



Scary Tales

“**W**hen you live in a motel,” I told my audience, “you never know when your neighbors might be fiendish jewel thieves!”

Like always, the whole cafeteria was hanging on my every word. Even the lunch ladies in their plastic shower caps had come out to hear what I’d say next. It was so quiet you could hear a straw squeak its way into a milk carton.

“‘Was it dangerous?’ you ask. Of course it was! Was I afraid? Ha! Never!”

“How about when the tiger roared?” said my friend Gloria Ortega. “You looked pretty scared then.”

I ignored her and kept going.

(That’s one of the best things about being a storyteller. You don’t have to put in *all* the details.)

“So there we were,” I said, “me and Gloria, tailing the two most wanted men in all of Florida.”

“The notorious Sneemer brothers!” added Gloria. “From Miami!”

“But we weren’t after the two thieves,” I said. “Oh, no. We wanted the jewels they’d stolen from the Miami Palm Tree Hotel. Diamonds! Emeralds! Rubies! Cubic zirconias!”

“That’s not really a jewel,” whispered Gloria.

“Whatever,” I whispered back.

And then I amped it up for my big finish, which, by the way, is the most important part of any story. “That’s where the race is won,” Grandpa always says. “At the finish line!”

It was time to give it everything I had.

“We tracked those two banditos all the way to Tampa International Airport, where we saw them check a bag at curbside—an aluminum attaché case with a combination lock! They’d had it handcuffed to their wrists all day long. . . .”

“And they just checked it at curbside?” asked Pinky Nelligan, one of my best buds, which means he should know better than to ask logical questions while I’m busy making stuff up.

“It was their big mistake,” I told him. “Every crook makes one. Some return to the scene of the crime. Some brag to the wrong people. Some

check their loot with a baggage handler when they should’ve kept it chained to their wrists!”

Pinky nodded. So did everybody else.

“Anyway, Gloria and I saw the airline baggage handler put the metal briefcase on a cart.”

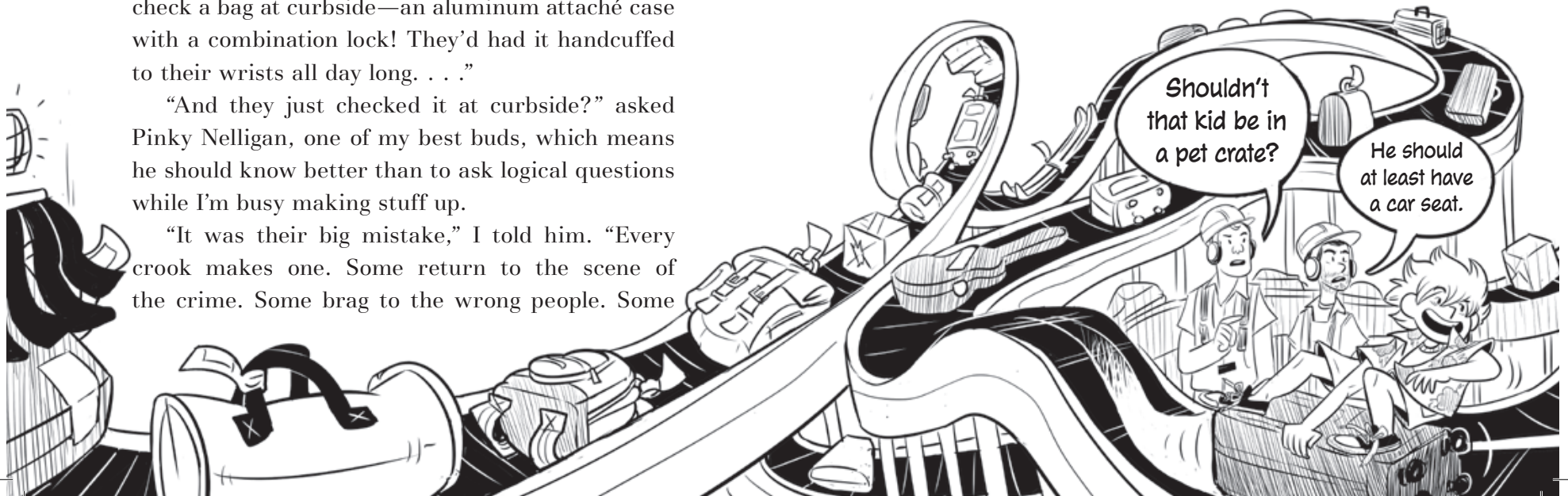
Gloria gave me a “We did?” look.

