

MAX'S CHRISTMAS TROUBLE

DAY 1

The Trouble with Christmas

The trouble with Christmas, thought Max, is that I was born on Christmas Day.

It was the first day of December, and the delicious smells of cinnamon French toast and crisp bacon filled the warm kitchen. The Talley household had gathered for their yearly first-day-of-Christmas breakfast, and as Father read the Christmas story from the book of Matthew, Maximilian Talley's mind wandered as he thought about his ill-fated luck at being born on Christmas Day, and how it meant that every year he had the misfortune of his birthday party being combined with the Christmas

party—AND seemingly only getting half the amount of presents as those celebrating their birthday on any other day of the year!

While Max had always been happy with the amount of gifts he received on his birthday/Christmas Day, the possibility of receiving fewer than “the right amount” had been pointed out to him by classmate Jones. At the time, Max had replied with “Well ... at least no one forgets *my* birthday!” But later he felt that his retort had been lame.

Sometime in the weeks leading up to December 1st, Max had struck on the thought that having *two* parties on Christmas Day would make sure he received the right number of presents!

“In the spirit of Christmas,” Max's father was saying, interrupting Max's reverie, “I will let the Millers have a fair advantage at this year's Annual Snow Fort Building competition!” Everyone chuckled.

The “in the spirit of Christmas” proclamations had been a tradition that Mrs. Talley had begun three Christmases ago: each member of the family was meant to say one thing that he or she would do that Christmas season to show Christmas cheer to others. The Annual Snow Fort Building was very important to Mr. Talley—former snow fort building champion two years in a row—so Max and everyone else in the Talley family agreed that it was a spectacular bit of Christmas giving.



“In the spirit of Christmas, I will allow Max to use the computer in the afternoons for the rest of the month from four to five.” This was Sophie, Max’s older sister by three years.

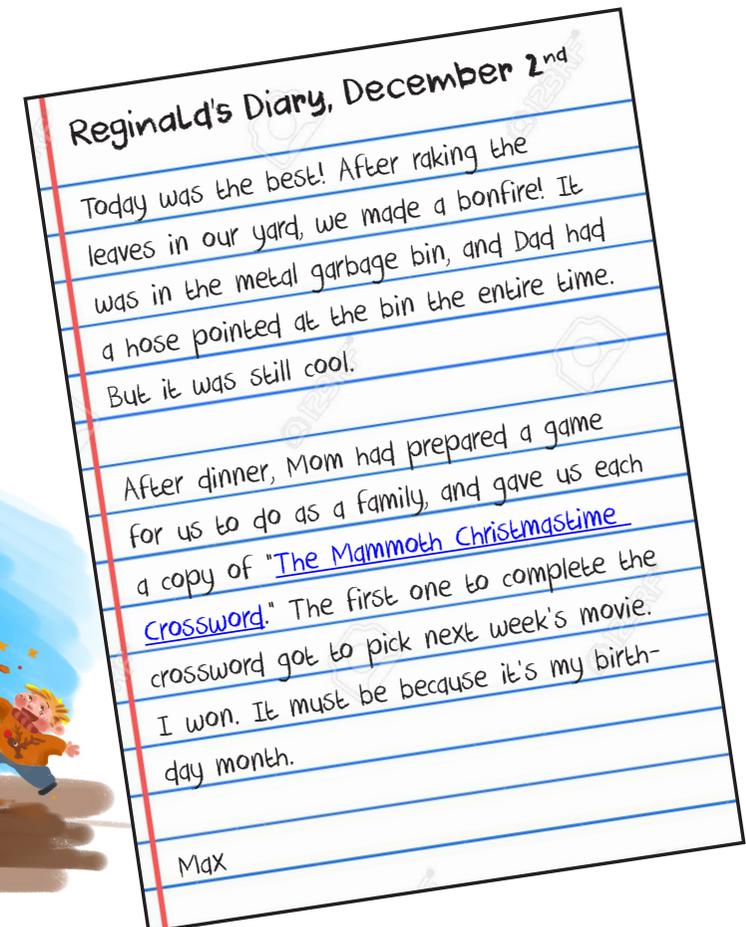
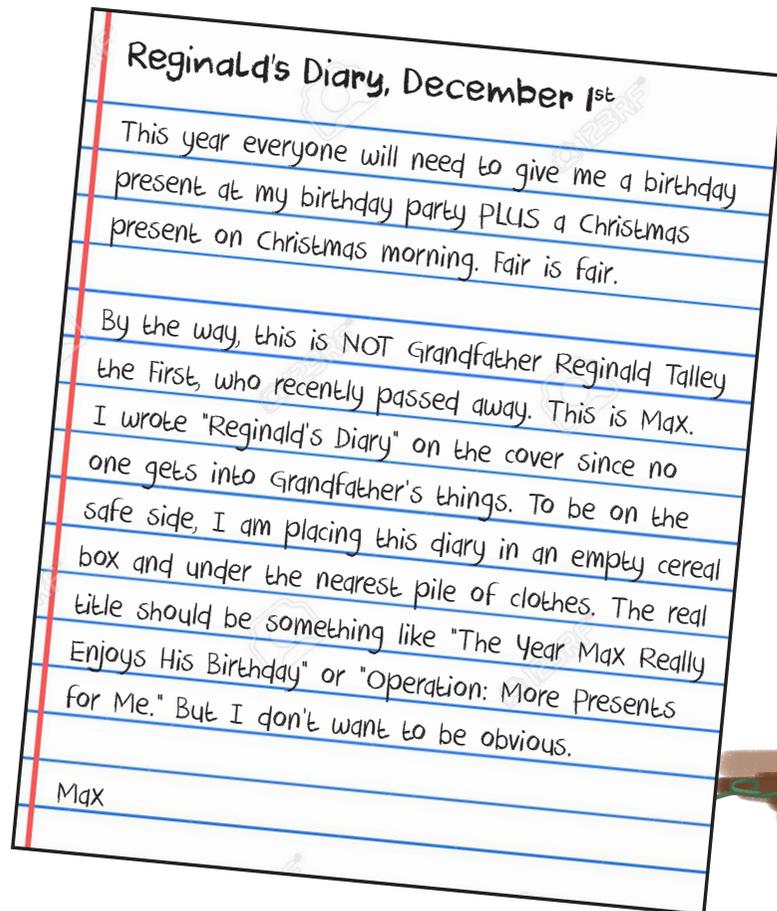
“That is very benevolent of you, Sophie,” said Father, and Max rolled his eyes.

