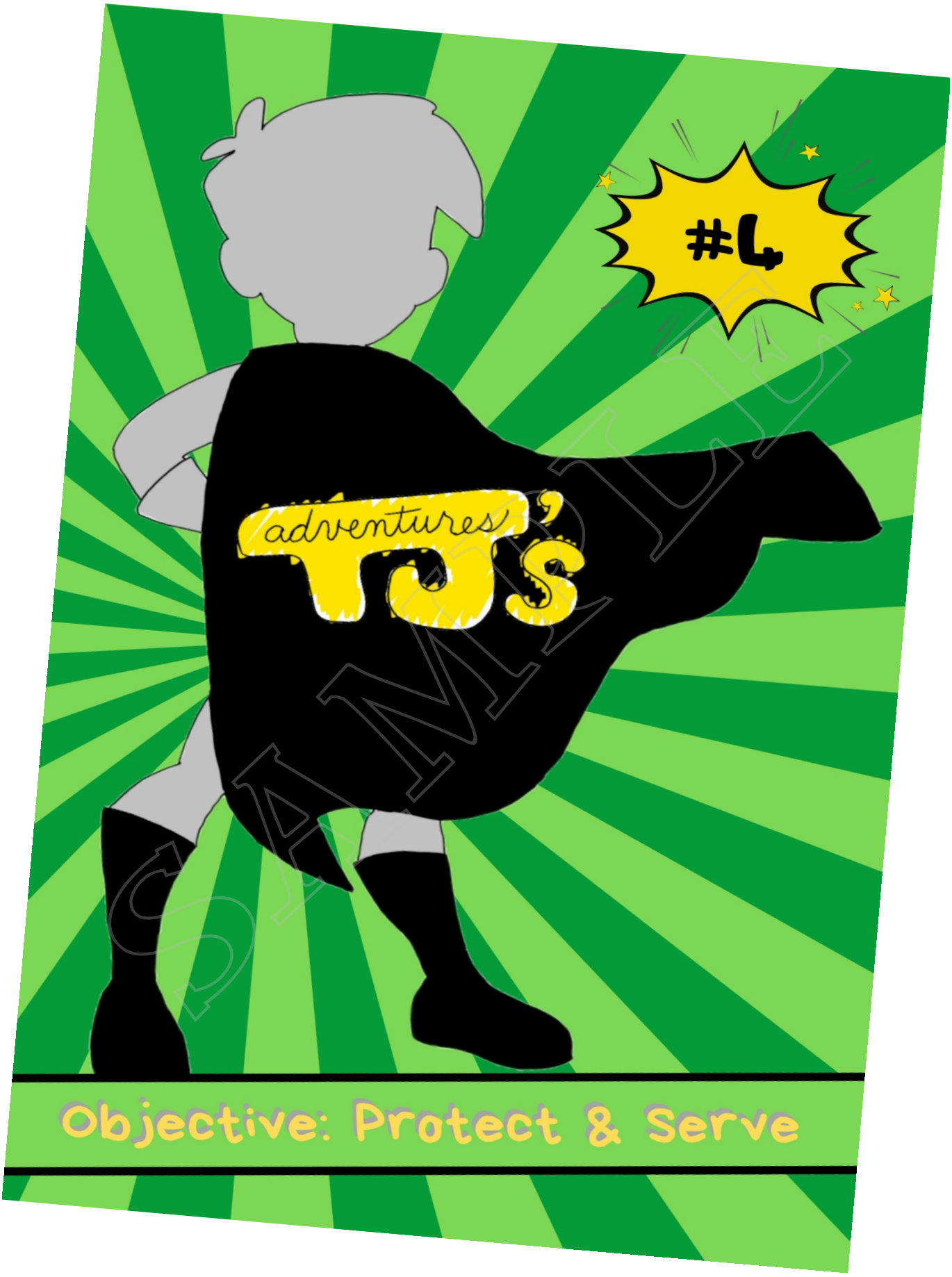
#4
adventures
TJ's
Objective: Protect & Serve

T.J.’s Adventures
Objective: Protect & Serve

“Mr. Angel” Ramirez

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Books By This Author

Some heroes just make the best of what they have.

1 My Morning Routine

"I am Batman. I am Batman. I am Batman," my alarm clock sounded, waking me from my slumber. That means it's 6:45 in the morning. Time to get ready for school. Here we go!

As I get out of my bed, I have that daily, it must be morning, you know what's coming, tingly feeling in my lower abdomen. Guess who needs to pee! As usual, I walk to my bureau, open up the

top drawer and take out a clean pair of underwear. After closing my drawer, I head straight downstairs to the bathroom.

Now, you might think that waking up this early is a bit much. Ridiculous even. But you don't know Xochitl. If my little sister gets into the bathroom before I do, then getting ready for school becomes a battle. Sometimes, I win. Sometimes she wins. *Sometimes*. But maybe I'll save those details for another adventure. Let's just agree that waking up at 6:45 in the morning is better off for *all* of us.

After I use the restroom, I exchange my overnight protection for my clean pair of underwear. Thankfully, last night was another dry night. Back into the bureau they go. To help make *sure* that I have as many dry nights as I can, I've been limiting myself to just *one* cup of water after 5:30 p.m., just like my pediatrician suggested. It has *really* been helping. Today marks my *fourth* dry morning in a row. That's a new record!

While I'm downstairs, I usually check the breakfast menu. Mom keeps it posted on the refrigerator using magnets that Xochitl and I made at a Christmas party a few years back. It was a craft we did at dad's old boss's house. Mine is a snowman and Xochitl's is a gingerbread girl.

The breakfast calendar serves two purposes. It shows us what is going to be served for breakfast at school and it also helps us put the right date on our homework. Xochitl and I take turns putting an 'x' on the calendar, before we go to sleep. The calendar says that today

we have a choice between cereal and sausage on a stick. Cereal is good *any* day, but a sausage wrapped in a pancake? Now, *that's* good eatin'!

Since I'm not going to be eating breakfast at home, I'm going to head back to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Xochitl says that mom's mint toothpaste burns her tongue and that dad's cinnamon flavor is gross, so she still uses the bubblegum flavored toothpaste that I *used* to brush with. Now, I use mom's toothpaste. It's not that I don't like cinnamon. It's just that I like the way my mouth feels after using her mint toothpaste. It feels like I can blow smoke from my mouth, like when it's cold outside and you can see your breath!

After rinsing my mouth out with water and pretending to blow smoke from my mouth, like a dragon, I wash my face. I've never understood how the people in television commercials wash their face. I've tried to do it the way they do, but all I end up doing is wetting my chin. And my neck. And the front of my shirt. And the sink. And since I have *lots* of morning crust in the corner of my eyes, I think I'll wash my face the *proper* way.

By the time I finished brushing my teeth and washing my face, Xochitl's footsteps could be heard from upstairs.

"Out of the way! I have to pee!" she ordered, moving me aside as I climbed the stairs.

Like I said, a battle.

When I get back to my room, I put my overnight protection back into their hiding place. After asking him to, dad made me a secret compartment in my underwear drawer, just like Marcus has in his. And now it's time to pick out some pants. To the closet I go!

I don't know what the weather's been like where *you* live, but over *here*, it's been raining for a few days straight. And when mom was watching the news last night, the weather lady said it was going to *continue* throughout today. I think a long sleeve shirt will go well under whatever shirt I decide to choose.

When I finish tucking my long sleeve shirt into my pants, I return the two hangars back to the closet. I then go back to my bureau to pick out a shirt. Today, I'm on Future Funmaker duty, so I think I'll just put on my Future Funmaker shirt.

Shoe choice is easy today. Rainy weather equals rain boots. And not just *any* rain boots. *Batman* rain boots. My grandmother bought them for me back in third grade. Luckily, I haven't grown since then. Well, not much anyway. The point I'm trying to make, is that they still fit. Oh, yeah!

Now that I'm dressed, it's time to do my hair. Just so you know, I don't really *want* to do my hair, since it's raining outside. I mean, I'm going to be wearing my Batman raincoat anyways. You know, the one that matches my rain boots. And I'll *definitely* be wearing the hood to keep dry. Which is *just* going to end up making my hair all

messy. *But,* mom won't let me leave the house unless my hair is neat. She just doesn't get it.

Luckily, Xochitl was out of the bathroom went I went back downstairs, so I don't have to fight for the mirror. Even if she's just brushing her teeth, she won't move away from the sink so I can comb my hair. It's *so* annoying! It's not like we have a small mirror or anything. It can *definitely* fit both of our faces.

I really like the mirror we have. When I spend the night at Marcus' house, I have to use a handheld mirror to make sure the back of my hair is straight. And since it's a reflection, I sometimes brush the wrong way. At *my* house, we have a medicine cabinet that has a mirror with three equal parts. Kind of like those folding brochures or trifold poster boards we sometimes use for school projects. It allows me to adjust the two outside mirrors so that I can see the front, back and *both* sides of my head, without having to use a handheld mirror.

I was almost finished combing my hair when mom's reflection appeared before me. Or was it behind me? Either way, I don't know *how* she does it, but mom's *always* dressed when I wake up. And I don't just mean dressed. Her hair is done, *and* her teeth have already been brushed. I wonder if it's a mom thing. Like, maybe she just wakes up that way. You know, like the moms on television and in the movies who wake up with perfect hair and makeup and stuff.

Without saying anything, mom gently took the comb from my hand and fixed the portion of hair I hadn't gotten to yet. Even *with* our cool mirror, the back of my hair always takes the longest to get just right. You would think that after all these years of practice, I'd be a pro by now. Not!

When she finished combing my hair, she turned me around and inspected the front of my hair before giving me a kiss and asking for a 'freshalyzer test'. A freshalyzer test is where mom says, 'freshalyzer test' and I have to blow in her face. She basically smells my breath to make sure that I've brushed my teeth.

One time, I was feeling lazy, so I just put a dab of toothpaste on my tongue to make it *seem* like I had brushed my teeth, but she figured it out. When I asked her *how* she knew, she said that it was one of her 'mom superpowers'. I'm not sure I believe her. But it *definitely* convinced me not to try that trick on her again.

Once I passed the freshalyzer test, mom asked me if I was going to be eating the school lunch or if I wanted her to pack me one. I told her I had to check the menu. You see, the lunch menu is on a different calendar than our breakfast menu. I've never understood why, but that's just the way it is!

Today is a choice between a chicken sandwich and nachos, so I'll be eating at school. I haven't had nachos since last month. After crossing out yesterday's date, since Xochitl must have forgotten to last night, mom handed me a snack pack of trail mix and a

supplement shake. Supplement shakes are normally for people like Xochitl's age. You know, to help them get all the vitamins and nutrients they need. But since I haven't grown much in the past couple of years, the pediatrician told mom that it wouldn't hurt if I kept drinking them. And to be honest, I don't mind. They're pretty tasty. Now to grab an ice pack from the freezer and put it in my Batman lunchbox with the pack of trail mix and the supplement shake. If there's one thing you *don't* want to drink with *any* snack, it's a *warm* supplement shake. Gross!

"Have you made your bed?" mom asked, closing the freezer door for me.

"Not yet," I admitted.

"Get to it," she said, directing me to the stairs and gently patting my bottom.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded, climbing the stairs two steps at a time.

I always put my lunchbox next to my backpack, that way I won't forget it. I learned this lesson the hard way. When I *don't* put it near my backpack, I tend to leave it behind. Which if you haven't guessed, is a bad thing. *Especially* on days when I don't like what's being served for lunch. I mean, there's always the yogurt and granola option that the cafeteria offers. But that doesn't usually keep me full for very long.

I was on my bed, straightening the part of my blankets that faced the wall when mom asked me if she needed to sign anything. I finished smoothing out my blankets before taking my daily agenda out of my backpack. I also handed her my practice test. Mrs. Whiston has an adult sign our practice test to make sure that it's real. You know, to make sure that we didn't just copy the words straight from our list.

"Clean or dirty?" mom asked, holding up my pajamas.

"Clean," I answered, taking them and throwing them on my bed.

When I turned around, mom had her arms crossed and a 'do you really think you're going to get away with that?' look on her face. I smiled awkwardly, and chuckled nervously, before turning around to fold my pajamas. I *really* should have seen that coming.

When I turned back around, mom was gone, so I grabbed my backpack and lunchbox and headed downstairs. I put them down in front of the door and walked to the hallway closet. That's where we keep our jackets and umbrellas. I put on my Batman raincoat and grabbed my Batman umbrella. If this is the first time that you're meeting me, then you may have noticed that my favorite superhero is Batman.

There's still some time before we have to leave, so I guess I'll watch some television. Luckily, I'm finished first today, so I don't have to watch some dumb show that Xochitl would normally choose.

But then again, we don’t have cable, so the only other thing to watch is the news. Or one of the Spanish channels. But the only thing on the Spanish channels right now are those dramatic soap operas. So, the news it is!

And that, Leaguers, is my morning routine!

2 The Daily Struggle

Xochitl finally finished getting ready, so mom told us to get in the car. Thank goodness it's not raining that hard. Actually, it's only drizzling, so I don't have to use my umbrella. Xochitl, of course, uses her umbrella no matter what, which just makes it harder for mom, since she can never get it closed when we get in the car.

Even though I'm past the required age for using a booster seat, I still use one. Why? Because I'm short, remember? And earlier this

year, a study came out that said age isn't the true factor for determining when someone should stop using one. *Height* is.

They showed how kids, that haven't reached a certain height, can easily get injured by the shoulder strap of the seat belt. You know, when your mom or dad have to make a sudden stop or if you get into a car accident? 'Kids can be choked or receive severe bodily damage', the doctors and scientists on television had said. And since I'm nowhere *near* the suggested height, I'll probably still be using a booster seat in sixth grade. Unless I have a sudden growth spurt, that is.

I *would* rather sit in the front seat, *away* from Xochitl, but mom said that isn't going to happen anytime soon. Apparently, that's even more dangerous than not using a booster seat. She's shown me the yellow label on the underside of the sun visor. It warns against children sitting in the front seat. Something about the airbag being dangerous.

When I was younger, I didn't understand how something that's supposed to protect you could be dangerous, so mom pulled out the car's manual. She looked in the table of contents and found where information about the airbags was. She read that the airbag can launch at between one hundred and two hundred miles an hour! Our *car* doesn't even go two hundred miles an hour! After finding that out, I never argued about sitting in the front seat again.