It didn’t slow me down.

“We chased that cart into the terminal, where another airline worker tossed the briefcase onto a conveyor belt. It disappeared behind some black rubber flaps. So I jumped onto the conveyor belt, too!”

“Didn’t the security guards stop you?” asked Kate Mackenzie Williams.

“Oh, they tried,” I said with a grin. “But I’m slippery when I want to be. I wasn’t going to let them catch me! Even though it meant I might end up in the cargo hold of a jumbo jet headed to Timbuktu!”





Story Time

“So did you catch up with the briefcase?” asked Kate.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I followed it all the way out to the runway, where these two big dudes were loading up a plane. They wondered what I was doing riding on a conveyor belt with a bunch of suitcases. I told them I was a bounty hunter following a tip.”

“And they believed you?”

“They did when I showed them my badge.”

I flashed a tin sheriff’s deputy star, which has been crammed inside my wallet since forever. My grandpa used to give the badges away at our motel, the Wonderland, back when he had a ride-along train that looped through the parking lot. Masked actors pretending to be bandits regularly attacked it. Grandpa needed lots of deputies. I have a ton of badges.

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“The baggage handlers believed me even more when I popped open that aluminum attaché case and showed them all the hot rocks.”

“You mean that candy that explodes in your mouth?” said Kate.

“No,” I said. “Those are Pop Rocks.”

“‘Hot rocks’ is what cops call stolen jewelry,” said Pinky. “Right, P.T.?”

“Yep.”



“What about the jewel thieves?” asked Kate. “What happened to them?”

I shrugged. “Like I said, Gloria and I weren’t after the outlaws. We just wanted to return those precious family heirlooms to their rightful owners.”

“And pick up the reward money from the insurance company,” added Pinky.

“Oh, yeah. That, too!”

“Was it a million-dollar reward?” asked Kate.

“Due to the terms of our settlement,” said Gloria, who’s an incredible business wiz and knows how to talk like a lawyer when she has to, “we are not at liberty to divulge the exact amount.”

“That means we can’t tell you how much cash we scored,” I told the crowd. “But today, ladies and gentlemen, the Nutty Buddies and ice-cream sandwiches are on us!”

“Woo-hoo!”

Everybody except Gloria and me streamed back to the cafeteria line to grab an ice-cream treat. We strolled outside to meet her dad in front of the school.

Gloria and Mr. Ortega are “extended stay” guests at my family’s motel on St. Pete Beach because Mr. Ortega recently landed a job as a sports reporter on WTSP, our local CBS station.

“He’s working his way up the dial” is how Gloria puts it. “Hopping from one station to the next,

moving from city to city, hoping to one day land his dream job at ESPN.”

“ESPN is the leader of the pack,” Mr. Ortega tells me all the time. “And if you’re not running with the lead dogs, P.T., all you see is a bunch of furry butts.”

Anyway, right after the news broke that “Two Florida kids solve decades-old jewel heist,” all sorts of TV and radio people wanted to interview me and Gloria. Well, mostly me. Gloria “doesn’t do” TV.

“That’s Dad’s wheelhouse,” she says.

I had no idea what manning the wheel of a boat had to do with being on TV, but I agreed to handle all the press requests—including the call from *Everyday Superstars*, a show on ESPN5 that airs at like three in the morning . . . every other Tuesday.

I told them I’d do it—but only if Manny Ortega (that’s Mr. Ortega’s TV name) did the interview.

I wanted to help him run with the big dogs.

Hey, he’s a good guy. He should look at stuff besides furry dog butts.