“In the spirit of Christmas, our family will go caroling at the Olive Grove Retirement Home!” proclaimed Mother. Sophie and Max glanced at each other

and sighed. They had known this was coming. Every year the Talley household would go caroling at the Olive Grove Retirement Home. Max actually enjoyed the visits, and talking with Mr. Padraic—the toymaker was especially exciting, but this year he had made different plans.

Noah was next in line, but at two years of age no one expected him to say anything—except for “yay,” which he said a lot.

Max seized the opportunity. “In the spirit of Christmas I’ve decided to plan my own birthday party. I know it’s a lot of trouble to celebrate my birthday along with the Christmas party, so the good thing is this year I’ll plan my own party, and then we can have two separate parties, but both on the same day.” Max didn’t wait around to hear what his mother, father, Sophie, or Noah had to say. He hastily excused himself, and then flew up the stairs to his room—he had a birthday party to plan!



DAY 3

The One Where Max Doesn't Get into Trouble

Max hadn't planned to bake Christmas-*anything* that year, and not because he didn't like to bake. Mother wanted to give the staff at the Olive Grove Retirement Home some Christmas cheer—which in her mind equaled something yummy. Max agreed with the “something yummy” part, but—“Aren't I banished from the kitchen?”

“Ha ha, dear. That's right.” Max had been banished from all kitchen activities for three months after his experimental cookie recipe had burst into flames. “But I've found this



no-bake cookie recipe—and if you promise to follow the recipe strictly, you should be fine. Right? I'm running late for that PTA thing, and I was hoping you could help me with this....”

“Sure, Mother!” said Max agreeably—he was in a terrific mood, which was definitely from all the glorious presents he was imagining his upcoming birthday would bring. These wouldn't be birthday presents doubling as Christmas presents—these would be uniquely birthday gifts. Max had started working on a list. To top off his day, AJ, aka Augustine Jeffrey, aka Max's best friend, would be coming over to help Max with his birthday party planning. In the meantime, he had an hour or so to spare. *No-bake cookies? Piece of cake!*

Reginald's Diary, December 3rd

Max here. I must say, those cookies rocked. Aside from the part where I put them in the freezer to cool down, and then forgot them there. When I took them out, they were hard as stone! I needed to taste one to be sure that it was good, so I held one of the cookies above the stove's flame to soften it up a little. BAD IDEA!! I cleaned up the mess before Mom returned.

PS: AJ and I have decided that my birthday party theme will be laser tag lair. AJ has the best ideas!

Reginald's Diary, December 4th

This morning, around the breakfast table, we watched a nativity movie clip on Dad's laptop. Mother said that Mary was brave, seeing as she had to give birth outside of a hospital and in a stinky stable at that. Dad said that Joseph was the remarkable one, as he didn't know whose child it was that Mary was having. Sophie said that the Magi weren't supposed to be in the clip because they came later on.

Baby Jesus looked kind of cute—like a squishy, red puppy dog. I wonder if I looked like that as a newborn.

