



Sample Pages from Home of the Brave

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HOME OF THE BRAVE

A PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Lee Cataluna



Home of the Brave

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Characters

4W+4M

MARCUS: Sixth grader, Navy family, a rascal.

BRADY: Seventh grader, Navy family, bossy, confident.

JADA: Fifth grader, Army family, sunny, punky, optimistic.

JOHNELLE: Eighth grader, Army family, sensitive, tired of moving.

TY: Eighth grader, civilian family but parent works on base .

MOM: Marcus & Brady's Mom.

DAD: Marcus & Brady's Dad. Currently deployed.

PRINCIPAL: The Principal of the School.

About the Play

Home of the Brave was originally commissioned by La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla, CA and Honolulu Theater for Youth, Honolulu, HI.

Inspired by interviews with hundreds of military dependents and their families, teachers, principals, counselors as well as active duty and veterans from all branches of the service.

OPENING

A choral piece for the entire cast. Character names are given for a smaller cast, but the individual lines can be assigned to any actor for a larger cast.

ALL: My family is a military family.

JOHNELLE: My home is wherever we're stationed.

BRADY: I am the child of a sailor.

JADA: A soldier.

TY: An airman.

MARCUS: A marine.

TY: The military has its own words, and lots of short ways of saying longer things.

BRADY: MOS means Military Occupational Specialty,

MARCUS: which means "job."

BRADY: MWR means Morale, Welfare and Recreation,

MARCUS: which means "fun."

JADA: PCS means Permanent Change of Station.

JOHNELLE: PCS means "to move."

ALL: We PCS a lot.

JADA: I have friends in different countries.

MARCUS: When teachers pull down the world map, I can say, "I've lived there and there and there."

BRADY: I was born in Germany, but I'm not German.

JOHNELLE: I lived in Japan but that's not where I'm from.

JADA: Sometimes, you're brand new to a place but it feels like home.

ALL: HOME.

TY: And then –

ALL: You PCS again.

MARCUS: I worry about my mom when she's deployed to Afghanistan.

BRADY: I miss my dad when he's on a ship in the East China Sea.

JADA: It's not an easy life, but there are good things.

JOHNELLE: I know things other kids don't know.

BRADY: I can name every aircraft in the sky.

MARCUS: That's a Sikorsky!

JADA: That's a Chinook.

BRADY: That's a V-22 Osprey. It takes off like a helicopter and flies like a plane.

TY: I can make new friends really fast.

MARCUS: I can pack everything I own –

ALL: Into two boxes.

JADA: I'm good at waiting,

TY: good at helping,

MARCUS: good at adjusting.

BRADY: It's a challenging life, but I love it,

JOHNELLE: though it's not for everybody.

JADA: You have to make a home wherever you end up.

MARCUS: You have to know what it means to be...

ALL: Brave.

NEW KID

MARCUS is at the front of the school. He's on the lookout. JADA comes in. He spots her and then starts "coaching" himself.

MARCUS: Oh, there's one. She has a lost look on her face. She's holding a map of the school... and the map is upside-down! She has all the signs of a new kid! (*races up to JADA*) Hi! I'm Marcus!

JADA: Hey! I'm Jada!

MARCUS: I'm new to this school, but you're even newer, so I'm gonna help you.

JADA: Aw, thanks, but I don't need help.

MARCUS: I know what it's like. My family has been PCS-ed a lot.

JADA: Me too. I've never had the first day of school be my first day of school.

MARCUS: I'm in sixth grade, but I've been to five schools. That's a new school almost every year.

JADA: I'm supposed to report to the office.

MARCUS: I'll show you the way!

JADA: The building right there says... "OFFICE."

MARCUS: I'll walk with you to make sure you get there OK.

JADA: Wait, are you my official First Day Buddy?

MARCUS: Yeah. I figure the sooner I get to be a First Day Buddy to a new kid, the sooner I'm not the new kid anymore.

JADA: Smart.

MARCUS: Yeah. Maybe tomorrow, you can be the buddy. Hey, you got your answer ready?

JADA: You mean the answer to the question they always ask?

JADA & MARCUS: "So, where are you from?"

JADA: I always just say where our last duty station was. Otherwise, it takes too long.

MARCUS: Yeah, mine is like, born in Washington, then Okinawa, then a bunch of places I don't remember, then Bahrain, then San Diego, then here.