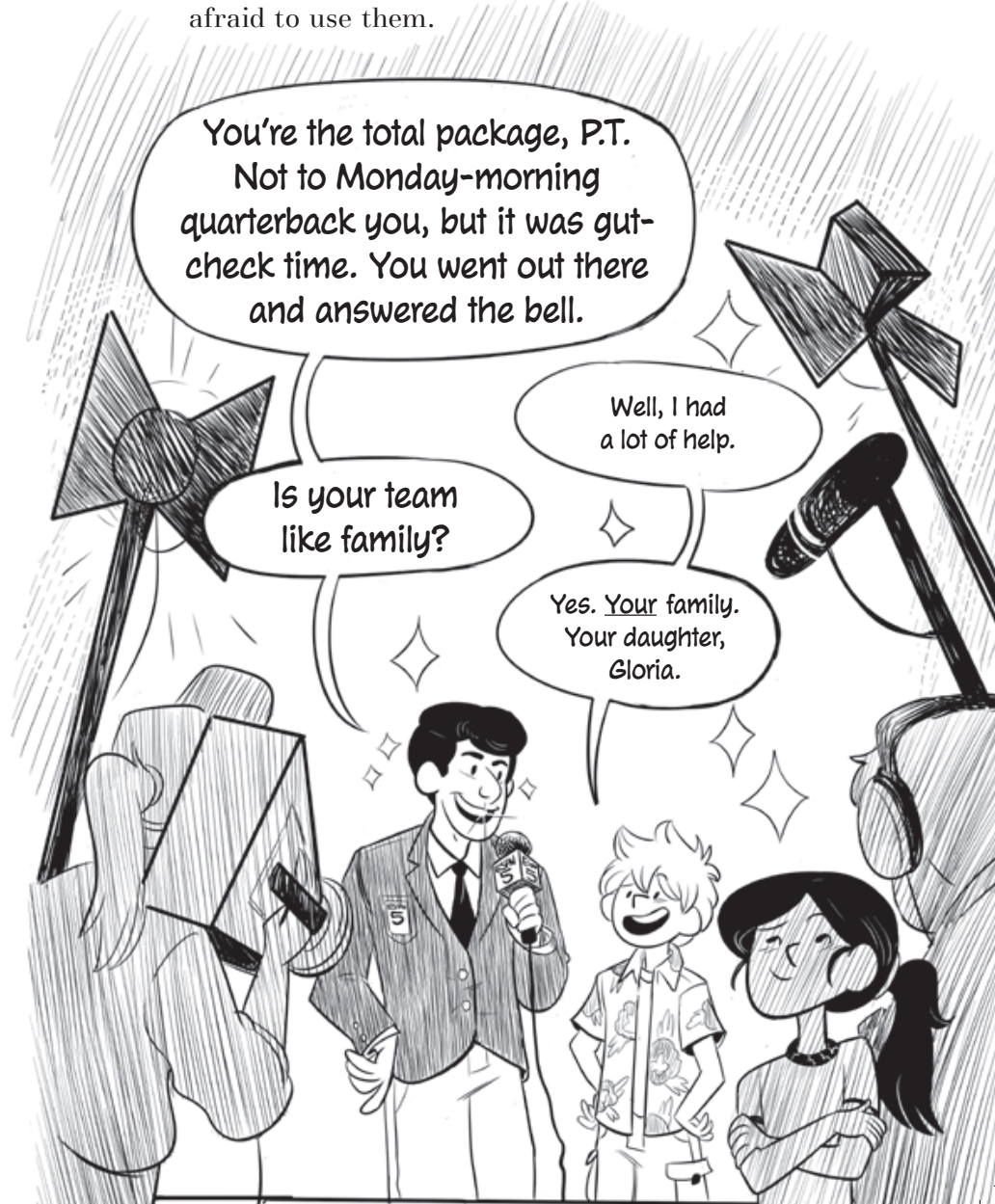
More Famous Than Amos!

I am standing with P. T. Wilkie, the boy who cracked the fabled Miami Palm Tree Hotel jewel heist case,” Mr. Ortega told the camera lens. “And, sports fans, you can just feel the electricity in the air.”

Gloria’s dad was dressed in a snazzy blue blazer with an ESPN5 patch stitched to the chest pocket. As always, he looked extremely handsome, with every strand of his shiny hair pasted into place. His smile was brighter than the TV lights blinding me. His eyes twinkled almost as much as his teeth.

“Up against the infamous Sneemer brothers,” Mr. Ortega continued, “young P.T. brought his A game. He left it all out on the field. He knew what he had to do and went out there and did it.”

Because he wants to be on ESPN, Mr. Ortega knows a ton of sportscaster clichés and he’s not afraid to use them.



“By the way,” I said, “we’re celebrating the rescue of the stolen jewels this coming Saturday with special guided tours at the Wonderland Motel, 7000 Gulf Boulevard, where there are always marvels to behold and stories to be told. All T-shirts are buy one, get one free, this weekend only. Limit two per customer. Void where prohibited.”

