

Let's Experience Some TNT — Twine and Thread

This is a narrative extracted from the blog post about how it works. This is meant to be a story prompt for kids, parents, and teachers. It is about learning empathy by looking deeper into the thoughts we all have without a filter.

My Birthday Party

POV Mia

I sat at the kitchen table with the bakery flyer spread in front of me, circling cakes with a dull pencil but it worked good enough. So many pretty cakes, but Mom said what flavor?

"Mom, I want a marbly cake," I said. "One side chocolate, one side white. Penny's allergic to chocolate, remember?"

"Maybe we could do two little cakes. A vanilla one so Penny can eat it and a chocolate one 'cause I love chocolate. Not everyone loves it as much as me. The store got confused when Jenny's mom said marbly."

I looked up, pleased with myself. I solved a real big problem. Marbly cake has a danger edge or they go and do the little blocks like Jenny discovered when she asked for a marbly cake and didn't get this side white that side chocolate.

Penny never got cake that time. Her mom at least had chocolate and vanilla planned. But I like vanilla if we run out of chocolate.

Mom is just "quiet at the counter." Mom, say something, anything. Am I not clever?

Silence Speaks Loud

POV Mia and Mom (Mia's Mom, Geramiah)

Two cakes at the store? Two smaller cakes, yes, but two cakes.

I checked my account this morning — twenty-two dollars until Friday. The power bill is due, can I let it slide? Get a little time for a proper break. I hate this. I hate being broke, and a good thing I always save when he goes on overtime as they pull it every year. Mass work followed by a shutdown. I don't see how working people like that makes it understandable when surely just everyone pulling it 40 steady makes more sense.

We just had a lot go wrong lately. But look at her. She remembered Penny's allergy all by herself. That is good. I am not going to teach her that caring is a problem. Let's see, "Mia, darling, two cakes are a problem because they are actually expensive, and I am sure a split

cake they can do, but you are right, at times the bakery would make a costly mistake. How about I get a chocolate cake for you and I will get a box of cookies for Penny and the other kids."

(Mia) Cookies are good. She does like them. But it would just be a tray of them for everyone and once more no cake for Penny. That really blows. "Mom, let's just get vanilla. Everyone can have that."

(Mom) My girl, my sweet, gives up the cake so easily, too easily. "How about I bake the cakes instead?"

(Mia) Oh, I didn't want to give her that much work as she's working so hard lately, but if she wants to, I love her cakes best. Humm....m boxy cake. Boxy cake sissy makes and they seem nice and quick. "Mommy, how about boxed cake to make it quick."

(Mom) I do want to make it properly but time, she's got me. But that means we got a little bit of spare time. "Love, we make boxed cakes and a tray of cookies."

(Mia) Baking time with Mom is the best. I nodded fast, "Sugar cookies because of Penny though."

(Mom) I have chocolate chips and sugar cookies with ease. "Nah, we do both sugar and chocolate chip. For a sugar who thinks of her friends."

And then she is dancing and that is the good moment.

The Baking Project

(Mom) Mia and me are working together like a well-oiled machine. Well... as well oiled as a kid can get. She forms the cookies with her two spoons and makes little heart shapes.

(Mia) I bake this cookie with lots of love. Chips for the chocolate lovers. Sugar for those who don't or can't. I give them lots of love.

(Mom) She really does concentrate on shaping them that way. "Honey, they won't stay heart shaped likely."

(Mia) Oh, I know that but it doesn't matter how they look. They each got love and attention. "I know but I put in love."

(Mom) Sometimes I don't get it. When she does whatever she does they just come out a little better. I don't know why it does but it does.

We started up the cookies and they were firing away. The kitchen was getting too hot for my daughter to be in. It made me worry on the oven. Was there something wrong? Ah well. I sent Mia out to play as I can mind the cakes. The cookies got done fast, too fast. Good I checked

them.

But I am too hot. Oh, we set a timer for the vanilla cake first. I know it's bad of me but if one of the two cakes burns I'd rather it be vanilla. Penny does have the sugar cookies and I spotted one that stayed magically perfectly heart shaped. I put that aside just in case.

On my return to the kitchen, it was cold, so cold. No, it gave up the ghost. This terrible stove and I didn't need another thing wrong when flat broke.

I fell on the floor, crying hard. We do have a little credit, Geramiah. It's not a real emergency. It is to my heart. How much do I use? I go outside and I see Mia playing happy. And pull up the smile, "Honey, bad news, the oven died on us."

"We got cookies, we are good," she said, swinging away. "It happens."

(Mom) Love her. She's getting a cake to ease my heart and get that smile. "I can swing one cake. I'll get chocolate. Penny has a special cookie." I had it in my hand, don't remember having it there.

(Mia) Oh yeah, a perfectest heart, but she'd not have cake and I'm good with vanilla really. "Mom, just get a vanilla cake. Everyone can have one. Don't worry about fancy decorations. They have like vanilla ones just out. Bet they are cheaper." I smiled big as cake is a score any time.