JADA: Have you ever noticed how most of the base stuff is the same no matter where you go?

MARCUS: Stop and face the flag...

JADA: at the first note of retreat.

MARCUS: Stand for the national anthem...

JADA: before the movie starts in the base movie theater.

JADA & MARCUS: Main gate, commissary, bowling alley... BURGER KING!

MARCUS: Every base has a Burger King. It must be in the constitution.

JADA: And, of course, the two most important rules... never ever lose your military ID.

MARCUS: And never ever get in trouble on base.

JADA: Yeah, because if you get in trouble, your dad could get called in to his commanding officer, and he could get –

MARCUS & JADA: TALKED TO!

MARCUS: Do you ever get tired of being the new kid all the time?

JADA: I guess, but the good thing about being new is that you get a fresh start at being you.

MARCUS: Yeah. If there was something embarrassing that happened at your old school, like maybe you threw up on the teacher's shoes or something, nobody at your new school has any idea. That part is good.

JADA: But the not-good part is that nobody knows you're really great at track if this school doesn't have a track team. You have to prove yourself all over again.

MARCUS: Yeah.

JADA: Yeah.

MARCUS: So, are you ready to start proving?

JADA: Yeah!

They run off.

CATCH

BRADY has a contraption made of a broomstick, a plant stand, a baseball glove and some bungee cords. He has a bucket of baseballs with him.

BRADY: This is my dad.

I mean, I know it's not my dad. My dad is deployed. But when he's home, this is what we do. He catches for me and he coaches me. I'm going out for pitcher this year.

You ready, Dad? Let's do this.

This is what my dad always says: “Your whole body is in balance to start. Then, power position, knee up, eyes locked on the target. Step forward, keep the line from the back elbow through the shoulders through the front elbow. Everything focused on home plate, release.”

I’m getting really good. No matter where we’re stationed, I know I’ll make the team.

A neighbor at our last duty station saw me outside practicing like this. She got this look on her face like I was the saddest kid in the world. I wanted to tell her that I’m fine. I like traveling all over the world. I’m proud of my dad’s job. I love military life. But instead of saying all that, I just made sure I hit my target square the next three times.

It’s not that I don’t miss my dad. I do. But he taught me how to be OK. Help my mom. Look out for my brother. Try my best. He coached me so well it’s like I have his voice in my head: “Balance. Power position. Focus. Release.”

BOXES

In JOHNELLE and JADA’s new room. JADA is carefully hanging up her curtains. JOHNELLE’s side has all her boxes. JOHNELLE enters, staring at her phone.

JADA: How was school? Are your classmates nice? Mine are super friendly. Hey, we should finish unpacking.

JOHNELLE: I’m done.

JADA: Help me put up the curtains. These look nice no matter where we live. Come on, Johnelle. You need to unpack your clothes.

JOHNELLE: I have clothes.

JADA: Only what you’re wearing. What are you going to wear to school tomorrow?

JOHNELLE: These worked OK for today. I’ll just wear them again.

JADA: How are you going to make new friends if you’re wearing the same old stinky clothes every day?

JOHNELLE: Maybe I won’t make new friends. Fine with me.

TY enters. He’s a cute, earnest guy just JOHNELLE’s age.

TY: Hey! I'm Ty. I live over there. I saw the moving van so I came to help.

JOHNELLE: We don't need help. We've done this before.

TY: Mostly I just came over to say hello.

JADA: Hi!

JOHNELLE: Bye.

JADA: Don't mind Johnelle. She left her good manners behind at our last duty station.

JOHNELLE: Stop it, Jada.

JADA: (*whispering loudly behind her hand*) Could you please be her friend? She's actually a nice girl and she really needs a friend here.

JOHNELLE: I already have a friend.

JADA: I'm not your friend. I'm your sister!

TY: (*picks up biggest box*) I'll help you unpack. Where do you want me to put this?

JOHNELLE: Leave it there. I'm done unpacking.

TY: But where's your stuff?

JOHNELLE: In the boxes.

TY: Naw, you need to unpack. This is a good room.

JADA: See?

JOHNELLE: You don't know that.

TY: Yeah, I do. I've lived across the street my whole life. I knew every kid that ever lived in this house.

JOHNELLE: Was one of them your best friend?

TY: Pretty much all of them.

JOHNELLE: You can only have one best friend.