Before I left for school that morning, Grandpa reminded me to plug our newest attraction. He’s the one who opened Walt Wilkie’s Wonder World way back in October 1970. That’s right. Exactly one year before that other Walt opened Disney World over in Orlando.

“We had a very good year, P.T.,” Grandpa always tells me. “A very good year.”

Now the Wonderland is mostly an old-school motel with lots of wacky statues (we have a giant dinosaur *and* a bucking jackalope) decorating the property. Between the reward money that helped us pay off what bankers call a “balloon loan” (it’s a mortgage, not a loan to buy balloons) and the hype around the jewel heist and the notorious thieves who’d stayed in rooms 103 and 114, we had a shot at another very good year. Maybe two!

“By finding those stolen jewels,” said Mr. Ortega in his smoothest broadcaster voice, “you, P. T. Wilkie, have become the most famous, most

beloved middle school student in the entire state of Florida. How does that make you feel?”

“Awesome!”

Mr. Ortega nodded and smiled. “As it should. But be mindful of what a great football coach once said: ‘Success is about having; excellence is about being.’”

“Huh?” I was confused. Mr. Ortega was starting to sound like Yoda from the *Star Wars* movies.

He turned to the camera to tell the whole world what he and the coach had meant.

“Some think success is all about having money and fame. But excellence, my friends, is about being the best *you* that you can possibly be! From Ponce de León Middle School in St. Petersburg, Florida, this is Manny Ortega.” He fist-thumped the chest patch on his blazer. “For ESPN-Five.”

I still didn’t totally get what Mr. Ortega had been talking about. But to tell you the truth, I didn’t really care.

I was on TV.

I was famous!

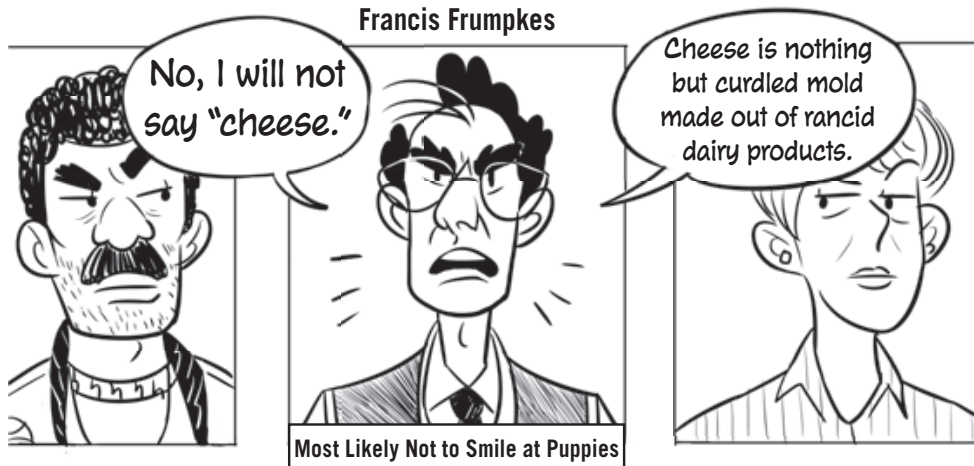


Mr. Grumpface

After the interview, Gloria and I headed to grumpy Mr. Frumpkes's class.

Yes, everybody calls him Mr. Grumpface. Even the other teachers.

If the Ponce de León yearbook had pages for "Least Favorite Teacher" and "Most Likely to Annoy," Mr. Frumpkes's photo would be on both. Every year.



Mr. Frumpkes teaches history, or, as I like to call it, the Study of Famous Dead People.

"You're tardy, Mr. Wilkie," Mr. Frumpkes said when Gloria and I hurried into his classroom five minutes after the second bell.

"Sorry," I said. "We had this TV thing."

Mr. Frumpkes made like he was playing the world's tiniest violin with his thumbs and forefingers.

"Oh, dear," he said sarcastically. "A TV thing. My heart weeps for you, Mr. Wilkie."

"I guess I was tardy, too," said Gloria.

"No, Miss Ortega. You were simply associating with the wrong individual. I know you're new here at Ponce de León, but you should really try to cultivate a better caliber of friend."

"But, sir," said Gloria, "isn't the freedom of assembly, and, therefore, the right to associate with whomever I choose, guaranteed to all American citizens under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution?"

Mr. Frumpkes's ears turned purple. It looked like he was wearing eggplants for earmuffs.