Max



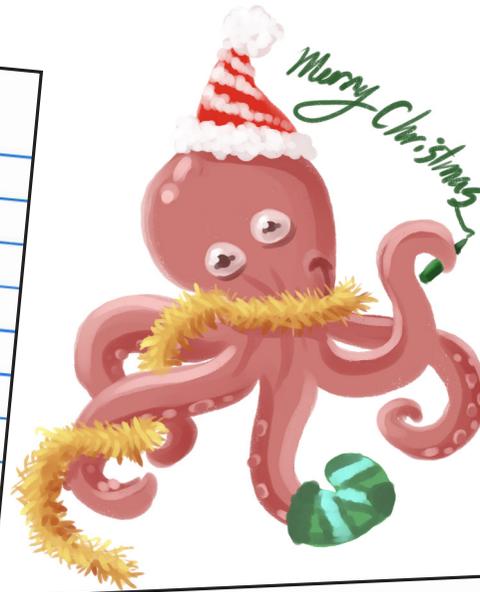
DAY 7

The Origins of Christmas, and Max Talks about His Christmas Present Wish List

A week before December 1st, Mother had decided that everyone would take turns over the dinner table to share either a Christmas “did you know” fact or a Christmas-themed story. Today was Father’s turn, and he had decided on the origin of the Christmas holidays as his “did you know” fact.

“In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as those in the far north, Saturnalia—a holiday in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture—was celebrated.” Father was reading from his laptop as the rest of the family tucked in to generous helpings of shepherd’s pie. “Beginning in the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month, Saturnalia was a hedonistic time, when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month, slaves would become masters. Peasants were in command of the city. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun. Also, around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome. In addition, members of the upper classes often celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun, on December 25. It was believed that Mithra, an infant god, was born of a rock. For some Romans, Mithra’s birthday was the most sacred day of the year.”

“I like the part about slaves becoming masters,” said Sophie, and Max agreed.



Reginald's Diary, December 5th

I've been laminating, flocking, and cutting a flannelgraph of the Christmas story all afternoon! We're going to St. Jerome's Shelter on the 14th, and I'm to prepare my own presentation of the Christmas story. Just you wait! My Christmas story will include an alien invasion ... I mean, that's what angels are, right? I'm making my own green antennae to hang on their halos and everything.

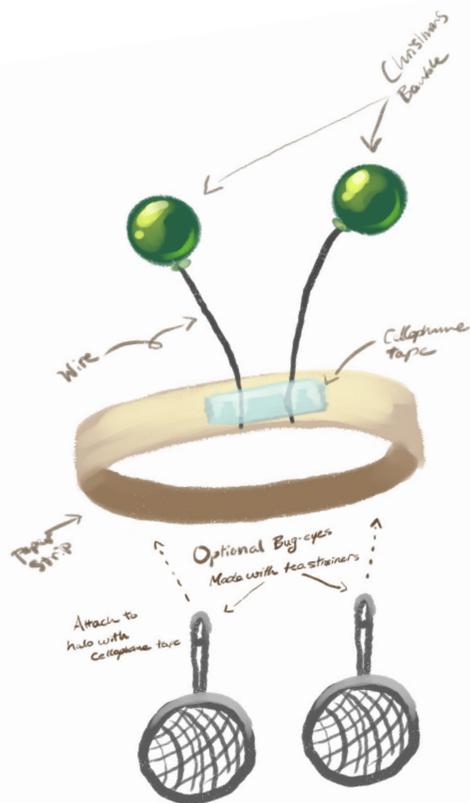
Max

Reginald's Diary, December 6th

Christmas cards are tricky. But this year I want to do something that will stand out! Here are the ideas I followed for my three unique designs!

1. Pick the most un-Christmassy animal—I chose an octopus, and put a Santa Claus hat on it—and then have him visit baby Jesus in the stable. (If I were an octopus, I'd still want to visit Jesus in the stable.)
2. Choose unusual objects to spell out the words "Merry Christmas" and then take a picture of it, print it out and use it as a Christmas card.
3. Video or audio record a Christmas greeting, send that out by email.

Max



“So how did these festivals turn into Christmas?” asked Mother.

“In the 4th century, Anno Domini, Pope Julius I decided on December 25th as the date to celebrate the birth of Christ,” said Father, and he continued reading. “By holding Christmas at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced.”

“That makes sense,” Sophie said, looking pointedly at Max. “I mean, they’re having a feast and a celebration anyway, why not include someone’s birthday along with it?”

“Two birds with one stone,” observed Father. “Rather ingenious.”

Max could feel a flush creeping across his face and up to the tips of his ears. “Because it could hurt their feelings if you do a huge party, but it’s all about the Christmas turkey, and the dessert, and the lights, and everything else besides the birthday boy—er ... Jesus.” Well! Since they were on the topic anyway, he decided to share a Christmas fact of his own.