TY: Who told you that?

JOHNELLE: My one-and-only best friend Ava. She helped me pack. That was two moves ago. We text every day. Mostly.

JADA: (*again, whispering loudly*) Johnelle is worried because Ava doesn't text back.

JOHNELLE: Stop it, Jada! Ava is busy. Her family just PCS-ed too. Ava is my one and only best friend forever.

TY: We don't have to be best friends. We can just be neighbors.

JADA: OK!

JADA works to put up her curtains. TY joins her.

TY: Let me help. It's the neighborly thing to do.

JOHNELLE: It makes no sense to unpack. I'll just have to pack up everything again as soon as we get orders. I'm sick of moving.

TY: I know how you feel.

JOHNELLE: You don't know how I feel. You lived here your whole life. I'll bet your family's not even military.

TY: So? I knew every military family that lived in this house and that house and that one.

JOHNELLE: I'll bet none of them stayed very long, right?

TY: Depends. Define long.

JOHNELLE: One entire school year.

TY: ...Yup.

JOHNELLE: Two entire school years?

TY: Wait... yes.

JOHNELLE: Three entire school years?

TY: Uh...

JOHNELLE: See?

TY: At least unpack some shorts so we can go outside. I can show you the best hill for riding bikes.

JADA: Come on, Johnelle! You'll have fun! I'll go look for our bikes.

JADA exits.

JOHNELLE: Look, if I unpack, it's like believing we might actually be here for a while. It makes having to move again even harder, and moving is already so hard.

TY: I think it's harder to be the one who stays behind.

JOHNELLE: So why did you come over to meet us? You know we won't be here very long.

TY: I feel like I should make friends fast so we don't waste any time.

JOHNELLE: My mom says as soon as she gets around to unpacking the last box, we get our orders and have to move again. Do you think if I leave just one box still packed up, it means I'll get to stay a while?

TY: I don't know. It's worth a try.

JOHNELLE: OK. That one. That stays packed.

TY: What's in there?

JOHNELLE: Just... Nevermind. I'll leave that one and unpack all the rest later. You can show me the neighborhood if you want.

TY: Yeah?

JOHNELLE: Yeah.

They exit.

POCKETS

JADA enters, carrying a box. She opens it and lifts out her father's uniform.

JADA: This is my dad's stuff. It's what he wears to work. My father's job is to be a soldier. That means that sometimes he's far away. Sometimes it's just a few weeks for training. Sometimes it's really long, like a year.

His stuff has lots of pockets. In his shirt. In his pants. In his jacket. Even some of his pockets have pockets.

When he has to leave, it's hard. I think it's harder for him than it is for us. I can cry if I need to. But he can't. He has a very important job. He has to pay attention and work hard and stay safe. He has to be brave.

So to help, we put things in his pockets. I write notes for him and I find little presents and I put them in his shirt and his pants and his shoes.

I write, "Be safe" and put it here.

And I write, “Stay strong” and hide it there.

Or I put a note in his socks that says, “Remember to change your socks.” My sister Johnelle came up with that one.

When I was little, I would pick a dandelion and put it in his pocket. It was wilted when he found it, but he knew what it meant. It stood for the sun shining on our house and the happy smell of dinner and the sound of me and my sister laughing when we used to run in the yard.

One time, when my dad left for deployment, we said our goodbyes and watched him go. I could see him transform from my home dad to my military dad with every step as he walked away. Then I saw his hand go in his pocket. Inside was a little pink ribbon I always wear in my hair. I bet he could tell what it was because he had tied it for me so many times. I bet it made him smile.

And then, about a month later, it rained really hard and I had to wear my old yellow raincoat. I was walking to school and I put my hand in the pocket. There was a little piece of paper folded in half. Oh please oh please oh please. Let it be.

It was! My dad left a note in my pocket.

It was the best note anybody ever wrote. It said, “Jada, my heart is always with you.”

I kept that note in my pocket all that day and the next day and for a long time after that. I’ll keep that note forever. I’ll keep it safe.

CARE PACKAGE

MARCUS and BRADY race into the room like they’re trying to beat the clock. They’re gathering up stuff. There’s a laptop set up facing them. The audience can’t see the screen. (“Tst” is just a sound of frustration/dismissal.)

MARCUS: Hurry up, Brady!

BRADY: You hurry up, Marcus! I got all my stuff.