"This is Ponce de León Middle School, Miss Ortega—not the United States of America. Sit down, both of you, before I remember where I put my pink detention pad!"

Gloria and I did as we were told. We were both too busy after school coming up with new business

schemes to keep the Wonderland running in the black (that's how Gloria says "making money") to waste time sitting in detention hall.

Mr. Frumpkes clasped his hands behind his back and paced at the front of the room.

"Now then, where was I? Ah, yes. The Big Lie. History's time-honored propaganda technique. People will always fall for a big lie over a small one. For instance, today in the cafeteria, a certain student told a *huge* whopper, claiming he had heroically thwarted a pair of jewel thieves by jumping onto a baggage carousel at the Tampa airport."

He brandished a copy of the *Tampa Bay Times*.

"The truth of the matter is, I'm afraid, somewhat less dramatic."

"So?" said Pinky. "The story gets better every time P.T. tells it!"

"Next time," added Kate, "maybe Kevin the Monkey will be in it!"

"Oooh!" said the whole class. "Kevin! The Monkey!"

"And who, pray tell, is Kevin the Monkey?" asked Mr. Frumpkes. "One of your pimple-faced pop stars?"

"Kevin the Monkey is a supercool capuchin from the Sunshine State Primate Sanctuary," said Kate. "He's a total YouTube sensation!"

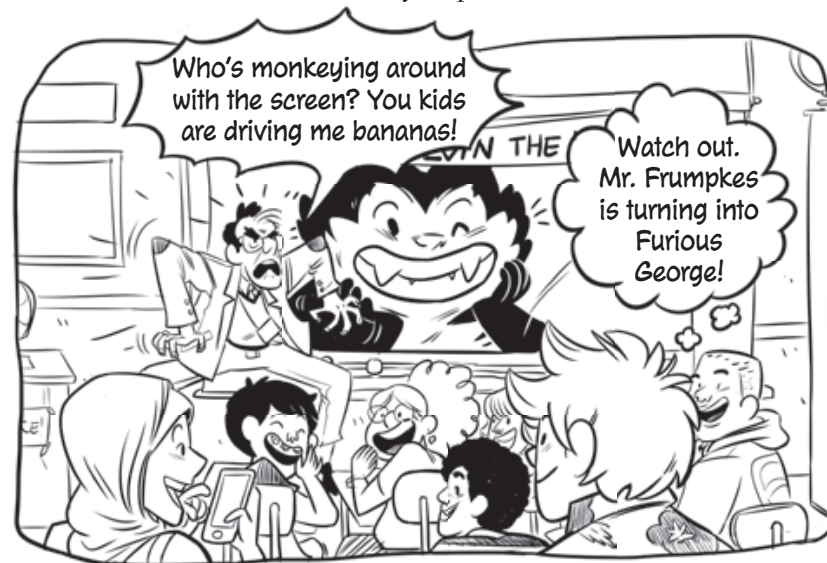
"And a savvy PR vehicle," added Gloria. "Last year, Kevin the Monkey's channel earned one point six

million dollars for the animal rescue charity, thanks to rollover ads. Net-net, he and the primate sanctuary have put together a rock-solid monkey business plan!"

When Gloria said that, the class cracked up.

"Monkey business!"

The laughter grew louder when somebody (probably Kate Mackenzie Williams, because she's a total gadget freak) used their phone to hack into the Smart Board's Wi-Fi connection and run a hysterical Kevin the Monkey clip.



I figured it was a good thing Mr. Frumpkes couldn't find his detention pad.

Otherwise, the whole class would be doing hard time after school.