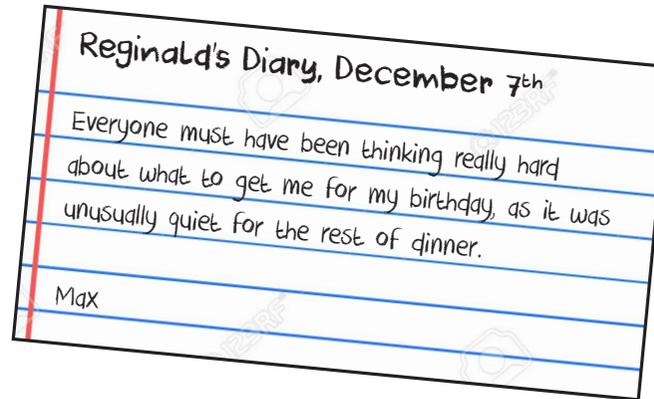
“Since my birthday lands on Christmas Day, what I want for my birthday could be listed as a ‘fact.’ So, here’s my list.” Max stood up and pulled out copies of his “Birthday Present Wish List” that he

and AJ had worked on the other day, and passed them around.

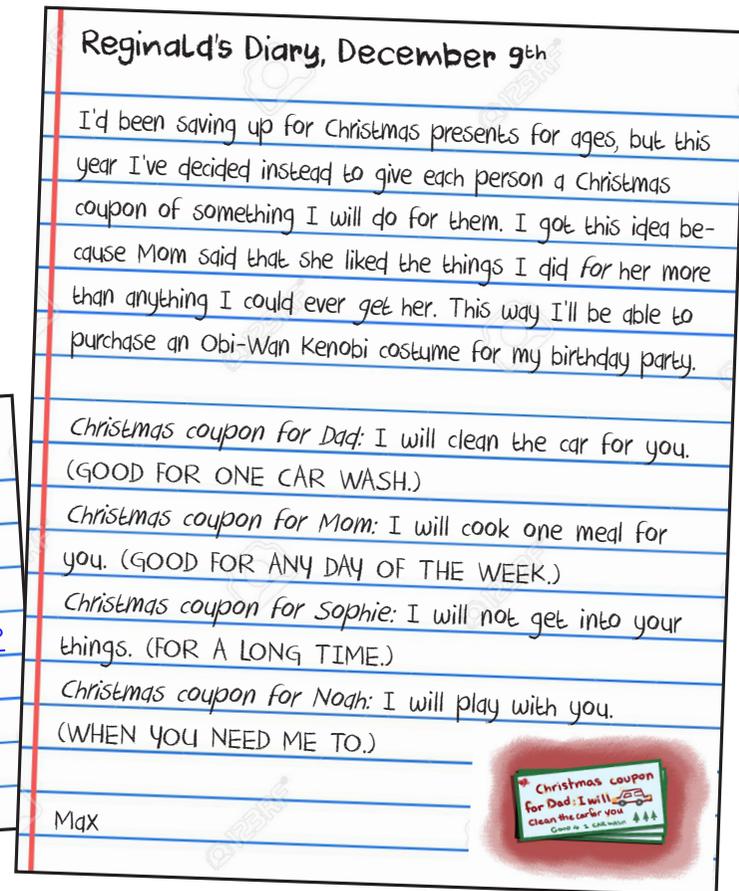
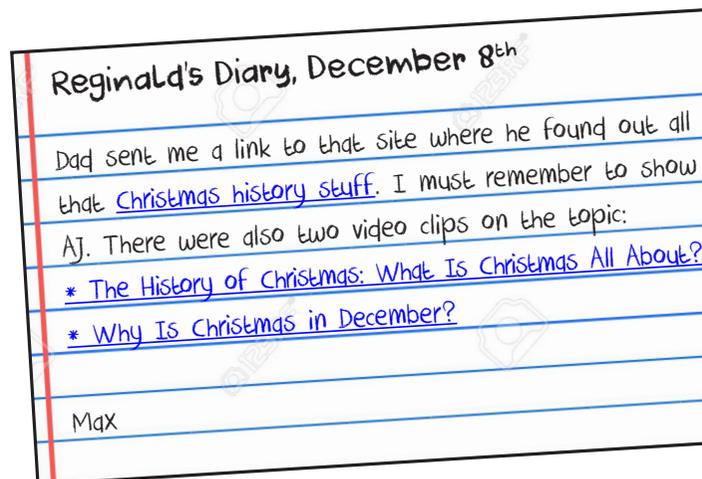
“I would like Sherlock’s Detective Fingerprint Kit, a top secret intruder alarm, a volcano making kit, and a build-your-own robotic arm set. Remember that these BIRTHDAY presents are not to double as CHRISTMAS presents. You can choose anything for Christmas presents—just make sure that it’s something I like.” Max sat back down.



