

Warm & Golden
December 5th

It all started yesterday, Friday when we walked in from gym class.

Coach Jackson was feeling nice that day and let us play dodgeball. Playing dodgeball means that some strong kids hurl foamy balls at each other until they're red in the face and others just hide behind anything that stays still.

Anyhow, as we were all walking back to our classroom as one big sweaty group, I asked Simone and Shelby what they were doing the next day, which was Saturday.

They looked at each other and then back at me. Shelby just bit her lip and looked at the floor. Simone said, "Well, I think we're both busy."

My heart sank a bit, and I said, "Oh, okay."

We all shuffled into math class. It seemed like they had plans, and I wondered why they didn't invite me. (You see, Saturday was my birthday, and I felt embarrassed...maybe they had forgotten.)

While everyone was quietly working on their algebra quiz, I wondered what Shelby and Simone might have planned without me.

Later, Clare came over after school. It was too cold to do anything outside, so we mostly just hung out in my room and watched music videos on YouTube. Clare pretended my hairbrush was a microphone and sang along very loudly, and I just laughed.

When she was about to go home, I asked her what she was doing the next day.

"Umm, I think I'm..." she said very slowly while looking up at the ceiling. "Busy with something!" she added quickly, then left through our front door.

I returned to my room, shut the door, and waited for dinner. Sometimes life is like that.

"Joanie," My mom said at the dinner table, "Are you alright? You've barely touched your food." I looked down at a big hunk of meatloaf—Grant, Ty, and Ruby were almost finished with theirs. I wasn't hungry, but I took a couple of bites and told them I was fine.

She asked me if I was thinking about Grammy's surgery. I nodded because that had been on my mind for the past few weeks, too. And I didn't want to admit I was just thinking about my birthday.

My mom reassured me, “Remember the doctors called last week? They said the surgery went well and everything would be okay! She’s just a little weak while recovering.” I nodded and tried to eat more food to show I was okay.

Later that night, I lay in bed, thinking. I used to be so excited for my birthday: I’d wonder how it would feel to be another year older if my parents got me some cool present, and how I’d pass people on the street and, though they’d have no idea, I’d have this great big shiny today-is-my-birthday secret sparkling inside me.

But this December 4th was different. If I’m being really honest, I went to sleep feeling let down by my three closest friends, and part of me was still worried about Grammy.

When I woke up the following day and looked out my window, I saw snow gently falling. The sky was white as paper, and the air surrounding the trees had infinitely many small white dots floating downwards; it was calm and beautiful—

“THOSE! ARE!! MY!!! LITTLE!!!! FLUFFY!!!! SLIPPERS!!!!!!” Ruby bellowed from downstairs.

“I’m just borrowing them!” I heard Ty yell back.

Then a scream and a crash—and I didn’t even have to be there to know that Ruby had just tackled Ty into the couch, and they were now brawling.

I stretched my arms, hopped out of bed, changed, and looked at myself in the mirror; still the same!

“Who’s that fourteen-year-old?” My dad asked loudly as he saw me coming down the stairs. He had made pancakes, the air smelled of syrup and butter, and Ty and Ruby had resolved the battle of the ‘little fluffy slippers.’

As we ate breakfast, I unwrapped presents from my siblings: a roll of cookie dough from Ruby, to make up for April Fool’s Day, a tub of lemonade mix from Ty, to compensate for stealing my customers in the Summer, and a mini Skateboard from Grant, so I could join next year’s Halloween neighborhood patrol.

My parents then gave me a beautifully wrapped box. *I couldn’t believe my eyes when I opened it!* It was the art set I had wanted but couldn’t afford in NYC! I hugged and thanked them, wondering how they got it. I still have no idea!

That day my family watched TV, played in the snow, did a puzzle, and I used all the pencils in my art set until late in the afternoon. I got a package from Grammy with a new white linen blouse with tiny embroidered flowers. I felt relieved that she felt good enough to go to the post office. It was turning out to be a very nice, mellow day.

Just before dinner, My dad asked me to drive to the store with him, and I did. When we got back, we parked the car in front of our house, and I noticed all the windows were dark.

My dad grabbed the heavy bags, I grabbed the light ones, we walked up the snowy stairs to our front door, and he said, "You go in first."

Looking back on it, that did seem strange...

I set the groceries down and turned the handle. When I opened the door it was all dark for just a second.

Then, all at once, a whole group of voices shouted "SURPRISE!" and the lights flicked on!

I could see Clare, Sarah, Simone, Shelby, Sophia, my brothers and sister, Jasper, and Grinspoon all packed into the hallway. Streamers were hanging from the ceiling, colorful balloons and a pile of snowboots lined the hallway, and a wonderful smell came from the kitchen!

I couldn't believe it! I was so full of joy. All I could do was laugh.

Everyone gathered around the living and dining rooms, eating pizza, talking, and laughing. My dad lit a log in the fireplace, and the whole room became warm and golden.

Afterward, we ate cupcakes, and my friends gave me cards. Simone and Shelby had drawn a flying egg on their card. Sophia's card thanked me again for the shoes. And Clare gave me a set of red and blue mittens on a string.

The whole night I kept looking around in disbelief. This was why Shelby, Simone, and Clare had all said they were busy! I'll bet my mom had been planning this, so I hugged her to thank her for everything. She smiled and gave me a long hug back.

When it was over, and everyone had gone home, I sat there to think. This was the year I completed seventh grade, made new friends, visited new places, and learned how to spell 'celery'.

"What a year this has been!" I thought.

Your Friend,
Joanie