Now, if I'm in someone *else's* car, I usually just sit on my legs. That way I'm taller and won't get hurt by the seatbelt. Unless I'm with Marcus. His mom noticed that my legs were always asleep when I got out of the car, so she bought a special Batman booster seat for me, for whenever I go with them. It has a 'utility belt' around the bottom. The belt is actually just a bunch of small compartments that you can use to store things. Like small toys, snacks or things like that. I think I know who Marcus gets his compassion from.

Speaking of Marcus, he is tall enough to *not* need a booster seat, so he doesn't use one. He also doesn't make fun of me for having to use one like *some* people do when they see me getting out of my car. I've gotten pretty good at ignoring those people, but Marcus always backs me up if he's around. Have I ever mentioned how *awesome* he is?

"I want Kids Bop!" Xochitl whined, as mom changed the music for me.

Just like we take turns putting an 'x' on the breakfast calendar, we take turns choosing the music in the car on the way to school. That's the *only* time mom lets us choose. And dad doesn't even give us a choice. He just plays jazz or classic rock. Except when he's in what he calls 'native homeland mode'. Then he puts on Spanish music. Sometimes fast. Sometimes slow. It depends on his mood. At least that's what he says.

But today is *my* turn to choose the music. How do I know? Because *yesterday* Xochitl had us listening to Barbie's Bonus Ballet soundtrack. She listens to it all day, *every* day! She just blasts it from her Barbie boom box, even though I tell her to use her wireless headphones. But then again, she usually forgets to charge them. I hear it so much, that I know all the songs by heart. And there aren't even any words!

"Today is brother's turn," mom reminded Xochitl. "You chose the music yesterday."

"But *I* want to choose the music!" she continued to gripe.

"You can choose tomorrow," mom said, in a calm voice.

"But—."

"Xochitl," mom said, in a 'if you don't calm down, then there's going to be consequences' voice.

Xochitl didn't say anything else. She just crossed her arms and put on her pouty face. That was fine with me. She's *always* getting her way with *dad*. At least mom has *my* back. Well, sometimes.

"Time for our morning weather report," the voice on the radio announced. "It seems this storm is moving slower that meteorologists thought it would. That means at least one more day of rain."

"Hey! That means another day we don't have to go out and water our grass!" another voice on the radio commented.

I don't know what *he's* so excited about. He may be thinking about watering the grass, but I'm thinking of another day that we don't get to have lunch recess. You see, on rainy days, we still have recess, but it's inside the multi-purpose room. But since we have to eat lunch in there too, we don't get to have lunch recess!

Don't get me wrong. I like the rain. It's actually a dream of mine to play a game of tag in the pouring rain. Of course, if I ever did that, I'd probably end up getting into more trouble than I've ever been in. Especially since I'm a Future Funmaker. When you're a Future Funmaker, the little kids like to pretend that they're you! It used to be *so* annoying. Until mom taught me a famous quote, that is.

Mom said that 'imitation is the highest form of flattery'. I know. I didn't understand it at first either. It means that when people try to copy you, it's usually because they look up to you. As in, they want to *be* you! After she told me that, I didn't let it bother me so much.

But she recently reminded me of *another* meaning it has. It also means that *because* those people look up to you, it's *your* job to be the best example that you can be for them. Because if they see you making *bad* choices, then they are going to *copy* those choices. They are going to think it's okay. And then the people that look up to *them* are going to copy *their* bad choices.

But, if you make *good* choices, then they are going to copy *those* choices. And *then*, the people that look up to *them*, are going to

copy their *good* choices. And so on, and so on. You know, the good choices will get passed around and make the world a better place!

"See! T.J.'s station doesn't even play music!" Xochitl whined, causing mom to give her a 'complain *one more time*' look from the rearview mirror.

Are *you* annoyed by Xochilt's continuous whining, too? Welcome to my life, where it's just another part of the daily struggle.

Three

Don't Forget Again

Normally, mom just drops us off anywhere in front of the school. You know, however far back the car line is. But since it's raining today, she told us to wait until we're *right* in front of the entrance. I don't exactly understand why. I mean, we both have our raincoats, rainboots and umbrellas. I'm not sure we could be any more protected from the rain.

When it was finally our turn, a supervision aide opened the door for Xochitl and me to get out. Normally, we would give mom a

kiss goodbye, but mom said not to worry about it and to just quickly exit the car. Xochitl couldn't get her backpack on over her raincoat, so I just grabbed it and told her to hurry up. It may seem like I was being mean or rude, but there were other cars waiting to drop their kids off. She whined, of course, and told me to give it back. But at least she followed me inside of the school.

There are *lots* of kids crowding the hallways. Normally, most of them would be on the blacktop waiting in their lines. Or, they would be playing one of the games that Funmaker John put out. But with the rain, all they can do is wait in the hallways. Xochitl and I headed for the multipurpose room so we could get breakfast.

When we got there, the line was longer than usual. I've noticed, over the last few days, that more people eat breakfast when it rains. I'm not sure why. But they do. It doesn't really matter to me. As long as they have my sausage on a stick! But the longer we waited in line, the more I worried that they might run out.

After getting my sausage on a stick, syrup pack, orange juice and chocolate milk, I tried to put in my personal food code. But it didn't work. So, I tried again. I was about to try a third time, when the cafeteria manager reminded me that her computer software had been updated and that the old codes don't work anymore. I had to use my student number. But I couldn't *remember* my student number!

I miss the old computer software. With the old software, we only had to enter the last *four* digits of our student number. *This* software made us enter our entire *nine*-digit student number. That's *five* extra numbers to remember! And it's not like we had a heads up. When we showed up to school on Wednesday, the software had been updated!

And lunch time used to be even *easier* than breakfast. At lunch time, we didn't have to remember *any* numbers! All we had to do was tell the supervision aide our teacher's name and she would tell the cafeteria manager that we were coming. By the time we got our lunch and made it to the computer, all we had to do was touch the screen. You know, click on our own picture. No entering numbers. No forgetting numbers. Just click on our face.

"What's your last name, T.J.?" the cafeteria manager asked.

"Olivera," I answered.

I know. I know. You're probably thinking 'I thought your last name was Espinosa'. And you're not wrong. My full name is Tomas Raymundo Olivera Uribe Barrientos Lopez Espinosa, Jr. But for some reason, if you have more than three names. You know, a first, middle and last name. Then the school uses your *first* last name in the computer. *And* on certificates and awards. I don't blame them there. It would take quite a while to handwrite my full name.

"Here you go," the cafeteria manager said, giving me a paper with my student number handwritten on it.

“Thank you, Mrs. S,” I said, taking the paper and putting it in my raincoat pocket.

I then surveyed the room for a good place to sit. Normally, I would take my breakfast and sit with the T.J. League at our usual spot, but *that* table is outside. Luckily, it didn’t take long for me to spot a good place to sit.

“Sausage on a stick!” I said, holding up mine like a sword.

“Sausage on a stick!” Marcus answered back, holding *his* up so we could pretend to sword fight.

His was a bit shorter, since he had already taken a few bites, so I won of course.

“No playing with your food!” the supervision aide called to us.

We just laughed and sat down.

“So, did you hear?” I asked Marcus.

“Hear what?” he answered, with another question.

“The lady on the radio said that we’re going to have another day of rain!” I exclaimed, throwing my arms up in frustration.

“Another day of rain?” Marcus said, in a ‘you *must* be kidding me’ voice.

“That’s what the lady said,” I answered in a ‘don’t kill me, I’m just the messenger’ voice.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like splashing in the puddles and all, but I haven’t been able to play basketball in *days*!” he commented.

“I know. And it’s probably going to take a couple of days for the tree house to fully dry,” I pointed out.

“What are you guys talking about?” Sammy asked, taking a seat next to Marcus.

“It’s supposed to rain *again*, tomorrow!” Marcus said, throwing *his* arms up this time.

“I know,” Sammy responded. “I track the weather through my weather app. I check it every night before I go to bed. It seems another storm from the north has collided with ours, creating an even larger storm. I wouldn’t be surprised if we heard thunder and saw some lightning before school is out.”

Have I ever mentioned how *smart* Sammy is? That’s why I choose her for group projects whenever I get the chance. Not to mooch off her or anything, if *that’s* what you’re thinking. I make sure to do *my* share of the work, too. I just like not having to worry about whether or not my partner is going to flake out on *their* part!

“I *love* thunder and lightning!” a girl sitting near us exclaimed.

“I don’t,” the boy sitting next to her said, looking around the multipurpose room as if it would begin to thunder and lightning at any moment. “Especially thunder. That scares me the *most*!”

“Don't worry. Thunder can't hurt you. It's just sound,” Sammy explained. “lightning on the other hand, *that* can hurt you. Make sure to stay indoors if you see lightning. Getting struck by lightning is a

thousand times worse than getting shocked by those trick bubble gum packs or pens!”

The little boy looked around the room again, before cautiously taking a spoonful of his cereal. I don't mind the lightning so much. But like the boy, I don't like thunder. I know it can't hurt me, but it just sounds so scary sometimes!

We sat and ate the rest of our breakfast, mostly in silence. It got so noisy in the multipurpose room that it was hard to have a conversation where we could *actually* hear each other. And even though the hallways are so stuffed with children, we threw away our trash and headed towards the exit.

I was almost out the door when I heard the supervision aide call out my name. When I turned around, I noticed that she was holding a piece of paper in her hand. She also had one of those ‘are you forgetting something?’ looks on her face. You know, the one your mom gives you when she told you to do something, but you *completely* forgot what it was. Yeah, one of those looks. As I got closer, I noticed what the paper said.

“You dropped this,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said, placing the paper in my pants pocket this time.

“You might want to put it in your backpack,” she suggested. “That way you don’t lose it.”

“Or you can just memorize it,” Sammy suggested, “so you don’t forget again.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

4 Make Good Choices

Even though the hallways are protected by awnings, the hallways are *soaked*. I'm not sure if it's because of the wind blowing the rain everywhere or the fact that everyone's feet are dragging the water with them. Either way, there isn't a single dry spot of concrete or blacktop in the whole school!

The supervision aides finally let us go past the office so that we could wait in front of our classrooms. You might think that letting us

do so would clear up the hallways. And if you did, you would be wrong.

There are three to four classrooms in each wing. Depending on which wing you're in. Some wings, like the three hundred wing, have a supply room. Or like the five hundred wing. That's where the computer lab is!

Getting back on track. Since each wing has at least three classrooms, that means at least seventy-five kids waiting in the hallway for their teacher to arrive. And *that's* just the lower grades. The upper grade hallways can have over one *hundred* and twenty students waiting outside!

As I passed by the different hallways, I could hear lots of different conversations going on. Some kids were talking about what they watched on television last night. Others were talking about videos they had watched on the internet. One conversation actually stopped me in my tracks. I overheard a group of kids talking about the new Batman movie that's going to be coming out. It won't be in theaters for another three months, but it seems that the latest preview was released last night. I missed it because I was at Xochitl's ballet practice.

Mom stays for the entire practice and I usually just stay at Marcus' house, but he had a doctor's appointment. His mom said I could go, but mom told her that I would be okay. Let me see. Waiting for my little sister's practice to end or hang out with my best friend. I

don’t care *how* boring the doctor’s office can be. I would rather have been with Marcus!

When I finally reached my wing, I almost got knocked over by one of the fourth graders. As I was turning the corner, she came sliding towards me. Luckily, Sammy was able to pull me out of the way before we crashed.

One of the fun things that the rain brings are wet floors. And not just wet floors. *Slick* floors. The kind of floors you can slide across. Depending on what kind of shoes you’re wearing, you can slide pretty far before coming to a stop. Shoes and good balance, actually. It doesn’t matter *how* good your shoes are if you can’t keep your balance.

First, you have to get a running start. Then, you take a little hop. It may sound weird, but when you land, you have to make sure your feet are in the right position. Kind of like riding a skateboard or surfboard. If you don’t land right, you’ll just trip and fall. But if you land just right, *and* have good balance, you can get some pretty good distance. The school record is one and a half classrooms! At least that’s what I’ve heard.

It happened a couple of years ago. According to the story, one of the sixth graders used an old pair of shoes to get the job done. You know, the kind that have been worn so much that the bottoms are smooth all the way across. It seems that helped him slide better. A full half class past the old record!

After letting us pass safely, the fourth graders continued in their fun. I was tempted to join them, but Sammy grabbed my backpack and dragged me to our classroom. I didn't see any harm in a couple of good trips down the hallway, but Sammy reminded me that it was our job to set a good example for those younger than us. She may be smart, but sometimes she can be a party pooper, too. But don't tell her I said that!

It ended up being a good thing that she stopped me. Just before the first bell rang, Mrs. Whiston came walking around the corner. Unfortunately, one of the fourth grade boys that was boasting that he could beat the school record, had already started his slide down the hallway. With no way to stop himself, he crashed *right* into her. Luckily, she wasn't carrying anything in her hands, so there was nothing for her to drop on the floor. *Unluckily*, the boy fell *right* into a huge puddle that hasn't shrunk in size since it first started raining a few days ago.

Mrs. Whiston reached over and helped the boy up while he repeated, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' over and over again. She also removed some leaves from his hair. The winds have blown so many leaves off the trees that they almost look bald!

"Do you have an extra pair of clothes in your backpack?" Mrs. Whiston asked the boy.

"No," he answered, between apologies.

“Is there anyone at home that can bring you some dry clothes?” she asked.

“No. My mom is on her way to work,” he explained.

I can’t believe Mrs. Whiston is being so calm. If he had crashed into his *own* teacher, she would be giving him a piece of her mind. And not a good piece, either.

“Okay. Hopefully she can turn around and bring you some,” she said.

“But I take the bus because we don’t have a car,” the boy said. “Mom takes the bus, too.”

“Well, you can head to the office so they can call *someone* to bring you a fresh pair of clothes. Or, maybe they’ll have some loaner clothes that fit you,” Mrs. Whiston said, turning him towards the office.

“You mean I’m not in trouble?” the boy asked, turning back around to face her.

“I’m sure that your teacher will think of *something* when you show up late to class and tell her *why* you’re late. Just remember that someone could get hurt. You could crash into someone and bump heads. Or worse! You could fall back and hit your head on the concrete. And then instead of having to call home for dry clothes, we would be calling home for someone take you to the emergency room!” she answered, shuffling the boy’s hair and redirecting him back towards the office.