DAY 9



DAY 8



DAY 10

The One Where Max Finds an Obstacle

“If you want to live in the wild, you’ll need to be able to keep up.” Max was sitting in front of the living room heater as he put together Watson’s daily obstacle course. Watson was Max’s pet tortoise, and Max had put Watson on a strict exercise schedule after repeatedly finding Watson out of his tank and sitting on the living room sofa watching the nature channel.

“Max, dear—” Max’s mother stood staring down at the tinsel and baubles strewn around the living room. She was smiling, but somehow Max knew that everything was not all right.

“Dear,” she began again, “you know the other day when I brought those lovely cookies you made over to Olive Grove Retirement Home? Well, the director mentioned that they’ll be holding their yearly Christmas party on the morning of the 25th instead of on the 24th ... I know you were hoping to have your birthday party on the morning of that day,” she rushed on, “and for sure—I want you to. ... So, well, I thought I’d leave it up to you. You can decide what we do this year on Christmas Day, because it is your birthday, too, and we want to make it special for you.”

But Max didn’t need time to think this one through. “Can’t we go to the retirement home on a different day? I’ve already sent out the invitations for the birthday party,” said Max. If he cancelled now, what would his classmates think—especially Jones?

“Yes. Yes! Of course!” agreed Mother quickly. “All right then, I’ll set up a new date to go see them. Oh, would AJ like to come? He has such a lovely voice...”

“I bet he will want to,” said Max. AJ loved to sing, and he was good too. “I’ll ask,” said Max, quite relieved that all was well in the world once again.



DAY 11

Reginald's Diary, December 11th

Close disaster averted! Party is still on track.

The bad thing is missing out on the Christmas party at Olive Grove. Mr. Padraic is cool, but I'll get to see him on another day—I bet he'd be the one to ask about how to make laser tag guns out of LED flashlights. Maybe I could sneak in Jelly Twists for him.

Max



DAY 12

Reginald's Diary, December 12th

Today's crafts project was Christmas Orange Pomanders! Won't everyone be surprised when I decorate the living room with these on Hot Choco night!

Max



DAY 13

Reginald's Diary, December 13th

My favorite Christmas carols! I had to print out the lyrics—as we didn't know many by heart. But I like these the best for singing at the top of your lungs on Christmas carol night:

- Good King Wenceslas
- I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing
- The 12 Days of Christmas
- We Three Kings of Orient Are

Max



DAY 14

The One with the Surprise

Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
Fa la la la la, la la la la.
'Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa la la la la, la la la la.

It was Christmas Caroling and Hot Choco night for the Talley family, and Max was hankering after something sweet and hot. It had taken most of the afternoon to prepare the “surprise” for his family, but he was finally satisfied with his effort. He had even given all his computer time to Sophie so that she would give the flannel-graph presentation at St. Jerome’s Shelter in his place, enabling him to stay home and prepare it. He looked at the surprise standing in the corner of the room. It was lovely. “Boy, *will* they be surprised!”



The past few days had been awkward. While at first everyone had wanted to hear about his birthday plans, after a while it seemed that his family was avoiding him. ... He thought of other Christmases, and how Christmas dinners were filled with talking and laughing, but lately it seemed that everyone had lost most of their funniness. So Max had decided to host this year’s Christmas Carol and Choco Night. He liked it when his family did things together—that was really the best part of Christmas.

After his No-Bake-Cookie success, Mother had agreed to let Max make the hot chocolate for their family activity that night. And Max had convinced Mother to buy a pack of extra large marshmallows for the occasion. Max had never seen marshmallows the size of his fist before; he was certain Dad would be equally impressed.

Max spent the next hour getting everything ready. He really did love Christmas. *It’s just the other part I don’t like*, he thought. *But that will change.* Max set out everyone’s favorite mugs, and turned on the twinkly lights in the room. He pulled out the orange pomanders he had made the other day and placed them on the coffee table. Lastly, he squished a marshmallow into each mug.

“Maximilian Talley! What on earth is that thing there?”

Sophie and Noah fled into the room behind Mr. and Mrs. Talley. Aside from an enthusiastic “Yay!” from Noah, everyone was quiet as they looked at the second Christmas tree in the room. It was smaller than their six-foot tree, but made up for it with a strange collection of baubles and tinsel.

“Mom, Dad, Sophie. How was the visit to the shelter? Oh, this? Do you like it?”

“Is that tree ... singing?”

“Yes! Well, it’s not really the tree, it’s this...” Max reached into the depths of the tree and pulled out a card. He pressed a button and the “Happy Birthday” song was cut short.

““Birthday Presents for Max Go Here,”” said Sophie, reading from a sign propped up at the base of the Birthday-Christmas tree.

Father cleared his throat, “Um, so this is your Birthday Christmas Tree?”

“Yep. Only, it could be called a ‘Max’-mas tree. Neat, eh? Would anyone like some hot chocolate? The marshmallows are the biggest ever!” Max looked around the room. “Aren’t we having our Christmas Carol and Hot Choco Night?”