A Parental Decision

POV John (Mia's Dad) and Geramiah (Mia's Mom)

(Geramiah) Oh, that girl is too sweet, but we will see, we will see. I am going to tell Penny's mom she's getting a Sugar Cookie Heart that was special made for her as I decided to get chocolate cake. My girl at times thinks a little too much of others. When I know she's not all that hip on vanilla cake. Plain vanilla cake. Vanilla cake with chocolate icing is probably in her mind but it'd be double vanilla. Her brother likes the double plain and she gives this very tiny sigh she thinks I don't hear.

Her birthday is when the shutoff happens most frequently and this year she's having a cake she loves.

I placed the rather annoying call and slammed down the receiver. My husband was on his cellphone and came in with a big smile. Popped on the couch and started texting someone as my face scrunched up annoyed still and I discovered I hadn't set down the receiver even. I had to have a moment before he hit me with whatever good news he had.

(John) It's over, finally over, but for me not everyone. Advantage of being on the best line at the factory, we get called back fastest. We are also the most trained too and can handle all

the products.

The new people just don't have the years I do. I feel happy and sad, but we have money again. Hallelujah. I was charged with calling my team, but we just text in group so much faster. Perk of being the lead. I got to spread the good word. Just wish it was a better one than one team, but we take it. The others will get theirs soon.

Her face is a little less annoyed looking, but she and Penny's mom also got on each other's nerves. Waiting one more tick, I saw her lip turn up. "What's the good news?"

"I am back to work on Saturday," I said.

My wife's face became such a puzzle.

"You are missing Mia's birthday party again, that means." She said while breathing.

Puzzle explained and I feel like a big idiot for missing that detail for one tick. I could have maybe said I had to take off but what PTO did I have. And my girl would get it but I hate missing their big days. But a man must work and work in my head solved the bigger problem of funds to even breathe. Sometimes I forget what is happening around me. My wife keeps it in her head somehow.

(Geramiah) Happiness and sadness waving around together. We just talked on her birthday not but an hour ago. Duh, party Saturday, but he can't say ah, call another, can he.

Elated he is working, knowing full well they will work one crew to death before calling another one. But we need the money and this is not the time to argue or worry on the hours coming. "It's okay. I decided to get chocolate cake."

He nodded and we both knew we came to that decision together. She would get chocolate this year long before Penny got vanilla. Hope her mom explains it. But this means a little more money.

"Love, go ahead and pull the one."

I knew what he meant. Pull the card we have never used as it's for emergencies only as they don't have a way to get payment protection, but I was going to use it anyway for a tiny amount and the stove. But we maybe can do just a tiny bit more.

The Beautiful Store

POV Geramiah (Mia's Mom)

Oh, look at all these fancy cakes. I have in my hand the little circles she made of spaceships. If I am doing one store cake, we will see the costs of decorations for a space theme.

The baker looks at me excited. It is where they get more money for the store. Not too much extra but a bit. And as I did I saw the cupcakes in the case. They had space ones.

There was this ah...h so beautiful vanilla whipped top. Is that vanilla cake? No, it's purple. Is it chocolate? A mix. I was instantly tapping the glass, and then it hit me.

Cupcakes, she adores cupcakes, my Mia. We get everyone cupcakes and that means less cleanup. Cupcakey Instant Platty is what Mia says when she gets one. Faster that way, no cutting it, and less cleanup by far.

Ice cream though but... what about the little cups of them. Humm....m nah.... I snapped and went to the cone section and found sugar cones. Sugar cones for my sugar. We did grab one bag of bowls just in case but that saves so much money.

I then went to the local dollar store for balloons and was looking over the Mylar ones when I remembered the clown at the last party. The balloon animals sure did delight her. I can't afford a clown as the party was still running close to a single cake budget.... but they had a way of pumping it. And Mia, she'd rather try to do it. She did ask the clown to show her how to make a few shapes. He gave in to that smile.

Okay Mia, Mom just SCORED!

The Phone Call

POV Geramiah (Mia's Mom) and Laura (Penny's Mom)

On the drive home, with the situation resolved, I relived the phone call and sighed.

I had breathed three times and dialed, "Laura, this is Mia's mom, Geramiah." I always have to say it like that to her. What, just because you live on snob hill doesn't mean I am worthless, you.... stop, breathe. You're about to tell her there won't be two cakes. "I wanted Penny to know about what is happening. I was baking the two cakes..."

(Laura) "Oh good, and now what are you about to say, you burnt them and can't afford another box. Need a loan to give your child even a cake."

Damnit... all the people are bugging me lately. Just because my husband decided to save some money during the downtime at the plant and furlough workers doesn't mean I suddenly have extra money. I hate poor people. They should have saved better. I can't even get a new dress right now for the mayor's banquet as we have to be conservative. Look at me, my shirt is frayed even. We need to get that contract and to do it I need to look my best. "Okay, how much you need?" It's for your kid's allergies and what is another hundred dollars for cake?