Home Sweet Motel

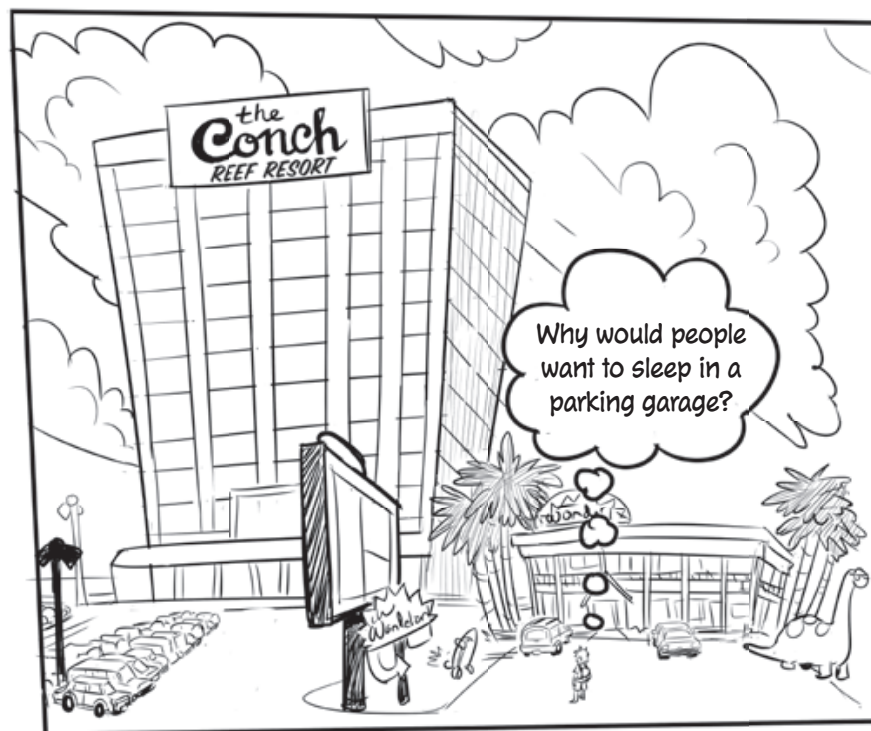
When Gloria and I walked home to the Wonderland after school, a car nearly cut us off while pulling into the humongous parking lot of the Conch Reef Resort, our brand-new next-door neighbor.

There used to be three other small family-run motels south of us: the Flamingo, the Sand Castle, and the Treasure Aire.

Now there was a fourteen-story concrete monstrosity with a ginormous plasma-screen reader board out front reminding everybody that they could eat all the “World-Famous Grouper Fingers with Tartar Sauce” they wanted for \$5.99 during the Conch Reef Restaurant’s early-bird dinner special.

We don’t have an early-bird dinner special at the Wonderland.

We don’t even have a restaurant.



“Catch you later, P.T.,” said Gloria as she clomped up the staircase to her room on the second floor.

“Later.”

“Hang on,” she called from the balcony. “Dad just texted. UPS delivered the candy necklaces, jawbreaker bracelets, and gummy bear earrings. I need to start packaging souvenirs for Saturday’s tours.”

“What’s our cost of goods?” I asked. Gloria and I sometimes watch a TV show called *Shark Tank* together on Friday nights, and those billionaires are always asking people about the cost of goods.

“Fifty cents,” said Gloria. “We’ll mark up each S-K-U five hundred percent, to three dollars, for a gross profit margin of eighty-three percent.”

“Cool,” I said. “Um, what’s an S-K-U?”

“We call ’em ‘skews,’” said Gloria. “It’s short for stock-keeping unit.”

Fact: it is awesome being in business with Gloria Ortega.

I went into the lobby (my mom and I live in rooms 101 and 102, behind the front desk), and right away a group of tourists wanted my autograph.

“You’re the boy!” said a lady.

“The kid who recovered all those stolen jewels!” said a man.

Both were wearing the souvenir “Jewel Thieves Slept Here” T-shirts Gloria had dreamed up. (For sale in the Wonderland lobby for \$19.99. Available in infant and toddler sizes, too.)

“Can you autograph our shirts?” asked the lady.

“Sure,” I said, whipping out the marker I always carry in one of the flapped pockets of my cargo shorts. It was beyond awesome to be a celebrity in my own home.

But the real reason I love all this sudden fame?
My dad.

As you may have noticed, he’s not really in the picture. Actually, he’s not in *any* pictures I’ve ever seen. I don’t even know what the guy looks like.

“Where is he?” you ask. Well, I’d usually answer that kind of question by making up another quick story—one with such a dazzling, pie-in-face opening hook that you’d be too blown away to wonder if what I was saying was true. You know, something like “He’s not here because the CIA needs him up in Canada.”

“There’s trouble in Canada?” you’d say.

“Nope,” I’d tell you. “But only because my dad’s been stationed there for a dozen years on an international peacekeeping mission. If he came home? Watch out. There could be a sticky maple syrup war.”

The truth? I don’t really know where my dad is or what he’s doing. But I’m guessing that when he finds out his son is the most famous middle school student in Florida, that I’m a certified celebrity, he’ll fly down here to meet me just as fast as he can!

Even if it means the start of a messy maple syrup war.