At that, Father and Mother pulled off their jackets, Sophie wandered toward the kitchen, and Noah made a run for the marshmallows.

DAY 15

Reginald's Diary, December 15th

Dad's been at me to read A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. So, yesterday, while Mom, Noah, and I were at the library, I sat down with the children's picture book of the story. I finished that book in twenty minutes. Fastest time ever for reading a book! Mostly looked at pictures. I actually knew a lot of the story. Mom and Dad are always mentioning Mr. Scrooge—“Don't be a Scrooge,” they say.

I feel a little sorry for Mr. Scrooge. I wonder if he became grumpy because no one paid attention to him.

Max

DAY 16

Reginald's Diary, December 16th

Tomorrow, AJ and I are teaming up for the Annual Snow Fort Building competition. ... Last year we did the usual castle-style snow fort, but I'm thinking that we should go way out this year.

Reminder to me: Tell AJ about dressing up as Star Wars characters at my birthday party...

Max



DAY 17

The One with the Snow Fort

It was the day of the Annual Snow Fort Building competition, and while Mr. Talley had promised to tone down the splendor of his snow fort to allow the Millers a chance to win, Max and AJ were still in the running. The air was nippy and the sky was clear blue and bright—a perfect day for constructing a winning snow fort!

“The key to building a good snow fort is in making snow bricks,” said AJ, as they discussed strategy. AJ pulled out a Tupperware container from a huge black bag he had dragged to the competition site. “This is about the right shape, don’t you think?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, that will make a good snow brick,” agreed Max as he began shoveling snow into a huge pile.

“Hey, maybe this year we could do the Roman Colosseum. I’d like to build something no one’s done before...” AJ looked over at Max. “MAAAAAX! Are you listening?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Roman ... um ... house. Hey, AJ, about my birthday. I was thinking about the laser tag lair, and wouldn’t it be cool if everyone came as a Star Wars character? I think I’ll be Obi-Wan Kenobi, and you can be Luke Skywalker. I’m going to the Olive Grove

Retirement Home soon, and Mr. Padraic—remember him—I’m going to ask him to help me make the laser guns, and—”



AJ threw down the snow brick he had been working on. “All Christmas you’ve been talking about your birthday! You even missed my choir recital, and the other day you forgot about the show for the shelter. ... And today I just want to build the snow fort without hearing about your stupid party!”

“Y-you’re supposed to be my best friend! You’re supposed to want me to have a great birthday!” Max was standing now, his fists clenched at his sides.

“I-I do. But y-you’re ruining Christmas...” Max turned away from AJ, his face felt hot and his eyes were stinging. He didn’t want to build a snow fort anymore. He wanted to go home. He wished he could skip Christmas. He even wished he could skip his birthday, since it seemed no one cared.

That night as he listened to his mother play “What Child Is This” on the piano—interspersed with “yays” from Noah, he wished he could go back to the first day of Christmas and do everything differently. But he didn’t know how.

DAY 18

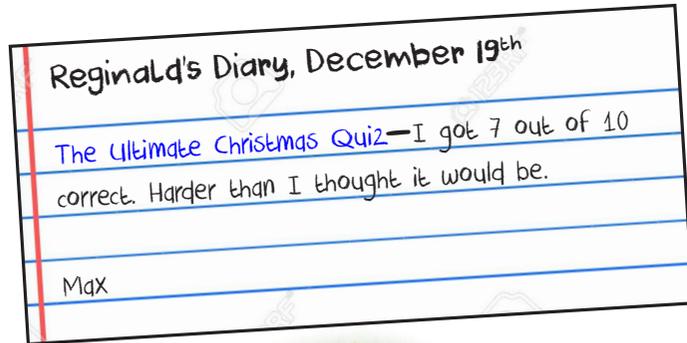
Reginald's Diary, December 18th

We watched this movie about a green ... um ... "creature" who lives in a town that makes a huge deal over Christmas. Except he does NOT like Christmas—and he steals presents, and takes down decorations, and tries to ruin everyone's fun. It ends all right, but I felt bad for him. I think he just wanted people to not leave him out of the celebrations.