When she turned back around to walk to our class, all the fourth graders who were sliding down the hallway suddenly lined themselves up against the wall.

“And that goes for you, too,” she said, looking each of them in the eye. “Don’t think I don’t know that you guys were enjoying a slide or two yourselves. This isn’t the first time someone has crashed into me sliding down this hallway.”

Of course, they each denied that they were doing anything wrong as their teacher approached. Mrs. Whiston just shook her head and smiled.

“Make good choices!” she said, as she continued her way to our classroom.

Five

You've Convinced Me

We usually keep our backpacks outside on the backpack rack, but the rain has been so wild that we've had to put them on the back of our chairs instead. That's made it a little more difficult to get around the room. I mention that because it has *totally* changed my daily routine in the classroom.

Normally, I would put my backpack on my hook and take out my homework folder and library book. *Then*, as I walk into the classroom, I would drop off my homework in the 'Homework' bin

by the door. I would then put my homework folder and library book in the basket on my desk. It's usually a pretty simple task, as everyone marches in, single file, and follows the same routine.

But today, it's chaos. Today is like trying to navigate one of those mazes that Mrs. Whiston sometimes gives us when we've already finished all our work. You know which ones I'm talking about. The ones where you have to do them in pencil, because you *think* you've found the right path to the finish, but *nope*, just another dead end! Today is like that. What normally takes us two, or three minutes max, has already surpassed five minutes!

When I finally made it back to my seat, I took out my daily journal so that I could do the Daily Prompt. I looked at the board so I could copy it into my journal, when I noticed that the date was wrong. And *then* I remembered something important: this week it's *my* job to change the date! Some people are still putting their homework in the Homework bin, so once again, I have to navigate my way through the classroom. Here I go!

After changing the date and returning to my seat, I worked on the daily prompt: What is your pet peeve? I wasn't sure what a 'pet peeve' was, so I looked it up in the dictionary. That didn't help, so I looked it up on my school tablet: something that a particular person finds especially annoying. Hmmm. What *is* my pet peeve?

Xochitl *can* be pretty annoying, but the definition says some*thing*, not some*one*. I sat, scratching my chin as I thought. Pet

peeve. Pet peeve. Pet peeve. What *is* my pet peeve?

Well, I'm not sure if it's a pet peeve, but it's pretty annoying when people just drop their trash on the floor when they've finished their food. I see it every day. When kids are finished with their chips or cookies and stuff, they just drop their trash and walk away. Even if a trash can is nearby!

It's also pretty annoying when people just pass *by* trash on the floor. You know. Step over it like it's not even there. Or pretend they don't see it. I *know* you saw it. You *looked* right at it. Just be a good citizen and pick it up!

When we've completed the daily prompt, we take out our library books for SSR: Sustained Silent Reading. Every day, Mrs. Whiston gives us fifteen minutes to read. Silently. She also plays classical or jazz music quietly while we read. You know. To set the mood. Except at Christmas time. Then she usually plays the karaoke versions of Christmas songs.

The rule is this: if she can't hear the music, then that means people are talking. And if people are talking, then they aren't reading. And if they aren't reading during SSR, then they get to read during recess. And if she doesn't know who's talking, and no one confesses, then *everyone* gets to read during recess! And tattling *isn't* allowed. The people have to *admit* that they were talking. The *entire* class could tell Mrs. Whiston who was talking, but it wouldn't matter. 'Trustworthiness and responsibility', she always says.

Thankfully she's never had to keep everyone in. Since she's usually nice, even when dishing out consequences, the person just admits it. It's either that, or the fact that we've learned that if we get caught in a lie, that the consequence will be worse than if we had just admitted our wrongdoing. The most Mrs. Whiston usually has to do is scold the person and remind them that there's a better choice they can make next time.

Since today is Friday, we'll be having our spelling test after SSR. Even though they're not supposed to, some people will use SSR to study their spelling words. But that's a risky thing to do. If Mrs. Whiston catches you studying instead of reading, you drop a *full* letter grade on your test! That means if you spell *all* the words correctly and get a *perfect* score, the highest grade you can get is a B^+. I don't know about you, but personally, I don't think it's worth it. I would rather get a B^+ knowing I earned it, than to spell *all* the words right and only get a B^+!

Not to mention, Mrs. Whiston makes us write any word we miss on the test, ten times for homework. Then we have to attach it to our test and get it signed by our parents. If we get caught studying our words during SSR, or cheating during the test, then we have to write *all* our words ten times! And since we've had Mrs. Whiston since kindergarten, our parents *know* that we were caught cheating. Like I said, *not* worth it!

“Okay boys and girls, time to put away your library books. Please put up your zombie proof walls and prepare for your spelling test,” Mrs. Whiston ordered.

If you’re wondering what a ‘zombie proof’ wall is, I’ll explain. Zombie proof walls are ‘walls’ that we put on our desk during a test. They have three panels like my bathroom mirror at home, except they’re made out of cardboard. Their purpose is to keep us from looking at each other’s test. Not only do they keep us from seeing each other’s test, they’re also soundproof. Sort of. Actually, not at all. But we’re supposed to pretend that they are.

“I want you to pretend these are zombie proof. If a *zombie* can’t get through, then *nothing* can!” Mrs. Whiston had explained, back in first grade.

“In the movies and television, zombies can get through *anything*. So, if these are ‘zombie proof’ walls, then theoretically, *nothing* can get through these! Not even sound. So, if your neighbor is talking to you, just put up your imaginary zombie proof wall so they won’t distract you!”

Some of us have gotten pretty good at putting up imaginary zombie proof walls. Others, not so much. But *no one* is as good as Jefferson. I’m pretty sure Jefferson could ignore a *real-life* zombie if it were trying to distract him during SSR or a test or something.

“T.J., I’m going to need you to put your tablet away for the test,” Mrs. Whiston instructed.

“But I’m documenting my day for the project you gave us,” I explained.

“I understand that, but you could have the spelling words on your screen and that would be cheating,” she commented.

“But I don’t! It’s just recording,” I pointed out, showing her the screen. “You can’t even dual screen when it’s in video mode.”

It doesn’t seem like I’m changing her mind.

“What if I sit at the kidney table, facing backwards. That way you can see that I’m just recording,” I asked, offering a solution. “I just want to get as much recording done as I can so that I can accurately document my day.”

“You understand that your video can only be three to five minutes long,” Mrs. Whiston reminded me.

“Yes. But I just want some footage of me taking my spelling test,” I defended.

She just stood there with that ‘I don’t know’ look on her face. You know which one I’m talking about. The one your mom or dad use when you’ve just spent the last ten minutes explaining why they should let you do something or buy you something that they don’t really want you to. That face.

“I’ll even use the school tablet. My spelling words aren’t even on there!” I tried to convince her, one last time.

“Very well, T.J., but just this once,” she said, motioning toward the kidney table.

“Thank you, Mrs. Whiston!” I said excitedly, taking my school tablet with me.

6 Future Funmaker Duties

Six

Future Funmaker Duties

With our spelling test over, we moved on to language arts and then math. Before long, it was time for me to head to the MPR, a.k.a. the multipurpose room. Even though it's raining, we still get to have recess. Except instead of using the blacktop and play structure, we use the MPR floor and stage.

Today, the whole T.J. League is scheduled for recess duty. More help is usually needed on rainy days. You know, to keep things

organized and running smoothly. With all of us working together, recess should be no sweat.

“Okay, Future Funmakers, I’ve posted signs on the walls for each activity,” Funmaker John explained, as we all sat on the stage steps.

“None of our activities will involve running. This will help ensure that no one will slip and get hurt. Station one will be the Hula Hoop Challenge and will be at table two. Station two will be Zim Zam Zoom Relay 2.0 and will be at table five. Station three will be Limbo Lower and will be at table seven. Station four will be the Color Creations Station and will be at table ten. And finally, station five will be Booty Basketball and will be on the stage.”

You may not be familiar with some of these activities, so let me take some time to explain them to you, that way you can have a better understanding of all the fun that was about to go down.

The Hula Hoop challenge is where everyone stands in a circle and holds hands. Then, a Future Funmaker has two people release their grip so they can put a hula hoop between them. Then, they hold hands again so that the hula hoop is now part of the circle.

Once everyone is ready, the Future Funmaker will shout a magic word. Whatever magic word they choose. Then, everyone has to pass the hula hoop to the next person, without unlocking their hands, until it’s made its way all the way around the circle. It may sound easy, but since everyone is holding hands, the only way to

pass the hula hoop is to *climb* through the hula hoop. Believe me, it's easier said than done. The challenge is to get the hula hoop all the way around the circle in under sixty seconds.

Since we can't run, Zim Zam Zoom Relay 2.0 is *completely* different that the Zim Zam Zoom Relay we play on the black top. It still starts with two teams though. It works like this: The two people at the front of the line play Zim Zam Zoom. Whoever loses, has to crawl through the legs of the other team, like a tunnel, until they reach the back of the line. Now, they are part of the other team.

The goal of the game is to get *everyone* from the other team, onto *your* team. It may seem easy, but it's a lot harder than it sounds. Sometimes recess ends before we can even find a winner. Then again, I've seen a team with only *one* person left, come all the way back and win! I think it's the uncertainty that makes this game so much fun to play.

Now for our next activity. If you've ever played limbo, then you know the basics of the game. But Limbo *Lower* changes things up a bit. Instead of moving the stick to a lower rung, we place it in the middle and leave it there. It may sound too easy, but just wait. Whoever makes it past round one, has to hold a one-pound weight to their chest during the second round. That's usually no challenge for most people. But after each round, we exchange the weight for an even heavier one.

Think of it this way. Whatever round you're on, the weight you're holding is one pound lighter. For example, if you make it to round six, then the weight you're holding will be five pounds. Even though the stick never moves, the added weight after each round increases the difficulty.

The Color Creations Station is less of a recess game and more of just a fun activity. For Color Creations, everyone has the same coloring page and a bunch of crayons to share. For this activity, to make sure that everyone participates, each person takes a turn spinning a wheel to decide what color crayon everyone has to use. Although the spinner chooses what color you have to use, *you* get to decide *what* part of your color page to fill in. And you can only fill in *one* part of the page at a time. No coloring the entire thing after the first spin and saying, 'I'm finished!'.

Even though everyone has the same coloring page, no two people end up coloring them the same way. I'm not sure if they do it on purpose, just to be funny, or if everyone truly has a different idea of what their color page should look like. I mean, if you and all your friends got the same color page and your teacher told you to color them, using the zombie proof walls, do you think you'd all color them the same exact way? Me neither. We're all different. And that's the way I like it!

Our final activity, Booty Basketball, is usually everyone's favorite. It's like basketball. But it's not. You still have two teams,

like real basketball. And you still have two baskets. Except, we use empty trash cans for Booty Basketball. *Clean* trash cans!

The *main* difference, is that to get around, you have to scoot on your booty. Also known as the ‘Booty Scoot’. No crawling on your knees. No crab crawling. No nothing, but scooting on your booty. As long as you don’t have the ball, you can scoot around. Once you have the ball in your hand, you can’t move. You’re frozen in place. You can only pass the ball or shoot the ball. If you booty scoot with the ball in your hand, the ball is taken away and given to the other team.

Also, to make it fair, we put a piece of blue tape two feet in front of the trash can so that no one can block your shot. In other words, no babysitting. Anyone who passes the line or is caught moving around off their booty, has to sit out for two minutes in the Sit Out Square.

The Sit Out Square is just a square on the floor that we make out of blue tape. If someone else is in the Sit Out Square when it’s your turn to sit out, then that person is released from the Sit Out Square. Even if they’ve only been sitting there for thirty seconds. Like Mrs. Whiston said to those fourth graders earlier: make good choices!

On a normal day, kids would get to choose what games they want to play during recess. And they’re not restricted to playing just one game. They can change games anytime they like. But to make

things easier on rainy days, we give kids a number as they come into the MPR. Whatever number we give them, that's the station they go to. And that's the station they stay at. That way everyone doesn't just go to the same activity, like Booty Basketball. Unless they brought a snack. Then they go to the snack table. And if someone says that the station we give them is an activity that they don't like, we remind them to Try A Game That's Not The Same!

Even though there are five different activities for Future Funmakers to lead, Erick and I have a different job today. Even though we've technically been Future Funmakers longer than anyone else who is working today, we have the *least* exciting job. But that's what happens when you pick the shortest straws. And because we chose the shortest straws, Erick and I have the task of keeping the floor dry.

With everyone coming from outside, where the floor is *soaked*, lots of water is bound to come in with them. And even though we have extra floor mats to help soak the water up, some still manages to make it inside. And because it does, Erick and I get to walk around mopping up any water we see. Yay us! Just another part of our Future Funmaker duties!

Seven

That's Just Great

“Okay, Future Funmakers, good job setting up all the stations,” Funmaker John praised, as we all sat on the stage steps, our full focus on him.

Everyone high fived each other and cheered.

“Now, we still have three minutes before the first recess period begins. Let’s go over the Recess Revitalization Foundation rules,” he continued.

“Tattle Tales Don’t Prevail!” Justin called out, standing up with his fist in the air.

“Right,” Funmaker John confirmed.

“Try A Game That’s Not The Same!” Paul quoted, also standing tall, with his fist raised.

“Yes,” Funmaker John said.

“Don’t Shun My Fun!” the rest of us cried out confidently, standing up together, with our fists raised above our heads.

“Great job, guys,” Funmaker John said, adding his fist to ours.

It didn’t take long before we heard voices coming from down the hallway. Without waiting to be told, we all hurried to our stations. Since Erick and I don’t have a station to run, it’s our job to give kids a number as they come into the MPR. We usually take turns. He’ll do one class and then I’ll do the next. You know, to keep things fair.

Once everyone was at their stations, Funmaker John used the MPR’s sound system to remind everyone that there is no running while in the MPR. Anyone caught running, would have to sit out the rest of recess at table one. Table one is also the snack table. If you brought a snack to eat, you have to eat it at table one. When you are finished, you can join the activity that you were originally assigned.

He also told everyone that since there is only one bathroom in the MPR, students would still be allowed to use the ones at the end of each wing. That way no one has to hold it in or have an accident. Especially since the first recess period is only first graders.