MARCUS: I got the important stuff.

BRADY: School work is the important stuff!

MARCUS: I mean the REALLY important stuff – check this out! Dark chocolate, brownie batter, chocolate peanut butter pie!

BRADY: Dad is more interested in our schoolwork than Oreos.

MARCUS: But we always try the new flavors together. They probably don't even have cookies where he is. Think of that!

MOM: Are you kids ready to video chat with Dad? He'll be calling soon.

MARCUS: Mom! Tst! We're so ready!

BRADY: Whoa. Did you really just "tst" mom?

MOM: Don't you "tst" me, Marcus!

MARCUS: Yes ma'am. I'm sorry. I'm just excited. It's been a month since we talked to Dad.

BRADY: I'm going to read him my essay.

MARCUS: Your essay is soooooo long. No offense, but it is. Just give him like a sample so we can get to cookies.

BRADY: My essay is so good, you lose track of time when you hear it.

MARCUS: Tst!

BRADY: Did you just tst me?!

MARCUS: Yeah I tst-ed you. You're wasting Dad-time on a boring social studies essay when we could be eating cookies? TST!

BRADY: I'm reading my amazing social studies essay, then I'm telling him about baseball tryouts and then we're showing our report cards.

MARCUS: Yeah, no, there won't be time for report cards with all your reading and bragging and stuff. Maybe next month.

BRADY: Dad is gonna' want to see our report cards.

MARCUS: He's not gonna' want to see my report card.

BRADY: Tst!

MARCUS: How come you get to "tst" but I can't "tst"?

The sound of an incoming call.

BRADY & MARCUS: It's Dad!

DAD enters on the other side of the stage. He faces forward while speaking to MARCUS and BRADY as though they're on a video chat.

DAD: Hey guys! Boy am I happy to see you!

BRADY: Hey Dad! How are you doing?

MARCUS: Did you get our box, Dad?

BRADY: I hit a double in practice yesterday. And I want to read you my essay. But first, we want to show you our report cards!

BRADY proudly shows his report card. Very smug.

DAD: Wow! Nice job, Brady! Honor roll again! Where's yours, Marcus?

MARCUS: Time for cookies!

BRADY: Marcus, Dad asked you a question.

MARCUS: *(he does a kind of cheer)* Cook-ies! Cook-ies!

DAD: We'll get to the cookies, Marcus, but I'd much rather hear about school. What's going on?

MARCUS: *(hard to say and he's fighting tears)* I – I – I got a bad report card. I'm sorry.

DAD: Hold on, son. Let's take a look.

MARCUS retrieves a crumpled report card from his pocket. He reluctantly holds it to the screen.

MARCUS: I thought I was doing OK.

DAD: Well, it isn't all bad. What's your plan to fix this, Marcus?

MARCUS: Work harder. Pay attention. Stop messing around.

DAD: What else?

MARCUS: I don't know.

DAD: Can you ask for help?

MARCUS: I guess.

DAD: Who do you know who has already been through sixth grade and is right there to help you?

MARCUS: The teacher?

DAD: I meant at home.

MARCUS: Mom?

BRADY: He means me.

MARCUS: You?!! You're not a helper. You're a boss-er.

DAD: Brady will help you with homework.

MARCUS: You sure about that?

DAD: You boys are so good at looking out for other kids. You need to be that way for each other. All right?

MARCUS & BRADY: Yes sir.

DAD: Now did I hear something about cookies?

MARCUS: Cookies! Do you have the box we sent, Dad?

BRADY: Mom let Marcus pick most of it out. He went for the weirdest stuff he could find.

DAD: No kidding. No kidding. This package says it tastes like key lime pie.

MARCUS: We got some here! Let's try it together.

MARCUS passes an Oreo to BRADY.

DAD: You ready? OK... All together now. One, two, three!

They all try the Oreos at the same time. MARCUS and BRADY have big, funny looks on their faces like the cookies taste weird but good.

THREE WHISTLES

JOHNELLE has ridden her bike to the top of the hill in her new neighborhood.

JOHNELLE: From up on this hill, I imagine I can see the ocean.

When my mom was little, her father was in the Navy. When it was time for him to ship out, all the families would go down to the harbor and all the sailors would stand on the deck so the families could wave goodbye as they pulled out of port. It was very sad, but for my mom, it was even worse because her father worked in the engine room of the ship. He couldn't stand up on deck as they left. He had to be working down below.