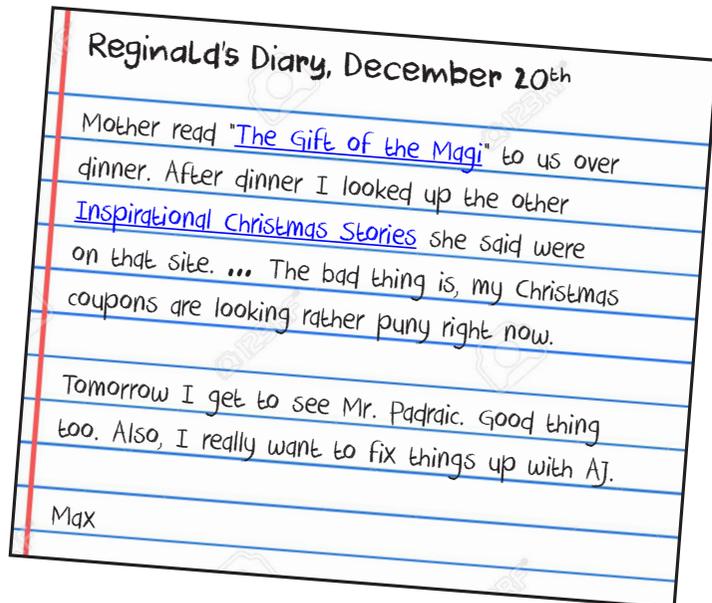
Max



DAY 19



DAY 20



DAY 21

Max and Mr. Padraic

"I've ruined Christmas." Max and Mr. Padraic were sitting in the lobby of the Olive Grove Retirement Home, a box of LED flashlights on the one side, and a bag of Jelly Twists on the other. Strains of "O Holy Night" drifted down the corridors from an ancient-sounding PA system. The Talleys were visiting that day and had sung Christmas carols at the cafeteria during lunch. AJ had come along, but he still refused to talk with Max. And now Max was having his long-anticipated talk with Mr. Padraic about turning LED flashlights into laser guns, but all he could think about was how rotten he felt. "Everyone is mad at me."

"Surely, not everyone." Mr. Padraic shook the red and green candy in his fist. "I'm not mad at you. Who else brings me boxes and boxes of Jelly Twists?"



"The people who are *supposed* to care, then."

"It's about your birthday, isn't it?"

"Yes. ... I wanted to be sure that my family would notice me—that they wouldn't forget that it's also my birthday. But now everyone is avoiding me, and I've tried so hard, but I'm sure it's going to be the worst birthday ever."

"Well, it's been years and years since I was a boy"—Mr. Padraic paused to take another bite of his Jelly Twist—"but the best way to ensure love finds you is to give plenty of love away, and often! You're a kind lad, and your parents love you. I'm sure they're planning something great for you!"

Max didn't want to tell Mr. Padraic that he had ruined his chances for that happening by his insistence on taking care of planning his birthday himself.

"I love my children," Mr. Padraic was saying, "and I would do anything for them." Max remembered that Mr. Padraic's family lived far away, and that they usually didn't make it out to see him during the holidays.

"Will your family visit on Christmas Day?"

"Oh, no. But don't worry about me. You have a lot to think about."

"I don't care anymore! I've tried to make it wonderful, but I feel miserable, and AJ won't even talk with me. I wish I could change everything back."

"You could, you know! Just think of what made Christmas special before, and try to do that now—starting today. You'll need to hurry, as there's not much of Christmas left. But you're the boy who thought of a birthday Christmas tree for yourself. You're inventive! I'm sure you're up to the challenge."

On the way home from the retirement home, Max thought of what Mr. Padraic had said. He still wished people would pay attention to his upcoming birthday, but it seemed his plan wasn't working, and he was sorry he had ruined Christmas for his family and his best friend.

Not much time left, and lots to do! thought Max. He was going to make things right.

DAY 22



Reginald's Diary, December 22nd

Over breakfast I told Mom and Dad and everyone that I'd cancelled my birthday party on Christmas Day so that we could all go to the Christmas party at Olive Grove. Mom and Dad and Sophie looked like their socks had been knocked off, and Noah said "Yay!"

I really did want to see Mr. Padraic on Christmas Day; he'll have no one to celebrate Christmas with, and he's probably the last person who wouldn't mind celebrating my birthday with me.

There are still three days left of Christmas, and I have big plans!

Max

DAY 23



Reginald's Diary, December 23rd

Shoveling snow is cold work. By the time I finished the driveway, it was only 7 am and I wanted to crawl back into bed. But I snuck Noah into the living room so that Mother could sleep in. I made him egg-in-a-basket for breakfast. And tried to teach Noah how to say "Merry" for "Merry Christmas"—except it sounds a lot like "Weeeese." But it's a start.

Must look up recipes. Have decided to host a brunch tomorrow. And Mother says as long as nothing explodes, she's happy to give the cooking to someone else.

Spent the evening rewriting my Christmas coupons...

- *Christmas coupon for Dad:* I will clean the car for you. (GOOD FOR ONE THREE CAR WASHES.)
- *Christmas coupon for Mom:* I will cook one meal for you. (GOOD FOR TWO DAYS ~~ANY~~ DAY OF THE WEEK.)
- *Christmas coupon for Sophie:* I will not get into your things. (FOREVER A LONG TIME.)
- *Christmas coupon for Noah:* I will play with you. (GOOD FOR TWO EVENINGS OF THE WEEK WHEN YOU HAVE NO ONE ELSE TO PLAY WITH NEED ME TO.)