Sometimes they hold it in too long before asking to use the restroom, and that usually doesn't have a good outcome.

His *final* announcement reminded everyone that even though we were inside the MPR, it was still Fun Friday. That meant that we would still get to listen to music during recess. Yes!

In case you're wondering what the supervision aides do during recess on rainy days, I'll fill you in. There's always one who roams the room with Funmaker John, making sure that everyone is following the rules, or allowing students to use the restroom. The other two usually join one of the activities and play with the kids. I don't know about you, but beating an adult is pretty fun to me. Each recess period, they take turns monitoring the MPR and playing games.

As recess went on, I scoured the room for water on the floor. Luckily, there wasn't much to be found, so I was able to watch everyone having fun. I know it may sound weird. But to me, sometimes watching someone have fun is just as much fun as playing the game yourself.

I know. I know. Saying that *watching* someone play a game can be as much fun as *playing* the game yourself, doesn't make sense. Kind of like Paul's parents not understanding why he would watch a video of someone playing a video game instead of just playing the game himself. And to those people who don't understand it, like Paul's parents, I ask you this: why would you watch someone on

television *playing* a sport, when you could go out and play it yourself? I know they're professionals, but the concept is the same!

When I got to Booty Basketball, I had to laugh, because I noticed that one of the supervision aides was sitting in the Sit Out Square. They're always telling us to 'play fair' and 'play by the rules', and here they are, in the Sit Out Square for breaking a rule. Serves him right!

"T.J., one of the first graders spilled her juice," the roaming supervision aide informed me.

"I'll get right on it," I said.

I took one last look at Booty Basketball and walked quickly towards table one, but I was stopped in my tracks before I could get there. By the time I made it halfway across the MPR, Erick had already gotten there. One less thing for me to do!

I decided to scan the room for water in the direction of the Color Creation Station. I wanted to see how differently everyone was coloring their picture.

"Why don't *you* give the wheel a spin?" Sammy suggested, as I approached table ten.

"Sure!" I obliged, giving the wheel a hearty spin.

Before we could find out what color everyone would have to use, the lights went out. Actually, so did the music! Then something even *better* happened. Everyone started to scream! If you didn't notice, by 'better', I meant *not* better.

I know, I know. Sometimes sarcasm is hard to read in text form, which is why I'm kind of glad my parents won't let me get a cell phone yet. I don't know *how* many times I've seen people get angry with each other because they read a text wrong. Instead of texting, just *talk* to each other!

"Well, that's, just, great!" Sammy said, rolling her eyes.

Did you notice the sarcasm in her voice? No? Then maybe in the way she rolled her eyes? Yeah. I think that was a better give away, too.

8 Stay In Place

Funmaker John tried to calm everyone down using the wireless microphone, but it didn’t work. I guess the electricity is out. That must be why the music turned off when the lights went out.

Since the speakers were out, the Future Funmakers used a technique that we’ve practiced, but have never had a chance to use before. We all gathered together at the center of the MPR and stood back to back, in a circle, with our hands cupped over our mouths.

“Okay, Leaguers!” I shouted. “On my count! One. Two. Three!”

“If you can hear us, clap once!” we shouted, together.

Some kids clapped in response, while others continued to scream. Actually, some kids have even started to cry.

“If you can hear us, clap twice!” we continued.

More kids joined in the clapping that time.

“If you can hear us, clap *three* times!” we ordered.

Almost everyone clapped that time.

“‘Everybody clap your hands!’” we instructed, quoting D.J. Casper from the Casper Slide.

Everyone clapped together, including Funmaker John, the supervision aides, and even Mrs. Sorroyan, who had come out of the kitchen. By the time we finished clapping the rhythm, the *entire* MPR was silent. Some kids were still sniffling, but our technique had worked. And now Funmaker John has everyone’s attention.

“Great job, boys and girls,” Funmaker John said. “For the safety of all, I would like everyone to please take a seat wherever you are.”

He didn’t have to say it twice. Everyone sat down together, as if one hundred invisible hands had gently nudged all of us toward the ground. Except the supervision aides, that is. They *didn’t* sit down. Instead, they walked around the room, trying to calm the kids who were still crying.

“I’m going to go head to the office to check on the lights. I’m leaving the supervision aides in charge, so please follow their instructions,” Funmaker John announced, leaving the MPR.

He was only gone a couple of moments before Principal Martinez’s voice came over the school’s *old* speaker system. I don’t think I’ve heard anyone use those speakers since I was in second grade. *Actually*, I didn’t even know those speakers still worked!

“Good morning, students and staff,” he began, in a calming voice. “Please excuse this interruption. As you have probably noticed, during that last shock of thunder, our electricity went out.”

Thunder? I didn’t even know it was thundering outside. The music, laughter and screams of joy must have drowned it out.

“Unfortunately, the phones are out, too, which means no internet, so you won’t be able to contact the office by phone or email,” he continued. “Teachers and staff, if you need to contact me, please use the Classroom Communication app.

“I’m not sure if the outage is due to the storm, but we are working hard to restore the power and phones as soon as possible. I am currently using the school’s old announcement system to speak with you and will be sure to keep you posted as we receive updates on our situation.

“Keep in mind that the lights in the bathrooms are *also* not working. So, for safety purposes, please keep restroom breaks to emergencies only. In the meantime, please stay in place.”

Stay in place? For how long?

9 Classroom Communication App

"I *knew* it was a bad idea for our school to go digital with our phone system," Sammy commented.

"Digital?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, digital," Sammy repeated.

"What exactly does *that* mean?" Paul asked.

"It's like this," Sammy started. "Our *old* phone system used a copper wire base to connect all the school phones, and the phones

outside of school for that matter, to a central line, so that when you dialed a number, it would connect you with *that* phone's copper line. This was a great system to have in place, because even if you didn't have money to pay your phone bill, you could still call 9-1-1 for emergencies."

"Makes sense," Marcus commented, matter of factly.

The rest of us just exchanged confused looks and continued to listen.

"The problem with the *new* phone system, is the fact that it directly links to the school's *internet* protocol," Sammy explained.

"What does *that* mean?" Erick asked.

"That means that anytime the central internet hub goes down, so does the *phone* system!" she finished, slapping her palm to her forehead.

I'm starting to wonder, if maybe, *just maybe*, Sammy is a child android prototype that the government created and planted at our school, to see if it could blend in and learn from it's surroundings. Either that, or reincarnation *is* possible, and all the smart stuff she says are just facts that she knew in her past life. Lives? Or maybe she's just the smartest girl in our grade. In our school. In the whole *city*!

Back to the blackout. Even with the curtains opened, it's pretty dark in the MPR. If it was a sunny day outside, we could have just continued recess. But since the storm clouds are as dark as they can

be, not much light is getting through. And since most first graders are afraid of the dark, that's *not* helping!

"Okay, Leaguers," I said, getting their attention. "As Future Funmakers, it's our job to make sure recess runs smoothly. Even on days like this."

"But how can we make *this* any better than it is?" Justin asked, throwing his arms up in frustration like he always does.

"You're going to head back to your stations and try to keep the kids calm," I instructed.

"But what about you and Erick?" Paul asked.

"We'll continue to roam around and help out wherever we're needed," I explained.

"Come on, guys," Sammy said, enthusiastically. "If we can overcome all the obstacles that T.J. throws at us when we play T.J. League, then this should be easy. This is our chance to show what being a Leaguer is *really* all about!"

"Yeah!" Erick said, putting his hand in the center of our circle.

"Let's do this!" Paul said, adding his hand to Erick's.

"Easy peasy, mac and cheesy!" Marcus exclaimed, putting his hand on top of Paul's.

"Something inspirational!" Sammy shouted, placing her hand atop everyone else's.

I just laughed and joined my hand with theirs.

“Here goes nothing,” Justin said, sounding like he had given up before we had even started.

◆ ◆ ◆

After five minutes or so, I noticed that our plan was working. Eventually, we were able to calm everyone down. As we waited for further instructions, we played hand games. Slide. Zim Zam Zoom. Rockin’ Robin. Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite. Games like that.

Wait. What do you *mean* you don’t know what Rockin’ Robin and Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite are? You’ve never played those before? Okay. Okay. I’ll explain them to you. But *man*! You should *definitely* talk to your principal or PTA about getting the Recess Revitalization Foundation at *your* school!

Rockin’ Robin goes to the *song* ‘Rockin’ Robin’ and takes four people to play. First, you have to stand, or sit, in a square formation. The person across from you is your partner. The people on the side of you are important, too.

First, you and your partner have to give each other a high ten. You either go high or low. If the people to your side go high, then you go low. If they go low, then you go high. Get it? And if you go high first, then you go low second.

After clapping high then low, you have to clap side to side. Then you repeat high and low and side to side again, all while singing Rockin’ Robin.

You continue this pattern until you reach the part of the song that says ‘tweet, tweet, tweet’. At that part, you clap your hands with your side partner three times. One for each ‘tweet’. Then you start all over again, with the original pattern you used at the beginning.

It can take some time to get it going just right. But once everyone in your group gets the hang of it, you can get through the entire song without making a mistake. And once you go through the whole song, you do it again, but a little faster. The challenge of the game is to go as *fast* as you can without making a mistake.

Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite is a *completely* different kind of hand game. It’s one the T.J. League came up with, and it’s more of a tournament style game. The last person to get out, wins!

For Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite, you have three movements to choose from. If you want to be a superhero, you stand with one hand on your hip and the other in a fist, raised high above your head. If you want to be a Villain, you stand with both hands in front of you, making claws. If you want to be Kryptonite, you stand with your arms in an ‘x’ across your chest.

The game goes like this: superhero beats villain, villain beats kryptonite, and kryptonite beats superhero. Your objective is to try and guess what your opponent is going to choose so that you can use whatever it is that will defeat them.

If they choose villain, you choose superhero, since superheroes always win in the end. If they choose, superhero, you choose

kryptonite, because *every* superhero has a weakness. And if they choose kryptonite, then you choose villain, because kryptonite has no effect on villains.

You *could* argue, like Sammy, that kryptonite should work against villains, too, since they *also* have a weakness. But for this game, we just make kryptonite work against the superheroes. It's easier that way.

◆ ◆ ◆

A couple of minutes before recess would normally be over, the earthquake drill started to alarm. Once again, kids were screaming and crying.

"Not *this* again," Sammy uttered.

One of the supervision aides ordered everyone to get on their knees and cover their necks. The other supervision aides ran to close the doors, which confused me. Why would they close the doors?

Once the alarm stopped, we gathered at the center of the MPR and repeated our special technique to get everyone's attention. While one of the supervision aides gave instructions for everyone to stay where they are, I wondered something out loud.

"How can the earthquake drill work if there's no electricity?"

"The emergency systems are on a different circuit," Sammy explained, "that way the sprinklers will still work if there's a fire."

"How do you *know* all these things?" Justin asked.

“It’s basic knowledge,” Sammy answered in a ‘doesn’t *everyone* know this’ kind of voice.

“Well, that didn’t come with *my* basic knowledge package,” Justin commented.

“Maybe you need to upgrade,” Sammy whispered, under her breath.

“Guys. It doesn’t *matter* how she knows. All that matters is that we help keep these kids calm,” I said.

Wait a second. Did Sammy just confirm my theory about her being a child android prototype when she suggested that Justin needed an upgrade? Nah!

As Justin looked at everyone with a ‘is anyone going to back me up?’ face, I looked back and forth between the doors that the supervision aides had just closed.

“What is it?” Marcus asked.

“Did you notice that the supervision aides closed the doors during the earthquake drill?” I asked.

“I did,” Paul answered.

“Yeah.”

“Me, too.”

“They did?”

“Why would they close the doors?” I asked, still looking back and forth.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sammy commented. “It’s like you said, T.J., our focus should remain on keeping the kids calm.”

The guys went back to their stations while Erick and I continued to roam the room so we could be used wherever we were needed. It didn’t take long to get everyone calm again. We just continued playing hand games to keep the first graders distracted.

◆ ◆ ◆

I was at table one, playing Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite when Sammy waved for me to come to the Color Creation Station.

“You win!” I told the first grader, before getting up so that I could go to table ten.

Erick gave me a ‘what’s going on?’ look as I crossed the MPR. I shrugged my shoulders, truthfully not knowing why Sammy had motioned for me.

“Sit down,” she ordered, patting the empty space to her left.

“What is it?” I asked her, as she continued playing Zim Zam Zoom with her partner.

“You win,” she told him. “Find another partner to play with.”

Then she turned to me and held up her fist as if to challenge *me* at Zim Zam Zoom. I *still* had no idea what was going on, so I held up my fist and played along.

“I think we’re on a lockdown,” she whispered, so that the first graders wouldn’t hear her.

“What do you mean?” I asked, continuing to play Zim Zam Zoom with her.

“I overheard the supervision aides talking about it,” she said, motioning to the hallway with her head, where the three supervision aides were standing.

“How in the world would *they* know?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“The Classroom Communication App!” she whispered intently with a face that said, ‘are you seriously that dumb!’.

The *Classroom Communication* app. Now, why hadn’t *I* thought of that. Maybe *I* need an update to *my* knowledge package, too.

10 Just Do It!

I can’t figure out why we would be on a lockdown. I thought we were just having an electrical outage? Either way, as long as the doors are closed, we should be safe, so there’s no use in telling the rest of the guys about the lockdown.

I told Sammy to keep me updated on any other important information she overheard the supervision aides talking about and returned to the snack table, since it was the only station that didn’t

have a Future Funmaker watching over it. Once again, Erick gave me a ‘what’s going on?’ look. I shook my head and gave him a ‘no need to worry’ look and hand gesture. Without any more information, there’s no need to spread panic.

◆ ◆ ◆

Eventually, the first graders started getting bored of playing hand games. That led to whining. The supervision aides tried their best to keep them relaxed, but we were losing them. And if we don’t figure out something new for them to do, I’m not sure we’ll be able to get them back.

“Leaguers!” I called out, walking to the center of the MPR.

Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul and Sammy all stood up and joined me. As the leader of the T.J. League, I had decided that we needed a call that meant ‘come quickly’. And I’m not the only one that can use it. Any core member of the League can use it and the rest of us will come running. Or in this case, speed walking, since we can’t run in the MPR.

“What is it, T.J.?” Erick asked, giving me a ‘I thought you said there was no need to worry’ look.

“The first graders are getting restless,” I commented, motioning around the room.