(Geramiah) That... oh, that woman thinks I'm asking for funds. I know full well she's not lending you it at cost when her husband was the one that shut down after forcing all the

workers to work overtime for three months so he had a stockpile. Maybe not work people to death, but breathe, we won't be insulted. "Not that. I have enough for a cake. It will be chocolate. Mia made her before the stove broke a very special Sugar Cookie." Snap, I said it forcibly, I am sure. I know she'll take it that I value my kid more or being spiteful.

(Laura) Chocolate, fine, whatever. I'll let my daughter know exactly that she's undervalued by Mia. A sugar cookie in a heart means nothing.

The School Yard

POV Matt (Mia's Classmate)

"Mia, that party was amazing," Penny said. "My mom said you made me a perfect heart and that was all I was getting as your mom was getting a chocolate cake." She shuffled on her feet.

"I told her to get vanilla," Mia sighed. "Sorry you were told that. But she might have thought I was just being nice. I wanted everyone to have cake. But I did try to make everyone get a special heart on all the cookies, and she did think the perfectest heart being yours was special."

"You always think of everyone. I thought about it and you should have asked for chocolate. It's your favorite," Penny said, and then she said, "But it was a perfect cookie. Loved it."

"Glad you did. Some were sad when theirs weren't so perfectest." Mia looked down. "There was only one perfect cookie and it had to go to the one promised. And they all had my love in them. And she solved the big budget problem with two cakes. She said it was nice as she hadn't thought of their big cupcake pre-dones. She got us all cupcakes and that is the best. As cupcakes are cakeys already on plateys. Love them and sugar cones, score. Plus we had four cupcake flavors. That was rockin'."

I wanted them to hate each other. I hate and I love both of them. I should have got the heart cookie. Penny's dad destroyed my family. My mom's flat and dad too. Mia's dad gets to work this week. I hate everyone. I want to destroy them. I want to tear Penny apart. She has EVERYTHING!

Now Your Turn

Alright kids, now think — you are Mia or Penny and Matt is over there looking at you.

You know that look. Cold eyes. Aimed right at you. The kind that says you have been chosen as a target and you don't know why, and that is almost the scariest part — the not knowing why.

Mia and Penny feel it but they don't know what you know.

You know his dad is flat. His mom too. You know Penny's mom — laughing on snob hill — is connected to the people who shut the plant down.

They probably both work there. And that means double unemployment checks which aren't meant to keep families afloat in our two wage earner society even when just one is on it. One on unemployment is a hard pinch, but both very hard and many have lost places to live, had to resort to food stamps, all sorts of hard things. Very hard right and parents start yelling at times as they are in a panic.

You know he was probably alone a lot during the overtime months too, and maybe they splurged on him in things and didn't save as much as they could have. But that doesn't mean they were irresponsible with funds. Splurging a little bit feels good when you can't be there for your kid.

But those things they bought him didn't fill the space where they should have been sitting in his head. They didn't help fill the gap when the drop in income hit. They were probably snipping and short with each other on being too generous and so every gift he got during that time feels like he is at fault for wanting something to remember if he asked for something, upset for wanting things. All sorts of big emotions not his fault.

When you work overtime like that sometimes people get a little testy and if one spends more than the other they can get snippier. So much and when the funds are gone those fights come back and harder and feel worse. Once more not his fault.

Adult choices are on them, but add in that new layer of snips and you land that poor boy in emotions he might not be able to process.

You look at the cold eyes. You know he is carrying something way too heavy for one kid's shoulders but these girls don't have his inner thoughts to explain it.

Those heavy painful feelings that are being pushed out in painful words. It is coming out as cold eyes aimed at two girls who were just talking about cupcakes and cones and cookies genuinely filled with love. The perfect cookie went to the girl whose family he blames. He can't see the love still in the cookie received.

So here is your question to weave in as you make your story:

Knowing what you know — knowing the look is really a cry that got twisted somewhere on the way out — how do you react when those cold eyes find you?

Do you look away? Do you look back? Do you walk over? Do you run?

Do you help Matt at all? Is Matt receptive to the try? People have to be ready to deal with pain often. But that doesn't mean never trying with the person in front of you.

And if you did walk over — if you were brave enough, or kind enough, or just curious enough to try — what would you say to get him to talk?

Not to fix him. Not to lecture him. Just to crack the door open a little so those big feelings have somewhere to go besides cold eyes on a playground.

Write it. Make it yours, but don't worry about POV if that is hard like this. Instead, get out your narrative and then start building it. And then discuss with your parents your take or your teacher.

And if you're a boy or girl feeling like Matt out there — I see you on the playground and adult problems are never your fault.

It's not okay to hurt yourself or others for this great pain. But it is fully okay to go tell someone. I am hurting right now, that hurt me, and I need help.

Being a bully is never okay to do but telling others why you feel like that is the right call.