So instead of going down to the harbor, my mom's mom brought her up on a hill where they could see the ocean and the path the big ships take from the harbor out to sea. My grandfather would wait until he knew the ship was passing right by the hill and then

he would tell his commanding officer, “Sir, I’ve forgotten to sound the whistle. Permission to conduct whistle drill.”

My granddad’s CO, he knew what was going on, so he would say, “Permission to signal to daughter granted.”

And my grandfather would blow the ship’s horn three times. That was special for my mom. Three times meant “I... love... you,” which is what you want to hear when you say goodbye.

Then my mom grew up and she married my dad, who’s in the Army. She told him about the three whistles and said she wished he could do something like that for us when he leaves. But the Army is mostly trucks and planes, nothing with that long loud whistle like a big ship.

One time, when my dad left for deployment, we stood at the fence and cried our eyes out while he got on the big white bus. I closed my eyes and wished so hard that the bus driver would sound the horn three times as they drove away and that it would be special for me. That didn’t happen. But because my eyes were closed, I missed my father waving to me from the window of the bus and saying “Johnelle, Johnelle honey, I love you.”

NAVY BALL

JOHNELLE, TY, BRADY and MARCUS meet up at a community park.

MARCUS: All right! Let’s play Navy ball. Who’s in?

JOHNELLE: Our family’s Army.

MARCUS: Perfect match up! Army versus Navy. Go Navy! You can be your team captain.

JOHNELLE: Wait, no, I’m not playing.

MARCUS: Yes you are. You have the ball. *(throws the football to her)*

BRADY: I’ll be captain of the Navy team.

MARCUS: Naw, Brady. You’re the star player. I’ll be captain so you can focus on you. So as team captain, I’ll pick my first player. I pick... me!

BRADY: Why are you wasting a pick on yourself? You’re already on your team.

MARCUS: I'm the captain so of course I'm gonna pick the best. And I pick you and Vince and Cory.

JOHNELLE: You can't pick your whole team all at once.

MARCUS: Yeah I can. It's Navy Ball. Those are Navy Ball rules.

TY: Why don't we just play regular football?

MARCUS: Navy ball is better. It's football but... NAVY STYLE. You take him and Jenn and Max.

JOHNELLE: Wait, now you're picking for me? If I'm captain of my team, I want to pick my own players.

MARCUS: Go ahead then.

MARCUS throws the ball to JOHNELLE.

JOHNELLE: I pick Ty.

JOHNELLE throws the ball back to MARCUS.

MARCUS: OK, and you get the others I said too. Let's play!

BRADY: You haven't even explained the rules of this game.

MARCUS: OK, all you do is run the ball past enemy lines. If you get tagged or lose possession, ball goes to the other team.

TY: That sounds like regular football.

MARCUS: Kind of. But you line up different.

JOHNELLE: How do you line up?

MARCUS: Kind of in a line.

JOHNELLE: There are different kinds of lines. There could be vertical lines and horizontal lines and diagonal lines and trajectories and...

MARCUS: I thought you said your family was Navy. You sound kind of Air Force-y.

BRADY: Let's play Marine-style and just GO, GO, GO!

JOHNELLE: Hold on! I want to ask something. (*MARCUS throws her the football*) Does the ball always have to be passed forward or can we pass behind the line of scrimmage?

JOHNELLE throws the football to MARCUS.

MARCUS: You can pass whatever way works so long as you get to the end zone.

JOHNELLE: Wait now. (*MARCUS passes her the ball*) How many plays per possession? And how many minutes in the game?

JOHNELLE throws the ball to MARCUS.

MARCUS: You keep the ball until somebody steals it. You play until somebody's mom says it's time to go home.

TY: Question. (*MARCUS throws the ball to TY*) Is this touch or tackle?

He's about to throw it to MARCUS for the answer, but then JOHNELLE grabs it.

JOHNELLE: It's tackle!

JADA enters.

JADA: I wanna play.

BRADY: Sorry. We already started.

JOHNELLE: You can't tell my sister she can't play. (*turns to JADA*) You can't play, Jada.

JADA: Why not?

JOHNELLE: Because it's Navy Ball and we're Army.

JADA: You're playing.

TY: And it's tackle.

JADA: So?

BRADY: Besides, you don't know the rules.