“*That’s* why you called us over? *That’s* why we left our stations? *That’s* why you called this emergency meeting?” Justin

said, throwing his arms up. He really *does* wear his emotions on his sleeve.

"If we don't act fast, whining is going to turn into crying. Then it's going to turn into all out chaos!" I explained.

"T.J.'s right," Erick agreed. "When my little brother gets tired, he starts whining. And if he doesn't take a nap or get what he wants, he usually starts throwing a fit. And *believe me*, once that starts, even my *mom* has a hard time calming him down."

"I know what you're talking about," Justin chimed in. "My little brother and sisters are the same way. My mom does this coin trick to get them to fall asleep. She tells them, 'heads you take a nap and tails you go to sleep'. It used to work on me when I was little, but now I don't fall for it."

"But we can't just tell all these first graders to take a nap!" Marcus pointed out.

"You're right," I agreed. "So, what do we do?"

We all stood in silence as we tried to think of a solution.

"What if we just went back to playing recess?" Erick suggested.

"We can't. It's too dark," Sammy said, pointing at the windows.

"Right," he said. "It was just a thought."

"Let's keep thinking," I instructed.

Once again, we stood in silence.

"What if we play the silent game?" Justin recommended.

“With *this* many people?” Sammy asked, in a ‘you’re not really serious, are you?’ voice.

“*You* come up with something,” Justin shot back.

“Come on guys. Keep thinking,” I ordered.

More silent thinking. I decided to look around the room for ideas. As I looked toward the stage, I saw my tablet on top of one of the rolling cabinets.

“Guys! My Tablet!” I exclaimed, pointing at the rolling cabinet.

“That’s great!” Justin said, then immediately covered his own mouth when he heard how loudly he had said it.

“What’re we going to do with your tablet?” Paul asked.

“We could show a movie!” Justin whispered, loudly.

This time, instead of *verbally* shooting down his idea, Sammy pointed toward the ceiling with a ‘really’ smile on her face. As we all looked up, we noticed that the internet router was off.

“So-*rry*,” Justin whispered. “I forgot that the internet was down, too.”

“What about a game? Do you have any good games on your tablet?” Paul asked.

Sammy smiled that ‘really?’ smile again.

“What?” Paul asked. “What’s wrong with my idea?”

“What *game* do you know of that allows one hundred people to play at once?” she asked. “Not to mention, how would they all be able to see the screen?”

She has a good point, but Paul doesn't look too happy. I think that the T.J. League might be getting a little restless, too.

"What about music?" Erick offered. "Do you have any music on your tablet?"

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked.

"Whenever we do a Random Dance Party while waiting for teachers to pick up their classes, everyone always dances," Erick said.

"And," Sammy said in a sort of 'tell me more' kind of voice. I'm not sure if she's looking for a way to shut down his idea, or if she's truly interested in what he has to say.

"If T.J. has some good dance songs, we can get everyone to take their mind off being stuck in the MPR," Erick expounded.

"Hey, that's a pretty good idea," Justin said, as the room lit up a bit. I guess the rain clouds currently blocking the sun aren't that full.

"Um, I hate to be a downer—" Sammy started.

"No, you don't," Justin interrupted.

"*But*," she continued, "if you haven't noticed, we *still* don't have any electricity."

"But we don't need any!" Erick said, excitedly.

"I don't get it," Paul said.

"The portable sound system!" Marcus joined in.

"The portable sound system!" Erick repeated, looking at Sammy with smiling eyes that said, 'find a flaw in my idea; I dare

you!’.

“That’ll work,” Sammy agreed.

“Yes!” Erick said, motioning Marcus for a high five.

“Just one thing,” Sammy said.

“Do you *always* have to be right?” Justin said, throwing his arms up again.

“How are we going to get to the portable sound system?” she asked.

“Don’t they keep it in the closet on the stage?” Erick asked.

“I think so,” I answered.

“But we’re not *allowed* in the closet on the stage,” Sammy reminded us.

“So, let’s ask one of the supervision aides to get it!” Paul suggested.

“Yeah! They can get it for us!” Justin agreed.

“Let’s just hope it’s charged,” Sammy said.

“Seriously?!”

“Really?!”

“Come on!”

“I’ll go ask them,” I told the guys. “I have to get my tablet anyway.”

“I’ll go with you,” Erick said.

“Good idea. The rest of you guys go back to your stations so you can lead your group in dancing,” I directed.

Erick and I walked to the rolling cabinet to get my tablet and then to the stage steps where the supervision aides were standing.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello,” Mr. Farmer greeted me.

“Would one of you guys be able to get the portable sound system from the closet on the stage?” I asked.

“For what?” he asked.

“We were thinking of having a Random Dance Party,” I explained.

“Why?” Ms. Hart asked, strongly.

“If you haven’t noticed,” Erick said, “the first graders are getting restless.”

“We did,” Mr. Farmer said, with a gentle voice.

“So, we thought a Random Dance Party might take their mind off being stuck in the MPR,” I further explained.

The supervision aides exchanged glances. They mostly made that ‘it’s not a bad idea’ face before looking back at us.

“Just do it!” Erick said, quickly followed by, “please.”

11 No Toilet Paper

“Okay, T.J.,” Mr. Farmer said. “I’ll get the portable sound system for you.”

“Yes!” Erick said, doing a fist pump again.

I unlocked my tablet. Luckily, I’ve downloaded Funmaker John’s ‘Random Dance Party’ playlist on the Recess Revitalization Foundation app. It has all the songs and dances that the kids are used to dancing to.

Once Mr. Farmer brought out the portable sound system and connected it to my tablet, I took the wireless microphone that connected to it.

“Random Dance Party!” I announced, in a deep, DJ voice, the way Funmaker John does it.

Whining quickly ended as the entire MPR erupted in cheers. The T.J. League stood and instructed their stations to follow. Erick and I stood on the stage so that we could lead everyone. Mr. Farmer joined us and asked if he could dance with us.

“Of course!” Erick exclaimed.

This time it was Mr. *Farmer* who did a fist pump, followed by a high *ten* from Erick.

The first song I chose to play was one that I knew would get the party started. It’s more of an exercise warmup, but the first graders don’t know that. It’s even called ‘Warmin’ Up’. Once they heard the music, they started dancing in place. All they have to do now is follow whatever Greg & Steve say.

Next, I chose an all-time favorite. They had already clapped along with us when we used it to get their attention earlier. Now they would get to dance to the entire song!

Now, I know that you’re supposed to turn to the left every time DJ Casper says ‘turn it out,’ but since that can be a bit confusing for first graders, we just stayed facing forward.

After the Cha Cha Slide, I went straight into the Cupid Shuffle. And once again, instead of turning to the left, when DJ Cupid said, ‘now walk it by yourself’, we just ‘walked’ in place.

By now, all the first graders had forgotten that that we were stuck in the MPR because they were too focused on dancing. The other supervision aides also joined us in dancing. Thank, you, *Erick*, for your *brilliant* idea!

When we got to the fourth song, Watch Me, by Silento, I noticed a line beginning to form outside the bathroom door. It *has* been about an hour since recess has originally started, so I’m not surprised. Actually, just thinking about it kind of makes *me* have to pee. Just a little. Nothing I can’t handle. For now.

When the song ended, I noticed that the line had more than *doubled* in size. I guess what they say is true: monkey see, monkey do! Or like Mrs. Whiston always calls it, a ‘potty party’.

Erick tapped me on the shoulder and gave me a ‘what’s the next song?’ look, so I started playing the Macarena. For some reason, first graders can turn to the left on this song. Don’t ask me why, because I have *no* idea!

We had only turned to the left twice when a first grader climbed the stage steps and made a beeline for me. I thought she was coming up to request a song. I was all ready to tell her that I don’t take requests. But what she asked me for was *way* more important than a song request.

I stopped dancing and walked over to Mr. Farmer. He was dancing with his eyes closed and his lips tucked into his mouth. I guess he really likes this song. Since he couldn't see me, I tugged lightly on his jacket. He quickly opened his eyes and stopped dancing.

"Oh. Hi, T.J.," he smiled. "*Great* dance party. You could be a DJ someday!"

"Thank you, Mr. Farmer, but we have a situation," I said, in a stern tone.

"Oh," he said, a bit more serious. "And what would that be."

I turned to the first grader who was *not* doing the Macarena. *She* was doing a totally *different* dance. I think you know which one I'm talking about.

"Yes?" Mr. Farmer asked her.

"There's no more toilet paper," she said, in a small voice, her legs crossed as far as they could go.

Twelve

It's Lunch Time

“Well, now. That *is* a situation,” Mr. Farmer commented, looking across the MPR. “T.J., you stay here and keep the dance party going. Ms. Hart, Mrs. Lender and I will find a solution to this problem.”

He called the other supervision aides over to himself and told them of the toilet paper problem. Ms. Hart quickly walked over to the girl, placed her hand on the girl’s shoulder and told her that

everything was going to be okay. She then walked the girl back to the restroom.

Mrs. Lender hurried behind the stage to see if there was any toilet paper stored in the stage closet. Mr. Farmer, on the other hand, just stood there, continuing to look around the MPR. Like me, Mr. Farmer thinks with his chin.

“What about the toilet paper in the kitchen bathroom?” Sammy asked, appearing out of nowhere.

“How did *you* know?” Erick asked her, still leading the first graders in the Macarena dance.

“I’m the one that sent Sophie to tell you guys about the toilet paper situation in the first place!” she said, pointing back at the restroom.

“Well, sorry. I didn’t know,” Erick apologized.

“There’s no time for apologies,” Sammy commented. “Who’s going to check the kitchen restroom for toilet paper?”

“I will,” Mr. Farmer volunteered. “You go back and help with the restroom. T.J. and Erick can handle the dance party.”

The Macarena was almost over, so I looked on Funmaker John’s list for another song to play. After scrolling down a couple of times, I found a good one.

Baby Shark! But it’s a short song, so I added it to the queue and scrolled some more. That’s when I saw Achy Breaky Heart by The

Chipmunks. And that's when it popped into my head. Oh, *please* have it on your playlist, Funmaker John. Please!

I had almost scrolled all the way down when I saw it! A song that was sure to get everyone pumped up. Not just pumped up, but pooped out. The Payaso de Rodeo by Caballo Dorado. I added it to the queue and set my tablet down. I was sure that it would be the last song I would need to play.

When the Macarena finished and Baby Shark started, *every* first grader screamed with glee. Even the kids waiting in line for the restroom came back to the center of the room. What can I say, it's just one of those songs that's hard *not* to participate in. And for the first time since the Random Dance Party had started, *every* person in the MPR was singing the lyrics.

Luckily, as we started to sing about Daddy Shark, Mr. Farmer came out of the kitchen holding a couple of rolls of toilet paper. They didn't look full, but it was better than nothing. And like I said, the song didn't last long. And even though there were shouts to play it again, I let the playlist continue. That allowed people who had left the restroom line to go back to their spots.

While Erick and I led everyone in the line dance for Achy Breaky Heart, Mr. Farmer joined us and informed us that the cafeteria workers had sacrificed their own toilet paper so that the first graders could use it. That Mrs. Sorroyan and her cafeteria ladies. They're just the best!

When Achy Breaky Heart faded out and Payaso de Rodeo faded in, only about *half* of the MPR got excited. We had tried to teach the dance to the school a few months back, but only the upper grades had been able to keep up.

As Erick and Mr. Farmer stood tall, stomping their right foot and pumping their right fist into the air, I grabbed the wireless microphone and told everyone that I would call out the instructions so that everyone could dance along. The slow part is easy enough for everyone to join in and dance to. It's when the song speeds *up*, that the difficulty *instantly* jumps from one to a hundred!

"Front! Back! Left! Right! Front! Back! Left! Right!" I said over and over, into the microphone, wondering when the song would end.

When it finally did, I spun in a circle and fell to the floor, lying on my back. Everyone in the MPR copied my actions. *I* did it to catch my breath. After dancing to all those songs, I was almost out of energy. Now that I think about it, the first graders were probably running out of energy, too.

"Water break!" I announced.

Fortunately, our MPR doesn't just have a restroom. It also has a water fountain. I played some more music while everyone lined up to get a drink of water. This time I chose songs that people would just sing along to. I'm going to need at least fifteen minutes before I'm ready to start dancing again. Luckily, there are so many people in the

MPR, it took about *twenty* minutes before everyone had gotten their ten second drink.

But by then, we had run into yet *another* problem: no one wanted to dance anymore.

“Does Funmaker John have any sleepy time music on his playlist?” Justin asked.

“I think you mean lullaby music,” Sammy corrected Justin, yet again.

“You know what I mean,” Justin commented. “That’s just what my after school teacher calls it when *she* puts it on.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked.

“When I first get to my after school classroom, my teacher has the lights off and soft music playing on her Bluetooth speaker. She calls it ‘sleepy time’ music. We’re allowed to put our heads down and rest our eyes. Some people even fall asleep,” Justin explained.

“Oh, I get it!” Erick exclaimed. “We can put some sleepy time music and hope they fall asleep!”

“We would have to do more than just play the music. Just cause a lullaby is playing, doesn’t mean they’re going to fall asleep,” Sammy pointed out.

“We could put the music on while playing Dead Fish!” Marcus chimed in.

“What’s Dead Fish? I’ve never seen it on the list of Recess Revitalization Foundation approved activities,” Sammy said.

“It’s a game I used to play when Daniel and I were in day care. The ladies would tell us to lie on the ground like a dead fish. And because dead fish don’t move, we couldn’t move. If we moved, we were out,” Marcus told us.

“I *still* don’t understand how that’s going to get everyone to fall asleep,” Sammy interrupted, pessimistically.

“I wasn’t finished,” Marcus said, still sounding excited. “We also weren’t allowed to blink. ‘Dead fish don’t blink, so you might as well close your eyes’ the ladies would say. And because we closed our eyes, we usually fell asleep!”

“Now *that* sounds like a plan!” Justin said, motioning Marcus for a high five.

Marcus happily high fived Justin and then looked at Sammy for her approval. Sammy just stood there and then looked at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Well. Does Funmaker John have lullaby music on his playlist or not?” she asked.

I scrolled and scrolled through the entire playlist, all sixty-seven songs, looking for some that might be good for sleepy time and Dead Fish. Unfortunately, Funmaker John’s playlist is called Random Dance Party, *not* sleepy time music. *Or* lullaby music. Random Dance Party.