Max

DAY 24

Reginald's Diary, December 24th

The Day before Christmas Morning Brunch

Menu

- Hot cocoa, with whipped cream and a freshly picked mint leaf on top—for Sophie, Noah, and me.
- Foaming cappuccinos for Mother and Father
- Chocolate and zucchini scones
- Cheesey omelets
- And waffles with strawberry topping!
- Christmas carols for the ears

Woke up at 6 AM to put it together, but it was worth it. Nothing burned except my pinky, and I put a BIG bandage on it so that people would know.... Just so they know that I'm brave and I can work hard. We ate and talked and laughed for a good two hours. Good thing Dad has no work today.

I almost forgot, but tomorrow is my birthday...

Max



DAY 25

Christmas Day

Christmas morning and another birthday, thought Max. He knew he had made the right decision to go to Olive Grove Retirement Home that morning, but he still wished a tiny something would happen for him after all. Even just making up with AJ would make my day ...

But there wasn't much time for thought—after a quick “Happy Birthday, Max” song, and Merry Christmas-ing over the breakfast table, Mother announced that everyone absolutely had to be in the car at 10:30 AM sharp! And that Christmas

presents—and birthday presents—would be opened when they returned home.

Is it just me, or does the receptionist look a lot like Princess Leia from Star Wars? Max and family had arrived at Olive Grove and were in the lobby. The receptionist was wearing a white robe, and had her hair parted in the middle with huge buns on either side of her head—quite a different getup than the pale blue shirts the staff usually wore.

Wait! Is that a Wookiee coming round the corner? With a Santa hat on? Max glanced at his mom and dad to see how they were taking this strange warp in reality. They were both looking studiously in another direction, but then the Wookiee was coming straight for Max.

“Halfhi-herthfay-fax!”

“Wha—?”

And then the Wookiee lifted his head off, and the smiling face of Mr. Padraic appeared. “Happy Birthday, Max!”

That was the cue, as at that prompt, the lobby burst into a galaxy of alien visitors: Jedi Masters, shiny robotic looking people, and many Princess Leia wigs (and was that a clown?) all singing “Happy Birthday to you.” In the corner Max noticed that his “Max”-mas tree had been brought to the lobby and had presents piled high under its low branches.

“Mr. Padraic? Mom? Dad?”

“It started as Mr. Padraic’s idea, and he called us with the plan just two days ago, and then AJ got in on it, and we all wanted to do something special for you.”

At this AJ appeared at Max’s side. “Wow, you look good,” said Max, taking in AJ’s Luke Skywalker outfit.

“I brought one for you too,” said AJ, smiling a bit, and then he said, “I’m sorry for the other day...” But Max was saying the same thing. They both grinned at the other.

“Look what Mr. Padraic made!” said Jones, coming up to AJ and Max, holding up two LED flashlights turned into plastic laser guns. “This is the best birthday party ever!”

Max turned to Mr. Padraic. “Y-you did all this for me?”

“Not just me. Your mom and dad, and Noah too. And Sophie baked you a blue cake. And AJ called your classmates. When we heard you and your family would be joining us for our Christmas party, well, everyone wanted in on the fun!”

“But I thought you all hated me...”

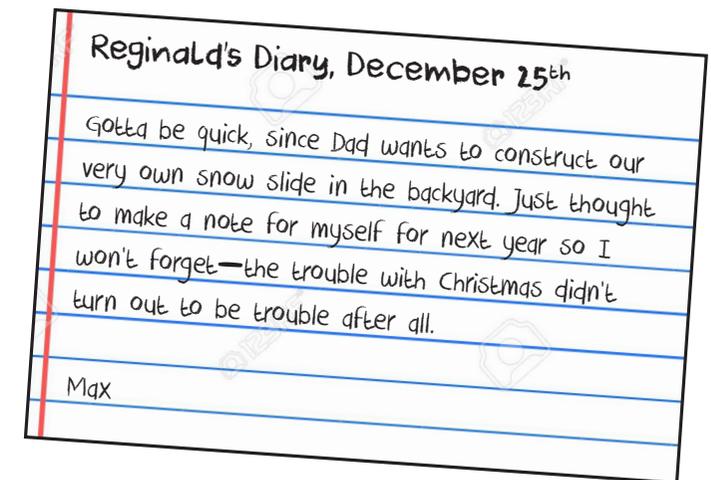
“Oh, please,” said Sophie. “You were just terrible to be around when all you could talk about was ... well ... you know.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry about that. I tried to fix it.”

“We know,” said Mother, “And we’re all more touched than words can say. We should have told you that we were going to make sure you were going to have the best birthday ever ... because, of course we weren’t going to let you have anything less. But you were so determined to do everything yourself...”

“I was quite a bear,” said Max, and he felt good saying it. He knew his family would have to forgive him, it was Christmas Day—and his birthday too.

“Were you ever!” agreed AJ, and everyone laughed.



THE END