a gift card donation, that we could use to purchase food items, which we were okay with. Other businesses, like barber shops, flower shops and even secondhand stores, let us set up a donation box with our flyer taped to it.

“We would like to provide more permanent boxes, with a logo and pick up date printed on them. Say, the third Friday of each month. That way people could make continuous donations that could be picked up by my friends and me. And we would add *those* donations to whatever our school sites are able to collect, of course.”

“Of course,” a council member commented.

“That’s three minutes,” the timekeeper announced.

“Let’s let him finish,” the mayor ordered.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I reacted.

“And how will you keep all of this organized?” she asked.

“Well, our PTA has contacted the other PTA’s in our district, and they have all agreed to take turns organizing the donations. And my dad’s boss has agreed to let him use their truck to make the deliveries,” I explained.

“It seems that you and your friends have put quite a bit of thought and organization into this,” the Vice Mayor pointed out.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, putting my hand on Sammy’s shoulder.

If I haven’t mentioned this before, let me say it now and say it proud: I’m so glad Sammy is on my team.

“So, if we *are* able to come alongside your team,” the Mayor started, “have you thought of a name to call this operation of yours?”

“We have ma’am,” I answered. “We would like to call it ‘Operation Superhero Support’. Because not all superheroes wear capes.”

“That sounds like a *great* name!” one of the council members commented.



“I’m here with the T.J. League at what should be the first of *many* donations,” a reporter from channel seven spoke into the camera. “Over the past month, Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul, Sammy and T.J. have led the effort to collect food and clothing donations to be shared with local shelters. Erick, could you tell us what inspired you and your friends to start Operation Superhero Support?”

“It happened after we did a food and clothing drive for a shelter our friends are staying at,” Erick answered. “T.J. gathered us together and insisted that there *must* be more we could do.”

“What about you, Justin? What part did you play in this magnificent operation?” the interview continued.

“I was part of the team that went store to store and business to business to ask if we could leave our donation box at their site,” Justin explained. “It may not seem like much, but it took an entire week to do!”

“That’s great! Marcus, you *must* have had a hand in this great idea,” the channel seven news reporter commented.

“It was a team effort, actually,” Marcus admitted. “T.J. and I spent a lot of time together sharing ideas to make sure that this operation was a success. But helping T.J. come up with the name for our idea was probably the most fun part!”

“I can only imagine,” the reporter commented. “What about you Paul? How did you help put all of this together?”

“Well, I didn’t really know how I would be able to help at first. Then the guys reminded me that I like to draw and that we needed a logo. So, with their help, I created logo ideas for the boxes, flyers and website we created,” Paul shared.

“Now, *that’s* what I call using your talents to help others. Sammy, as the only girl in the League, I’m sure that *your* contribution would make other young girls proud. Could you share with us what that was?” the interview continued.

“Of course! I really enjoy organizing things, so I helped create all the schedules we would need,” Sammy explained. “One for visiting stores and organizations to pass out boxes. One for collecting donations. One for rotating PTA volunteers. One for making sure we

had time to complete our homework assignments and projects. And of course, one for rotating shelter donations to ensure equity.”

“Girls, let that be an inspiration! And now we have T.J. The leader of the T.J. League. What you and your friends have done to give back to the community has inspired so many people. Is there anything you would like to add to what your friends have already said?”

I looked at the guys with my ‘are you thinking what *I*’m thinking?’ face. They all gave me a ‘let’s do this’ face in response. I put my right hand in front of me, followed by Erick, Justin, Marcus Paul and Sammy.

“We protect and serve all living things!”

“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 Friendships

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

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

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Physical Abuse

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

T.J.'s scary bedtime story has been read by the entire fifth grade and the outcome is probably not what Mr. Anderson or Mrs. Whiston were thinking of when they assigned this free write. Bad dreams. Angry parents. Stuff like that. And now something new has come to light. What ever will T.J. do

now?

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Bed Wetting

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

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

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of a School Lockdown

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