“It *was* a great idea, guys,” I said, looking at Justin and Marcus.

“Well, *there* goes a great idea down the toilet. No pun intended,” Justin remarked, doing his arm thing for like the tenth time today.

“There’s gotta be something else we can do!” Paul said, crossing his arms.

Once again, we stood in a circle, staring at each other. Just *hoping* a great idea would pop into our mind or present itself somehow.

“T.J.! Leo’s cheating at Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite!” a first grader whined, while tugging on my Future Funmaker shirt.

“Say again,” I requested.

I had been too deep in thought and didn’t hear the first part of what he had said.

“I *said* that Leo is cheating at Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite!” he whined, louder this time.

“Did you guys Zim Zam Zoom?” I asked.

“I don’t *wanna* Zim Zam Zoom!” he continued to whine, stomping his foot when he said ‘wanna’.

“It’s the best way to solve a problem,” Marcus tried to help.

“But I don’t *wanna*,” he refused, stomping his foot again to make sure we understood how resolute he was.

“Or you could just play with someone else,” Paul told him, putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “That’s what *I* do when someone won’t stop cheating.”

“Leo! I’m not playing with you anymore!” the boy shouted, as he ran back to his group of friends.

“How do you even *cheat* at Superhero, Villain, Kryptonite?” Justin asked.

“It’s easy,” Erick answered. “You can take your time choosing your position. You know. Just a little bit longer than your opponent. That way you always win. *Or*, you can just refuse to lose, even when it’s clear that you’ve lost.”

“Sounds like *someone* has used those hacks a few times or more,” Paul commented.

“More like people have tried to use those hacks on *me*,” Erick defended.

“Whatever you say,” Paul shot back, looking up while standing on his tippy toes and putting his hands behind his back.

“I’ve got it!” I said, with excitement.

“Got what?” Sammy asked.

“We could play Heroes and Villains!” I shouted.

“‘Heroes and Villains?’” she said, repeating me.

“Yeah! That hasn’t been part of the recess rotation for over a month!” I pointed out.

“T.J.’s right!” Marcus agreed. “And it’s a game that one hundred people can play at the same time!”

“T.J., you’re a *genius*!” Justin exclaimed.

“Thank the whiney kid,” I said, redirecting the credit. “If he hadn’t come to tattle on his friend, it would have never popped into my mind.”

“Well, *thank you* ‘whiney kid’,” Erick said.

I shared our idea with the supervision aides. They agreed that it was a great way to keep the first graders occupied. When they asked how we would keep it organized, I told them that we could have everyone return to their original station. Then, the Future Funmaker who was in charge of that station would oversee their own game of Heroes and Villains.

“I guess there’s a reason Mr. Martinez holds you in such high regard,” Mr. Farmer remarked, patting me on the back.

“Thanks,” I said, “but it was a team effort.”

I used the wireless microphone to once again announce what we would be doing next. And after everyone returned to their stations, it didn’t take long for everyone to start playing Heroes and Villains. It also wasn’t much longer before our *next* problem arose.

“T.J., I’m hungry,” a little girl told me, rubbing her stomach.

Now that she mentions it, I hadn’t gotten a chance to eat *my* snack. My trail mix and supplement shake were still inside my Batman lunchbox, which was still on top of the rolling closet where my tablet used to be. Usually, we get ten minutes between recess periods to reset the equipment and eat our snacks. Oh, how I could almost *taste* the trail mix! But I can always save that for tomorrow. I

just hope that my *shake* is still cold. Like I said before, if it gets warm, it's *gross*!

"*T.J.*! I said I'm *hungry*!" she repeated, rubbing her stomach again.

I looked at the clock to see what time it was. Yup. Just as I thought. It's lunch time!

13 Are Those Helicopters?

“We’ve been preparing lunch like normal,” Mrs. Sorroyan told me. “Well, the food we *could* prepare, at least. Some of our equipment runs on electricity, so we can’t use them. But some of it uses gas.”

“So, we can have lunch?” I asked.

“I don’t see why not. I’ll just have to keep track of everyone the old-fashioned way, since my computer is down,” she answered.

So much for updated computer software!

“Thanks. I’ll be right back,” I said.

I’ve got to get the guys together. They can help me organize the first graders. And the supervision aides can help Mrs. S keep track of everyone who gets lunch.

“Leaguers!” I called out as loud as I could, since everyone was still playing Heroes and Villains.

It must have been loud enough, because here they come. Along with Mr. Farmer.

“Mr. Farmer? What are you doing here?” Erick asked.

“I heard T.J.’s assembly call,” Mr. Farmer answered.

“‘Assembly call’?” Justin repeated.

“You know. Like when Captain America tells the Avengers to assemble and they all come,” he explained.

“Oh! ‘Assemble’-y call!” Justin exclaimed, as if a lightbulb in his head had just lit up. “When you said ‘assembly’ I thought you meant like an assembly we have for Student of the Month or trimester awards or something.”

“Where do you think the word ‘assembly’ comes from?” Sammy asked Justin. “The root word of ‘assembly’ is ‘assemble’, which means to gather together in one place.”

And *this* is why I choose Sammy as a project partner whenever I get the chance. Not only do I *not* have to worry that she won’t do her part of the project, I *also* get to learn a load of cool things. She’s

filled with fun facts. Because of Sammy, I was today years old when I realized that the words assembly and assemble are actually related!

Then again, I *could* just say that this is another great piece of evidence that proves she's an android prototype. Then again, maybe I just need to read more than I play.

"Is there anything you *don't* know?" Justin asked Sammy.

"I *still* haven't figured out why people use cotton swabs to clean the inner part of their ears. The earlobe I can understand. But the inner ear? It just doesn't make any sense. I mean, it *clearly* states the dangers of doing so *right* on the packaging!" she answered, passionately, throwing her hands up in a Justin-like fashion.

"O-kay," Paul said.

"How about telling us why you called this meeting, T.J," Mr. Farmer suggested, getting us back on track.

"It's like this. Some of the kids are getting hungry. And even though their lunchtime isn't for another fifteen minutes, Mrs. S says that she has lunches ready since kindergarten is supposed to be here right now," I told everyone.

"But what about the kindergarteners? What are *they* going to eat?" Marcus asked.

"They should be okay," Sammy answered.

"How can you say that?" Justin asked.

Sammy sighed. I can't blame her. If Justin hasn't learned to just trust her after everything that's happened today, then that's on him!

“You know the emergency bins we have in our classroom?” Sammy asked him slowly, as if talking to someone who doesn’t understand English.

“Yeah,” he answered, not sure where she was going with this.

“And you know how everyone had to bring a snack pack at the beginning of the year?” she continued, in like fashion.

“You mean when we had to write our name on a zip lock bag and fill it with juice and granola bars and stuff?” Justin asked.

“Yes, Justin. *Those* snack packs,” Sammy confirmed.

“But what about people who *didn’t* bring a snack pack?” Erick asked. “I know *I* never did.”

“They’ll be okay,” Sammy answered.

“Tell us why,” Justin said.

I think he’s finally learning to just go with whatever Sammy says.

“My dad’s on the PTA Board,” she started. “I was here after school when they were filling the emergency bins. We put first aid supplies, enough water bottles for every student and teacher in the class, extra snacks, as well as other necessary items. Even if first grade is the only grade to eat in the cafeteria today, all the other grades should have enough food to keep them going for the rest of the day.”

Like I said. *Filled* with fun facts!

“I can vouch for her,” Mr. Farmer said. “My wife volunteered to help that day. She was *amazed* at how much thought and organization went into making sure everyone would be taken care of in a situation like this. There’s even a solution for those who have to use the restroom but can’t leave the classroom.”

“And what solution is *that*!” Erick said.

“Um. I’d rather not say before we eat,” he answered.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” I refocused us. “All that matters, is feeding all these little people.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Paul asked.

I told the guys that I was going to have each of them lead a classroom. You know. Stand in for their teacher. And one at a time, they would take a class through the lunch line. I asked Mr. Farmer if he and Ms. Hart could put down the tables and benches. He said they could. He started to walk away, but I told him there was one more important thing to do.

“What’s that, T.J.?” he asked.

“Mrs. S is going to need help keeping track of everyone who is eating, since her computer is still down,” I explained.

“No worries, T.J. I’ll ask Mrs. Lender to help her,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, offering a handshake.

Instead, Mr. Farmer put his hand in the middle of our huddle. I looked at him, and then at the guys, who were all smiling. I put my hand on top of Mr. Farmer’s, followed by the rest of the T.J. League.

“Alright, guys. ‘Lunchtime’ on three,” I directed. “One, two, three!”

“Lunchtime!”

Everyone went straight to work. Mr. Farmer informed Ms. Hart and Mrs. Lender of our plan. They immediately began to take down tables and benches. Marcus went to station one. Paul went to station two. Justin went to station three and Sammy went to station four. Erick went to station five while I took my tablet and lowered the music to zero volume. Then I grabbed the wireless microphone.

“Mr. Thomas’ class, please line up at station one. Mrs. Brown’s class, please line up at station two. Mrs. Lee’s class please line up at station three. And Ms. Lund’s class, please line up at station four.”

It didn’t take long for the supervision aides to get all the tables and benches down. And although I had to repeat what classes had to go to which station a couple of times, getting all the first graders to line up didn’t take too long either. Before long, all of Mr. Thomas’ class was eating lunch. And by the time half of Mrs. Brown’s class had already taken a seat, the lights came back on. Once again, the whole MPR erupted in cheers. And it didn’t take long for Principal Martinez’s voice to come over the speaker system. But it was still the *old* speaker system.

“Teachers, staff, please excuse the interruption. As you may have noticed, the electricity has been restored. Unfortunately, the

phones are still down, along with the internet, so we will still be communicating through the Classroom Communication App.

"Even though the electricity is back, we are *still* asking for students and staff to stay in place. I will update you when the internet is back up. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation. You guys rock!"

Guess we truly *are* on a lockdown. During his *last* announcement, he said we couldn't use the hallway restrooms because they would be too dark. Even though the lights are back on, he's still telling us to 'stay in place'. Oh, well. I can't focus on that right now. I can only work on what's in front of me at the moment.

"T.J.," Marcus said, tapping me on the shoulder and waking me from my mid-distance stare.

"Huh? What?" I responded.

"Now that the electricity's back on, do you think we can turn on the video projector?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah! Funmaker John keeps movies in a stage closet," I said, turning around to get them.

"You get the projector going. I'll get a movie for us to watch," Marcus told me.

"Right," I said, agreeing with his plan.

Mr. Farmer must have noticed Marcus and me getting to work.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

“Could you turn on the MPR speakers, so we’ll have sound when I start the movie?” I asked.

“No problem,” he said, saluting me and going behind the stage curtains where the electrical panel is.

As soon as the projector started to warm up, Marcus returned with a movie. I put it into the DVD player and pushed play. Once the first graders realized what we were doing, they started to applaud. And the ones with their back to the screen turned around to see what was going on. When they heard the previews starting to play, they joined in the applause.

By the time the previews ended, all of the first graders had gotten their lunches. Some of them had even finished theirs. Mr. Farmer told me and the rest of the T.J. League to go ahead and eat lunch while he and the rest of the supervision aides took care of the trash.

“You don’t have to tell *me* twice,” Justin announced, turning around, and heading *straight* for the lunch line.

We each joined a table of first graders and began to enjoy our first moments of rest since *before* recess had started. Over *two* hours ago. While we ate our lunch, most of the first graders watched the movie. Some put their heads down and fell asleep. I can’t blame them. I would take a nap, too, if I could!

When I finished my lunch, I got up to throw my trash away.

“I’ll get that for you,” Mr. Farmer said, making his way toward me.

I handed him the plate and was going to sit back down when he placed his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear.

“Come with me.”

I wasn’t sure why he wanted me to go with him, but the tone of his voice told me that it was important.

“I can’t see,” a first grader said, motioning for me to move.

I followed Mr. Farmer as he threw away my trash and headed for the back of the MPR where Mrs. S was entering everyone who had eaten lunch into her computer.

“What is it?” I whispered, as Marcus gave me a ‘what’s up?’ look.

I shrugged my shoulders and gave him a ‘I have *no* idea’ look back.

“Do you hear that?” Mr. Farmer asked.

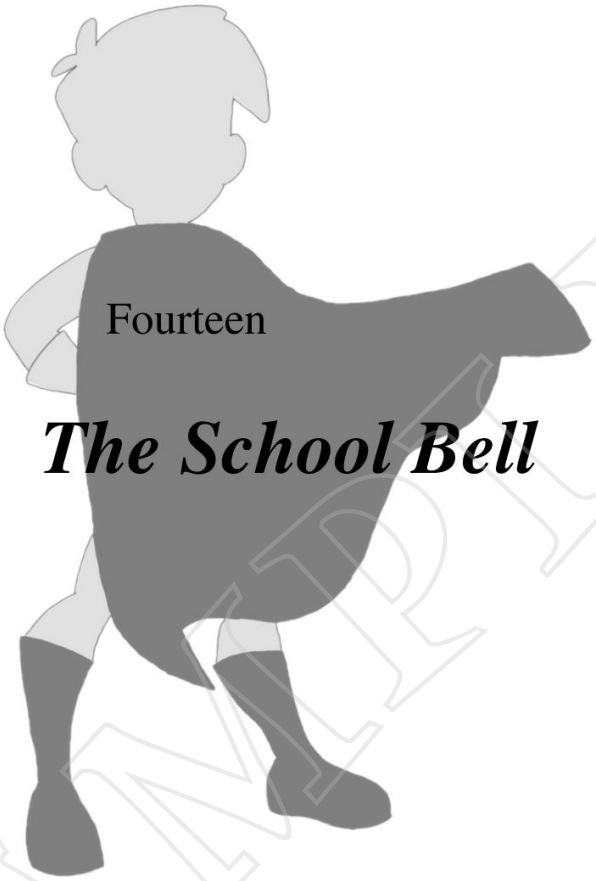
“Hear what?” I asked.

“Listen,” he ordered, pointing up while looking at the ceiling.

I looked to where he was pointing and tried to listen for what he wanted me to hear. It was a little difficult since the sound of the movie was distracting me, but after a moment or so, I think I heard what he was talking about.

