

ONE

Meet the Family

IT WAS A TYPICAL MONDAY MORNING in the Weight house. Leah, twelve, was the oldest of the three Weight children. She had just prepared breakfast for her family. As they sat down to enjoy it, you might be wondering why Leah was making breakfast: Was she in some kind of trouble? No. It was just her turn to do it. Her brothers also had to make breakfast on certain days. Even if they didn't know how to cook, they still made an effort by putting cereal or another simple dish on the table.

That morning, Leah had some help from her favorite assistant in the kitchen: Stacy, the family dog. Stacy was an energetic three-year-old Golden Retriever, and her job was to tell Leah about any food she dropped on the floor, then quickly eat it! Yum! This was probably Stacy's favorite job.

Josh, eight, was the youngest Weight child and the first at the breakfast table. Josh had short red hair and freckles on his nose, and the sturdy build of a small football player. As he took his chair, Josh exclaimed, "I love it when it's Leah's turn to make breakfast!"

Randy, ten, was the next to come in for breakfast. He wore very large glasses and had short, light brown hair. Randy was a very quiet boy and always seemed to have something on his mind. As he sat down next to Josh, Randy began to think about math.

Leah checked to see that she had everything on the table as her dad, Isaac Weight, wandered in and sat down. He said, "The coffee smelled so good this morning, I could not wait to get downstairs!" Leah grinned. Mr. Weight pulled his wire-rimmed glasses out of his pocket and put them on, picking up a newspaper.

"Please pass me the black pepper shaker, Randy," Mr. Weight said to his son, even though the pepper was close enough for Mr. Weight to reach himself. Randy said nothing but did as his father asked.

The last person to enter the kitchen was Beatrice Weight, the children's mother. Her friends called her Bea and she had curly brown hair that went down to her shoulders. She sat down and greeted everyone, "Good morning! Hey Josh, I know it's only early



September, but how is third grade going so far?"

Josh thought for a second. "It's cool, I think I might do some science projects!" He began to get excited. He wanted to jump up and dance around the kitchen because he had a special plan in his mind, but just in time he stopped himself, remembering the games that he and his parents played to help him express himself better.

Mrs. Weight said, "That sounds wonderful."

Randy stopped eating. "What kind of science projects?"

Josh, surprised to have to answer all these questions, blurted out, "I want to start a robot competition."

Randy looked in another direction as he considered his brother's words, and then thought for a while about how he felt proud of Josh. He then made a comment

that surprised his family. “Hey! That sounds great,” Randy said. “If you need help, let me know.”

For a few seconds, the family was speechless. Randy hated being the center of attention. They tried not to stare at him and Mrs. Weight was so shocked that she dropped her coffee on the floor, spilling some of it on her wrist.

“Are you all right?” Randy asked, concerned. His mom went to the sink and ran some cold water on her hand. Again, Randy asked her, “Are you all right?” Mr. Weight busied himself wrapping her hand in some gauze dressing.

“I just remembered something I forgot to do at work,” Mrs. Weight said, thinking quickly. “Yes, my wrist will be okay.”

Leah texted her friend Kayla to say, “OMG! My brother Randy has just done an incredible thing, he made some conversation on his own!”

“Sweet!” Kayla texted back.

Considering this historic moment for her brother, Leah then turned off her phone to better focus on Randy. Her mom noticed and was pleased. Josh couldn’t believe that his brother was talking without being prompted to speak!

In the next few minutes the family was on the move,

getting ready for school and work. Mrs. Weight told Leah to bring Stacy inside for the day. Mr. Weight got ready to drop the boys off at school, and Leah prepared to leave for school with her mom.

In the car, Leah mentioned Randy and how amazing his comment was. She asked her mom about her injured hand. Mrs. Weight was so pleased that both Randy and Leah had shown concern about her hand. She explained, "You know, it feels so much better than it did fifteen minutes ago, your dad did a great job with it. And yes, I am very proud of your brother!"

"I hope you feel better," Leah told her. She continued to think about her brother. She understood that he had some kind of learning issues, but she still felt confused. Maybe her mom could clarify things for her. "Why does Randy have difficulty with his words? I mean, I know that he lives with autism, but I'm not sure what that is."

Mrs. Weight knew that she had to be careful and not overwhelm her daughter with too much information. She began, "What are some of the things that you see Randy have difficulty with? Let's start there."

"Well, I guess it's hard for me to understand. Sometimes Randy seems to understand things, but other times he gets upset when things happen and he doesn't

understand them.”

Mrs. Weight said, “I can tell that you have thought about this. You’re right, Randy is smart. But his mind works in a slightly different way from other people. For most people living with autism, it is very difficult to understand something that they can’t see, touch, taste, or feel.” Leah started to interrupt her, but Mrs. Weight continued, “Your brother has come a really long way to learn how to compensate for some of his challenges. Randy looks at himself as just being like any other person, and people who are not like him are the strange ones. For a while, kids at school were picking on him until Randy became much better at expressing his feelings. They called him ‘weirdo,’ ‘geek,’ or other mean names.”

“What did Randy do?” Leah whispered. She began to twirl a piece of her light-brown hair around her finger.

“Randy was curious! He wasn’t sure why people get so uptight about how someone reacts or behaves in a different way from what they are used to seeing. I told your brother that is how some people feel at times. Something new can be scary for some people because they do not understand. Randy told me that he gets that. He also mentioned that he is glad to be who and what he is.” Mrs. Weight went on, “I then asked Randy

if it's better to be someone living with autism than to be someone without it. He told me that it's very stressful attempting to participate in a conversation. He said he couldn't see or touch what someone was talking about sometimes." She added, "I always think about what your brother said. He accepts who he is: good, bad, or indifferent."

Leah considered that. "Wow, that's crazy. I had no idea he felt or even thought like that." She began to collect her backpack as they pulled up to her school.

Mrs. Weight leaned over and kissed Leah on the cheek. "Have a great day, Lai-Lai!"