JADA: So explain the rules.

JOHNELLE: He doesn't know the rules either.

JADA: OK, so no rules. Got it.

MARCUS: There are rules!

JADA: Then tell me what they are!

MARCUS: It's easier if you learn them while we're playing.

JADA: Then let's go. I'm playing.

MARCUS: All right, already. Line up over there.

JADA: I want to line up over here.

MARCUS: That's my side. Your sister's team is over there.

JADA: I'm on your team.

MARCUS: OK. Line up and when I go 'Hup hup hup' I'm going to throw the ball to Brady and you guard him by blocking anybody from the other team trying to knock him down or knock me down.

JADA: Who guards me from getting knocked down?

BRADY: Getting knocked down is part of the game.

JADA: I know that. But if I'm keeping people from knocking you down, you have to keep people from knocking me down.

MARCUS: This is Navy ball.

JADA: That's how the Navy works!

MARCUS: I thought your family was Army.

JADA: Hey, you were nice to me on my first day.

MARCUS: There's no nice in Navy Ball!

JADA: In the military, we protect each other so we can protect the country. This ball is the country. *(takes the ball from MARCUS)* We are all on the same side.

MARCUS: If we're all on the same side, we can't play football.

JADA: Sure we can. We just have to work together.

MARCUS: Aw, you're just messing with me.

BRADY: No, think about it. She's kind of right.

BRADY takes the ball from JADA. TY takes the ball from BRADY and places it reverently on the ground. JADA is gloating.

The kids aren't sure what to do. They look at JADA, at each other, at MARCUS. They don't know how to proceed with the game.

With no warning, JADA dives for the ball and runs for it.

JADA: Mine!

MARCUS: I thought we were all on the same team!

JADA: I'm special forces!

She runs off. They all playfully chase her.

AWARDS ASSEMBLY

MARCUS and BRADY are backstage at a school assembly.

BRADY: Stop peeking at the audience, Marcus. Dad can't be here.

MARCUS: Brady, I'm getting TWO awards today! Perfect attendance and most improved! Perfect and most! That's EXTRA good. I worked soooo hard.

BRADY: I helped.

MARCUS: Yeah, you helped. But I worked really hard.

BRADY: Hey, how do you know what you're getting?

MARCUS: I peeked at the list in the principal's office.

BRADY: Marcus! Hey, what awards am I getting?

MARCUS: Pretty much all the rest. Hey! The Awards Assembly is starting!

MARCUS goes back to peeking.

BRADY: Do you see Mom in the audience?

MARCUS: Yup. And the chair next to her is empty. Like she's saving it for someone.

BRADY: Marcus, Dad's on a carrier in the Pacific. He'll come home next year, like he promised.

MARCUS: But if he does, Brady? If it's a surprise and he does come... and if you cry... it's OK.

BRADY: I wouldn't cry... Would you cry?

MARCUS: Well, yeah.

They step forward as though stepping on stage.

THE PRINCIPAL: Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special surprise today!

MARCUS: Here we go!

BRADY: It might not happen.

MARCUS: The door of the auditorium just opened!

BRADY: It's somebody in uniform. He's walking in.

MARCUS: He's wearing a hat. Brady, that's the right hat!

BRADY: I can't see his face. Can you see his face?

MARCUS: I told you!

BRADY: Marcus, I think I might cry.

MARCUS: He looks taller. Is that possible? Did he grow?

BRADY: He's coming closer. Wait. Wait. Oh. Marcus... That's somebody else's father.

THE PRINCIPAL: Please join me in welcoming home one of our brave military parents!

They look at each other. They're both so crushed.

MARCUS: Brady, it's OK. Come on. We should be happy for that kid.

They pause to gather themselves, then... they both clap for the kid and her father, happy for her, sad for themselves.

COUNTDOWN CANDY

MARCUS: Waiting isn't easy.

This is something kids use to help. It's a countdown jar. Inside, there's candy. One M&M for every day of my father's deployment.

My mom didn't do Countdown Candy for me when I was a baby. Babies don't understand waiting. When you're older, you understand what "deployment" means and how long it can be.

My mom made sure we knew the rules. Every night, one candy. That means one less day to wait until dad is home. One time, when we were little, me and my brother got the idea that if we ate all the candies at once, our father would come walking through the door. AAAAAAAAAAH!