“Are those helicopters?” I asked, looking back at Mr. Farmer.

14 The School Bell



“I think so,” Mr. Farmer answered.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I’m not entirely sure. But let’s just keep it to ourselves for now,” he suggested.

I nodded my head in agreement and went back to my table. Once I got there, Marcus gave me the same ‘what’s up?’ look. Only this time, it was more intense. I gave him a ‘don’t worry about it'

look, with matching hand motions. He shot back with a ‘really?’ look that was also a bit of a ‘best friends don’t lie to each other’ look.

“Milkshakes,” I whispered slowly, enunciating the word as big as I could since Marcus is three benches over.

He gave me a ‘fine, but you owe me!’ look. Hopefully, the helicopters really *are* nothing to worry about. Because after everything that’s already happened today, I’m not sure how much more I can take.

I decided to focus all my attention on watching the movie. Nothing else. Just like the first graders. I mean, look at them. They don’t have a care in the world!

Oh, to be little again. Only having to worry about whether or not Batman would defeat whatever villain he was facing. Actually, I didn’t even worry about *that*. I *knew* Batman would win in the end. But I *still* got butterflies whenever he battled someone.

When the movie was about to end, Marcus got up and headed back to the stage closet. I got up to be ready to change the movie when it finished. Mr. Farmer stayed with the other supervision aides at the back of the MPR and gave me a thumbs up when I looked at him.

After changing the movie, Marcus and I went back to our seats. I was fully immersed in the movie, so I didn’t notice Sammy walk

over. When she tapped me on the shoulder, I nearly knocked the first grader next to me out of his seat.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

“Sorry,” I apologized, catching him before he fell backward.

I looked at Sammy who was motioning with her eyes and her head for me to come with her to the back of the MPR. Here we go again!

“What is it?” I asked, feeling a little bit of déjà vu.

“My dad just texted me,” she said, taking her phone out of her pocket.

“Aren’t we supposed to keep those in Mrs. Whiston’s phone basket? And aren’t they supposed to be off?” I asked.

“Normally, I would agree, but you’re not the *only* one who chose to document their daily routine *today*. My dad emailed Mrs. Whiston yesterday, asking permission for me to use my phone to record myself at school today,” she clarified.

“Oh,” I said, in embarrassment.

“Only *I* didn’t think that recording myself during the weekly spelling test was that important,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It may not be important to *you*, but *I’m* on my way to my *eighth* perfect score in a row!” I exclaimed.

As soon as Sammy gave me her ‘really?’ look, I realized how foolish that probably sounded to her. She’s been getting perfect

scores on her spelling tests since the first grade! It was one of the reasons the teacher at her old school skipped her a grade.

"As I was *saying*," she began, "my dad just texted me."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He asked me if I was alright. When I told him that I was, but that we had been stuck in the MPR since first recess, he told me to stay inside," she explained.

"Why?" I asked, intrigued.

"He said that those helicopters outside— I *know* you heard them," she said, when I gave her my 'I don't know what you're talking about' look. "He said those helicopters are news copters. He said that they've been looking for a man that escaped from the back of a police car. They don't know exactly where he is, but they're sure he's in the area," she continued.

"Is he inside the school?" I asked.

"They don't know," she answered. "But I suspect that it wasn't the *weather* that shut off the electricity and internet."

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple. Whenever a villain enters a compound, his first actions are to take out all means of communication," she reminded me.

"You're right," I agreed.

"I know. And since the computers run on electricity but the tablets and laptops can still communicate through wi-fi, he shut that

down, too," she continued.

"But what about cell phones?" I asked.

"He can't control that unless he has access to the satellites or a phone jammer strong enough to cover the entire campus," she expounded.

"Are we safe?" I asked, genuinely concerned.

"We should be. The MPR doors are fireproof and bulletproof. As long as we stay inside, we should be alright," she ensured.

There is *no way* I'm about to doubt how true that statement is. After all the facts and knowledge that Sammy spit out earlier, I think I'll just trust her on this one. Wonder Woman would *never* put her friends in danger. And just like Wonder Woman, there's *no* way Sammy would *ever* put *her* friends in danger.

"Let's keep this to ourselves," Sammy suggested.

"Maybe we should tell Mr. Farmer," I suggested. "He *has* been helpful so far. He's the one that told me about the helicopters."

Sammy gave me a 'so, you've known all this time!' look while putting her hands on her hips.

"Not to mention, he's been staring at us this whole time," I said, pointing toward him and the other supervision aides.

"I guess that couldn't hurt," she consented.

Sammy headed back to her seat while I filled in Mr. Farmer. Actually, I didn't tell him something he didn't already know. It seems he's subscribed to the local news station and newspaper, so he

gets notifications on his cell phone whenever something important happens in the neighborhood.

“It’s okay, T.J. Everything will be alright,” he reassured me with a smile. “The authorities are protecting the school. So, there’s nothing to worry about.”

I headed back to my table, but I sat at the end of the bench, so that I could get up without distracting anyone or nearly knocking anyone out of their seat.

After re-immersing myself back into the movie, I lost all track of time. In the middle of a musical number that had most of the MPR singing along, Principal Martinez’s voice once again rang throughout the room.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Please excuse this interruption. The internet isn’t back up yet, but something more important is about to happen. In about five minutes, the school bell is about to ring. I know this would normally release you students to go home, but I need you to stay inside until further notice.

“Students, I have sent a phone dialer and schoolwide email to all your parents letting them know that you will be staying after school. As soon as today’s special activity is over, I will send another phone dialer and schoolwide email notifying them that it’s time to pick you up.

“Teachers and staff, thank you for your cooperation during this time. I have also notified the district and unions of the situation to

make sure you are fairly compensated. Mr. Ellis will input the extra time into your monthly profiles to accurately reflect your hours.

"In the meantime, please stay in place. And remember, you guys rock!"

Man. Compared to this, the district wide earthquake drill is *nothing*. Wait a second. Did he just say the school bell is about to ring? Has that much time passed already?

15 Make It Stop!

Principal Martinez's announcement had an unexpected outcome. First graders started asking why they couldn't leave when the bell rang. I took the wireless microphone connected to the MPR speakers and told them not to worry. That they should just keep watching the movie. But it didn't work. Instead, they started whining that they wanted to go home. Some started crying. It got so loud, that

the first graders that had fallen asleep were awakened from their naps. And then *they* added to the noise.

I gave the T.J. League a head nod as they all stared at me from their tables. They immediately came to the stage steps, followed closely by the supervision aides. We huddled up in front of the stage.

“What should we do?” Justin asked.

“We could try another Random Dance Party,” he suggested. “It worked the first time.”

“Do it,” Sammy said.

“I need to connect my tablet to the MPR speakers,” I said.

“What’s wrong with the portable sound system?” Paul asked.

“I put it away,” Mr. Farmer said, raising his hand.

“That’s okay. I can just plug my tablet in using the auxiliary cord,” I said, pointing at the headphone jack on my tablet.

“How much more juice do you got in that thing?” Justin asked.

“Enough,” I said, confidently.

I ran to the speaker and plugged in my tablet. It made a *loud* popping sound that got *everyone’s* attention. I unlocked my tablet as quickly as I could. Luckily, it was still on the Recess Revitalization Foundation app. All I had to do was click on Funmaker John’s Random Dance Party playlist. I scrolled down to a song that I was sure would get everyone to stop whining and crying. Good ol’ Baby Shark.

When the song started, the T.J. League and Supervision Aides placed themselves on the stage to lead in the dancing and singing. I started looking for another song to play since Baby Shark is barely two minutes long. Unfortunately, I never got a chance to find one, because once the words started playing, the whining and crying got louder!

“It’s not working!” Justin shouted, pointing out the obvious.

“Maybe a different movie!” Paul suggested.

“But we’ve already *seen* all the movies that Funmaker John keeps in the closet, thanks to all the rain this week,” Erick said. “The one we were just watching was the last one!”

“What about online?” Sammy asked.

“But the internet is down!” Justin said, with a ‘duh’ look on his face.

But of course, Sammy was right, once again. She pointed at the ceiling where the internet router was mounted. And sure enough, the blue light that meant it was working was lit.

“I’ve already checked the connection on my phone,” she said, showing us her phone, “and it’s working.”

“What movie should I put?” I asked.

“Just go on YouTube,” Justin advised, looking at everyone. “We can put on some ‘Try Not to Laugh Challenge’ videos. That way everyone will be too busy laughing to cry.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said.

I plugged the video adapter into my charging port while Mr. Farmer turned the video projector back on. We don't have internet at home, so I handed my tablet to Justin so he could find some good videos, which didn't take long. It seems he spends as much time on YouTube as I do writing and drawing comics.

The first video got some people's attention, but not enough. He tried another one, but that one didn't go so well, either. After his third choice flopped, we decided to regroup at the front of the stage.

"It didn't work," Justin said, frustrated.

"Good job Sir Points Out the Obvious A Lot," Sammy jabbed.

"Hey!" Justin shot back.

"Come on guys. We can't turn on each other now. We're going to have to work together to get through this. You've overcome *every* scenario I've *ever* given you when we play T.J. League. Just look at this as another challenge," I recommended.

"Yeah, guys," Marcus agreed. "We can do this!"

"Yeah! We can't give up now!" Paul chimed in.

"I don't care *what* we do. Just make it stop!" Sammy ordered, covering her ears.

16 An Unexpected Skill

Over the next fifteen or twenty minutes, the T.J. League and the supervision aides tried their best to calm everyone down.

We tried cartoon videos. Music videos. Freeze dance. Four corners. Dead Fish. Ultimate Limbo. Replaying the recess games we had played earlier. But nothing we tried worked, so we regrouped at the front of the stage to think of something else.

We were still in our huddle, trying to come up with a solution to our current problem, when Mrs. Lankershaim asked if she could join us. We opened up our circle and let her in.

For those of you who don't know, Mrs. Lankershaim is one of the cafeteria ladies. She's pretty cool. Ever since she dropped that tray of Sloppy Joe meat earlier this year, she makes sure to set a burger aside, with extra meat, just for me!

"I'm not sure if you know this, but one of those first graders out there is mine," she said, pointing across the MPR.

"I didn't know that," Justin admitted.

"I did," Sammy said.

Justin didn't say anything, he just made a 'of *course* you did!' face while throwing his harms up, one more time. He hasn't done that in a couple of hours, so I guess he was due for another one.

"I don't know if this will work, but whenever my hijito is having a bad day, I sit him on my lap and sing him a lullaby," she said.

"But we can't sit *everyone* on your lap so you can sing them a lullaby," Justin remarked. "And even if we did it one by one, it would take *forever*!"

"I don't think that's what she meant," I observed, before Sammy could make a comment.

"I think she just wants to distract everyone so that they'll stop whining and crying," Sammy followed.

“It couldn’t be worse than anything we’ve already tried,” Paul remarked.

“But how will they be distracted if they can’t hear her?” Erick asked.

Sammy held an imaginary microphone in her hand while making a ‘are you guys *still* doubting me’ face.

“Let’s give it try,” Mrs. Lender suggested.

Mrs. Lankershaim left the huddle to get her son while I grabbed the wireless microphone. When she returned and took a seat on the stage, I held the microphone to her mouth so that everyone could hear. *Man*, I hope this works!

“Buenas noches. Buenas noches. Duérmete. Duérmete. Cierra los ojos. Cierra los ojos. Duérmete. Duérmete,” she sang, while looking her son in the eyes and holding him close to her chest.

Her lullaby hadn’t put him to sleep, but it did *exactly* what we hoped it would do. It distracted *all* of the first graders. They stopped whining and crying and had their attention on Mrs. Lankershaim. Some even came forward and sat in front of her, laying their heads on the stage steps.

Mr. Farmer, Ms. Hart and Mrs. Lender motioned for the other kids to come forward and join them. The T.J. League all sat down on the stage step next to me and Mrs. Lankershaim. She looked at me and I nodded my head for her to continue singing.

“Duérmete mi niño. Duérmete mi amor,” she started to sing.

As she rocked her son side to side, the T.J. League swayed with her. Some of the first graders did, too.

“She has an *amazing* voice,” Paul whispered, into my ear.

“I *know*,” I agreed.

“Este niño mío que nació de noche,” she continued to sing.

As I looked across the room, I noticed some of the little ones starting to nod off. Some of them had already fallen asleep. I motioned for Sammy to grab the microphone, since she was sitting on the other side of Mrs. Lankershaim. After she took the microphone, I got up to grab my tablet. I knew that Mrs. Lankershaim would eventually finish her song. And now that the internet is back on, I can play some lullaby music when she’s done!

By the time I got back to my spot, she was finishing her song.

“Do you have another one?” I whispered.

She nodded her head and continued to sing.

“Arrorró mi niño, arrorró mi sol,” she sang, in her ever so calming voice.

I opened my music app and searched ‘lullabies’. There were *so* many different songs! Instead of choosing *one* song, I just chose a playlist that had *three hours* of lullabies.

“Este niño lindo se quiere dormir,” Mrs. Lankershaim sang so softly she almost whispered.

I got up and made sure to turn the auxiliary cord volume all the way down to zero. There is *no way* I want it to pop like earlier. Not

only would that ruin the mood, but I'm pretty sure that some, if not *all*, of the T.J. League would come for my head!

After plugging my tablet in, I turned the volume on my tablet down and turned the auxiliary cord level to the middle. Then, I waited for Mrs. Lankershaim to finish singing her song. When she began to slow down her singing, I knew she was about to finish.

The guys turned around to look at me while I pressed play on my tablet. I slowly raised the volume on my tablet so that the music wouldn't be too loud. I wanted to put the rest of the first graders to sleep. I did *not* want to wake them up!

Once it was at a decent level, I rejoined everyone on the stage steps. Almost *all* the first graders had fallen asleep by now. Some were lying down on the floor. Some were using their friends as pillows. And some had fallen asleep sitting up! I don't know how people can do that. Whenever I've tried it, I've always end up tilting to one side and waking myself up.

"They're all so peaceful," Justin said.

"Yeah," Marcus agreed.

"Why do we ever have to grow up?" I asked.

"They're *so* much more tolerable this way," Sammy commented.

We all leaned forward and looked at her with our eyebrows wrinkled. She responded with a 'What? It's the truth!' look on her face.

“If you ever decide to change jobs, you should add singing lullabies to your resumé,” I suggested to Mrs. Lankershaim.

“Yeah,” Justin concurred. “Talk about an unexpected skill.”

17 You Are Safe

By the end of the third song on the playlist, only a handful of first graders were still awake. When we told them that they could take a nap, they told us that they weren't tired. I think they're probably the ones that had fallen asleep during the movie.

Since they weren't tired, we re-set up the Color Creation Station so that they could color while everyone else slept. Only this time, we didn't use the spinning wheel. We just let them color the

pages however they wanted. And guess what? Each person *still* ended up coloring theirs differently!

While we were coloring, the MPR door near our table opened slowly. Principal Martinez hadn't made an announcement releasing us from our rooms, so I got up to get a better look.

Mr. Farmer grabbed my shoulders, from behind, before I could even make it past my table. When I turned around to look at him, his finger was over his mouth in the 'shhh' position. He then moved me behind him and carefully stepped toward the slowly opening door. Before we got there, we were stopped in our tracks by a thin black cord peeking through the crack in the door. It was about the thickness of a plastic straw. The ones for soda. Not for coffee or tea.

Then another strange thing happened. Below the black cord, a small white board appeared. 'Is everyone safe?' was written in black. Mr. Farmer and I looked at each other and then back at the whiteboard while nodding our head.

Next, the door opened wide enough to allow a person, dressed in all black, with a black mask, to enter. They were followed by a dog wearing a S.W.A.T. dog suit. The officer motioned for us to remain silent and to come closer.

"Are you guys being held hostage?" she asked.

"No," Mr. Farmer answered.

"Is there anyone in here that *shouldn't* be?" she continued to interrogate.

“Not that I *know* of,” Mr. Farmer responded.

“Okay. My name is Officer Redding, and this is Otis. Otis and I are going to check the building to make sure that everyone is safe,” she informed us. “Is that *lullaby* music?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Most of the first graders are asleep, but some of them are coloring on the table just to our right.”

“Okay. Go ahead and let them know that everything is okay, and that Otis is friendly. Once I’ve made a full sweep of the area and determined that everyone is safe, we will begin extraction procedures,” she explained.

“Yes, officer,” Mr. Farmer said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I responded.

Mr. Farmer and I turned around to see that the supervision aides and some of the T.J. League had lined up, side by side, to see what was going on. Mr. Farmer motioned for the supervision aides to move aside, and I motioned for Sammy, Justin and Erick to go to the Color Creation Station.

After telling the first graders at the Color Creation Station that a friend of mine was coming in with her *friend*, Otis, I sat down and continued to color with them. The T.J. League all gave me a ‘what’s going on?’ look that I completely ignored.

“Batman *always* protects his friends,” I said, in a calm and quiet voice, but loud enough for them to hear.

“Then that’s all I need to know,” Marcus said, grabbing a crayon to continue his Color Creation.

It only took a few minutes for S.W.A.T. Officer Redding and Otis to check the entire MPR for any intruders. When she finished, she talked into her wrist and motioned for Mr. Farmer and me to join her in the center of the MPR.

“The area is clear,” she stated. “Right now, there is a group of S.W.A.T. officers and a group of Sheriff officers waiting outside the kitchen door waiting to receive you. I need you to gather everyone together, in a single file line. Once we’re ready, I’ll open the door and you’ll exit and get onto a bus.”

“Why a bus?” I asked.

“It’s protocol to transport civilians to an offsite location until the perpetrator is in custody,” she seemed to quote from a book.

“But what about our parents?” I inquired.

“Your principal has notified your legal guardians of the situation and has relayed the pickup location. They should be there waiting for you,” she finished, placing her left hand on her ear, as if receiving information from a superior officer.

“Okay, T.J., let’s get everyone in a single file line,” Mr. Farmer said.

“If you say so. But if you think they were whiny earlier, just imagine how much whining there’s going to be when we wake them

up early from their nap. Sammy is *not* going to like this," I commented.

With the help of the supervision aides and the cafeteria ladies, the T.J. League organized the four first grade classes into single file lines, as if we were waiting for their teachers to pick them up. Officer Redding spoke into her wrist one more time and motioned for Paul's line to follow her through the kitchen.

Before the entire class had made it into the kitchen, she returned, without Otis, and motioned for Justin's line to follow. Next came Sammy's line, followed by Marcus' line. Erick and I followed Marcus' line with the cafeteria ladies and supervision aides right behind us. Officer Redding was the final person to exit the MPR.

When I finally got outside, I noticed that the rain had stopped. There were still dark clouds nearby, but the sky above us was clear. Wow. This is the first time I've seen a blue sky all week.

When I looked back down, I saw that one bus was leaving the school while the rest of us were boarding a second bus. After scanning the area, I noticed that there weren't any other buses around. I also didn't see many cars parked in the parking lot. Other than police cars and S.W.A.T. cars, of course. Wait. Does that mean that everyone else in the school has already gone home? Were we the last ones to be rescued?

As I made my way to the bus, it seemed like every S.W.A.T. and Sheriff's officer was saying the same thing: "You are safe."

18 Protect And Serve

Shortly after everyone finished boarding the bus, we were taken to a nearby grocery store parking lot. It's a pretty popular grocery store, but I've *never* seen *this* many cars in the parking lot! Except maybe the day before Thanksgiving.

One by one, parents were allowed to approach the bus with something that would identify one of us as their child. It's taking a

bit longer that I would prefer. Even though I'm not the *last* one off the bus, it's starting to feel like I *will* be.

When I finally heard my name called, I walked past all the other kids who were still waiting to hear their name. Some of them were quietly crying, while others looked out of their window for their parents. I felt bad for them. They're only six and seven years old. I know if Xochitl were here, she would be whining and crying for our mom. Wait! What about Xochitl? Is she okay? Is she already home? I know she's *annoying* and all, but she's *still* my little sister! I quickened my pace to the front of the bus so that I could find out.

"Are you Tomas Espinosa, Jr.?" an officer asked me.

"Yes, sir," I responded.

He took the picture my dad was holding and placed it next to my face. After a quick glance, he handed the picture to my dad and moved aside so I could pass.

"Next!" he called, before I was even off the bus.

With tears in his eyes and a smile of relief on his face, dad grabbed me tightly and carried me to our car. I rested my head on his shoulder and watched as more parents approached the bus and were reunited with their children. Each of them carried their child to their car, just like dad is carrying me.

When we finally reached the car, he held me close a few moments longer, and gave me one final squeeze before finally putting me down.

“Where’s your backpack?” he asked.

“In my classroom. We were stuck in the MPR all day,” I told him.

“Okay. No worries. Let’s go home,” he said, shuffling my hair and smiling.

After dad buckled me into my booster seat, he kissed me on top of my head, the way he does to Xochitl, and closed the door. I grabbed one of the small pillows we keep in the back seat and put it against the window so I could rest my head. It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep after that. Hey. Can you blame me? It’s kind of been a long day, you know.

◆ ◆ ◆

When we finally got home, I was still asleep, so dad carefully placed my head back on his shoulder and carried me from the car, all the way upstairs to my room. He then gently placed me on my bed and slowly removed my raincoat, rainboots, and glasses, so as not to wake me. The next time I opened my eyes, was when mom gently shook me awake to tell me that dinner was ready. Since I don’t know what time we got home, I’m not even sure how long I was asleep. But I’m *definitely* still tired. If she hadn’t woken me up, I probably would have slept until tomorrow!

As I sat up to get out of bed, I realized I was no longer wearing my raincoat or rainboots. I looked around the room but didn’t see

them anywhere. But that didn't really matter. All that matters is what I *think* I smell coming from downstairs. I hurried, as best as I could, down the stairs and into the kitchen where mom, dad and Xochitl were waiting for me. Yes! Just what I thought I was smelling! What's for dinner, you ask? Sloppy Joes, fries and a hot fudge sundae! Well, for *me* anyways. Xochitl has chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese and a strawberry sundae. Basically, our two favorite dinners!

Thankfully, before we started eating, mom and dad didn't ask any questions about what had happened at school today. Instead, mom took out the wooden trays that usually only dad uses. You know, the ones that moms serve dads on when they're watching their favorite sports teams and don't want to miss anything. Yeah, *those* wooden trays.

Instead of sitting at the kitchen table, like we usually do, we sat on the couches in the living room. Dad even let me sit on his recliner! Mom then played an episode of *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader* that had recorded on our DVR earlier that day. Since I'm in fifth grade, dad expects me to know *all* the answers as soon as they're posed. I keep reminding him that fifth grade isn't over, so there are still some things that I haven't learned yet. Although, I *am* usually able to answer more questions than he can. But not as many as mom.

When we finished with dinner and dessert, I asked mom if I *had* to take a shower since I was still really tired. She said that it

would be okay to take one in the morning. It's a good thing that today is Friday, because after everything that's happened today, it's going to take *more* than a short nap for *me* to fully recover.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Okay boys and girls. Time to present your Daily Routine projects," Mrs. Whiston said, on Monday, after recess.

Last Monday, Mrs. Whiston had given us a type of assignment that she had never given before. She told us that we had to make a project that told everyone about our daily routine. We could use *any* medium we wanted to. Write a song. Make a video. Illustrate a story. Anything we wanted. Then we had to present it to the class. We would get seventy-five points for our project and twenty-five points for our presentation.

"Go ahead and get your projects as I get my deck of cards."

Everyone reached into their desks or walked to the back table to get their projects prepared for their presentation. Everyone except for me. I raised my hand.

"Yes, T.J.," Mrs. Whiston said, pointing at me.

"I wasn't able to finish my original project," I said.

"What do you mean? You had all last week and the weekend to work on it," she reminded me.

"I know, but with everything that happened on Friday, I left my tablet on the stage over the weekend," I informed her.

“And,” she said, with a ‘go on, tell me more’ look on her face.

“And I had been using my tablet to record parts of my day so that I could make them into a video,” I continued.

“Okay,” she said, with a hint of ‘are you done’ in her voice.

“And since my tablet was at *school* all weekend, I wasn’t able to finish my video,” I said.

“Making a video was just *one* way you could have completed this assignment,” Mrs. Whiston pointed out.

“I know. I know,” I admitted. “Like I said, I wasn’t able to finish my *original* project.”

“So, you *did* finish your project,” she said, in a ‘why do I feel like there’s more to this story’ voice.

“Sort of,” I said.

“You either did, or you didn’t. There’s no ‘sort of’,” she declared.

“Well, I *kind* of did something else instead,” I confessed.

“What did you do?” Mrs. Whiston asked, raising her left eyebrow.

“Instead of documenting my daily routine, I kind of documented my day this past Friday, when we were on lockdown,” I clarified.

“That wasn’t exactly the assignment,” she said.

Then she crossed her arms, squinted her eyes and asked me another question.

“If you didn’t have your tablet, what medium did you use to document it?”

“I made a full color comic book. It’s actually the first ever issue documenting the T.J. League!” I announced, holding it up proudly for everyone to see.

I made sure to turn all the way around so that everyone in class could get a good look at it.

“And how does that document your daily routine?” Mrs. Whiston asked, bursting my elation bubble.

“Well, since they play such an important role in my daily life, I shared my daily routine through the eyes of everyone in the T.J. League,” I explained. “I started the comic book the same way I had planned to start my video, with me waking up at home and getting ready for school. I used the first-person narrative, like you taught us. Then, once I arrive at school, my daily routine is told through a second-person narrative by someone in the T.J. League. Actually, the narrative gets passed around by all of the members of the T.J. League by the end of my daily routine. Until I return home, that is. Then I used the third-person narrative to finish off the story. Book. Issue.”

“Okay. I’m intrigued,” Mrs. Whiston acknowledged. “I’ll accept it. *This* time.”

I smiled, as everyone in the class cheered, some asking when they would get a chance to read it.

When I was first trying to figure out how I was going to document my daily routine, without my tablet, I must admit, I was pretty nervous. I knew that this was a *big* project and was begging mom not to get mad at me if I lost points for not turning it in on time. Thankfully, as usual, mom knew the *perfect* solution.

She pointed out how I'm always starting new comics, but that I also always leave them unfinished when I get an idea for a new story. She challenged me to make a comic book documenting my daily routine and commented that I would probably be the *only* person making one. She said that in order to turn it in for a grade, I would *have* to finish it. She also ensured me that if Mrs. Whiston didn't accept it, she would help me create the video I had originally intended to turn in. Without getting punished for any lost points, of course. Mom, *you rock!*

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"You made a comic book about us!" Justin said excitedly, as he tossed me the frisbee at lunch recess.

"Yup," was my short answer.

"I can't believe it!" Paul exclaimed.

"When do we get to read it?" Erick asked.

"I already did!" Marcus boasted.

"What!" Justin yelled, looking at me with a 'say it isn't so' face.

“What? He lives right behind me, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t leave anything out before I turned it in,” I explained.

“Yeah right. You just wanted to make sure it was as good as you thought it was,” Marcus said, in a ‘don’t lie’ voice.

“That, too,” I chuckled.

“So, as I *said*, when do *we* get to read it?” Erick repeated.

“As soon as I get it back from Mrs. Whiston,” I answered.

“Actually, we can read it *before* that,” Sammy corrected.

“How?” Justin asked.

Sammy closed her eyes, placed her hand on her forehead and shook her head, in a ‘do I *always* have to explain *everything*’ kind of way.

“Your tablet,” Sammy answered, taking her hand away from her head.

“His *tablet?*” Paul asked.

“Mrs. Whiston has us—,” Sammy started.

“Take pictures of our work!” Justin finished.

Sammy threw her hands up with a ‘*finally*’ face to match.

“Sammy, you’re a *genius!*” Justin shouted, running over and giving her a side skwudge.

“Thank, you,” Sammy said, awkwardly, with raised shoulders.

That’s the first time Justin has ever given Sammy a hug. I think. And it’s *definitely* the first time he’s ever called her a genius.

“Every good comic book issue needs a good name,” Sammy commented, after Justin released his grip, of course. “What’d you name our inaugural issue?”

“Well, the series is called ‘The T.J. League’ of course. And our first issue is called ‘Protect and Serve’!” I answered.

“All right!”

“Dude!”

“Let’s go!”

I put my hand in front of me, looking everyone in the eye. They knew what that meant. One by one, they added their hands to mine. “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 Frienships

T.J.'S Adventures - The Vociferous Villain

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

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Physical Abuse

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

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

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