He mimes pouring the entire jar of candy into his mouth... he looks for his father with anticipation, followed by disappointment.

My mom got mad. And I got a stomachache. And my brother blamed it all on me.

One time, my dad had an extra two months added to his deployment, so my mom had to sneak in more candies. I wasn't asleep yet and I could hear the candies dropping like "plink plink plink" in the jar. I pretended I didn't know. I didn't want my mom to feel bad.

When my mom is deployed, my dad doesn't like to count the days. He says it makes it worse.

Some families make paper chains that they hang up in the house and then take it apart one day, one link at a time. Maybe that's a better way to mark the time, because after a while, the candy starts to taste like missing someone feels. But we all have our own ways of waiting. Mostly, we mark every day. And one day, you notice there's hardly any candy left in the jar. And then you get to that last one and you know Dad is almost home. Sometimes those last hours are the hardest to wait.

But then, the day comes and the jar is empty and your dad is sitting right there, right there in the same room, laughing at something silly you said. You think about how candy used to be your favorite thing, but this is so much better.

LAST BOX

TY and JOHNELLE are walking home from school.

TY: So do you want to do homework at my house or the library?

JOHNELLE: Let's go to my house. My mom will make us cookies.

TY: You called it "your house."

JOHNELLE: Yeah, well, it's where I live. Why?

TY: Nothing. Are you sure your mom won't mind if I show up for cookies?

JOHNELLE: Of course not. You're my best friend.

Ring tone. JOHNELLE looks at her phone, reacts with surprise.

JOHNELLE: It's my friend Ava! I haven't heard from her in forever.

She texts back a short greeting. Sends. Waits a beat. We hear the sound of a reply. JOHNELLE reads. Her face starts to register bad news.

TY: Is everything OK?

JOHNELLE: Ava says her family is moving again.

TY: Are they coming here?

JOHNELLE: She says they're being transferred overseas and that because my dad has the same job as her dad, we might be going too.

TY: But that would be good, right? You could see your best friend again.

JOHNELLE: I unpacked the box.

TY: The last one? The one you said you wouldn't?

JOHNELLE: It was right in the middle of the room getting in my way. So I unpacked it.

TY: ...What did you have in there anyway?

JOHNELLE: It's silly.

TY: What?

JOHNELLE: It's a collection. Music boxes, jewelry boxes, little handmade containers from different countries. My dad gets them for me.

TY: You had a box full of boxes?!

JOHNELLE: There's stuff inside them, just little things to remember places we lived and people I used to know.

TY: It doesn't matter.

JOHNELLE: It does.

TY: I mean, you didn't do anything wrong. Come on. Whatever happens, your family isn't moving right today. We still have time. First homework, then cookies, then we can ride our bikes to the top of the hill. OK?

They start to walk off together, but TY stops and turns to the audience. JOHNELLE freezes.

TY'S GOODBYE

TY: One. When you see a moving van across the street, look for kid stuff. A bicycle. A box that's marked "TOYS." A box that says "MOM." That's a sure sign it's a family moving in, and families have kids.

Two. Go over right away. Run. They will be happy to see you if you offer to carry boxes.

Three. Carry boxes. It's tiring to move, so they'll be glad for one more person who can help them unpack. Oh wait. No, number three is "introduce yourself." Then number four is carry boxes.

Number five is find out what grade the kid is in school. Tell them that's the best grade and the best teacher no matter what grade they're in and who their teacher is going to be.

Six. Show up at their front door early the next morning and walk with them to school.

Seven. Have lunch with them on the first day. This is very important. Nobody wants to be the new kid sitting all alone in the cafeteria.

Eight. Walk them home after school. Show them cool stuff in the neighborhood, even if you have to make up why it's cool.

Nine. Be friends like that every single day until they have to move. You don't have to be best friends. You can just be neighbor-friends. It kind of feels the same.

Ten. Give them something to remember. Something small. *(He reveals a small box he's had in his hands. The photo is inside.)* Give them your school picture so they don't forget your face. Promise that you won't forget them and really mean it, 'cause you won't.

He quietly gives the box to JOHNELLE and they wave goodbye.

Then, go home and lie on the couch and try not to cry.

Until a moving van shows up across the street. Then start back with number one.

CURTAINS

In the girls' room on moving day, weeks later. JADA has been packing boxes and is all but finished. JOHNELLE hasn't packed a thing.



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