

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## A Present for Mrs. Robertson

By Meg Medina  
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*Meg Medina is a New York Times best-selling author. When she's not writing, she works on community projects that support girls, Latinx youth, and literacy. In this short story, a girl finds the perfect present for her teacher. As you read, take notes on the interactions between Maria Elisa and Mrs. Robertson.*

- [1] Charlene Venuti has a lazy eye that makes her lean over her papers at school, but that has never once stopped her from noticing everything about everybody, all the time. Like now.

"What are *you* getting Mrs. Robertson?" Charlene asks. "You have to tell." Emily and Kyoko look up from the cards they are drawing and wait.

Friday is the last day before vacation and everyone will come to school with a present for our favorite fifth-grade teacher. The girls at Table Four have already gone shopping with their moms. Charlene bought earrings made of "almost real pearls," she says. Emily went to the ceramics studio on Long Island with her sister and painted a mug that they're going to fill with candies. Kyoko had her uncle bring back a pretty doll with a satin kimono from his business trip in Japan.



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I reach for a scented marker and draw a blue snowflake. "It's a surprise," I say, taking in a whiff of fake blueberry. "But it's going to be perfect."

- [5] Charlene and Emily give each other a look that makes my stomach squeeze. *You're lying*, their eyes say as they go back to drawing their cards. I know that look. It's almost the same one they gave me when I was first assigned to Mrs. Robertson's class in September. *What are you doing here?* their eyes seemed to ask. I'll admit it: Even I was shocked to see that I'd be spending fifth grade in the top class. I'm not a genius like Charlene and the other kids in here, like Kyoko, who plays the violin or Sanjay, who does pre-algebra at the middle school every day at eleven. It's kind of a mirade, actually. Mrs. Mueller, my fourth-grade teacher, was always pointing out my sloppy desk with the papers sticking out, the holes I'd erased into my worksheets, the careless misspellings. "Slow down, Maria Elisa. Your mind is speeding too fast. Work carefully to let your ideas shine through!"

That's hard for me though, especially when I'm writing. Sometimes the ideas come to me so fast that my fingers just can't catch up to writing them. Maybe that was why they gave me to Mrs. Robertson. She is always telling us about new books to read. Still, I can't be sure, and Charlene has a different idea, of course.

"Mrs. Mueller is really old. She's going to retire in June," Charlene told me as part of her Table Four welcome wagon. "Maybe she's getting, you know, cuckoo, and made a mistake sending you here."

What I really want to know is who appointed Charlene chief of the Brain Police in this class? She acts like it's her mission to sniff out the less-than-gifted. You can't get a paper back without her wanting to know your grade, her High Holy Days being report card time.

"How many Excellents did you get?" she asked a few weeks ago when we got our first-quarter grades. I ignored her. I'd gotten mostly Gs, for *good*, and an Excelling in Language Arts.

- [10] Naturally, Charlene had a long row of Es in everything from spelling to work habits, and she's always bragging. Her record, she informed me, is fourteen, "but who's counting?"

*You are*, I wanted to shout up her nose. *That's who!*

If I were Mrs. Robertson, I'd give Charlene a big fat U (for unbelievably annoying) in social skills.

Anyway, I'm not telling her what I have planned for Mrs. Robertson. Today is finally payday for my mom, and I'll go shopping after school to get it. I've had my eye on this present for weeks, and I know Mrs. Robinson will always think of me when she takes care of it.

Just then, the overhead lights flash. It's our class signal to stop what we're doing and look up. The clock reads two thirty-five.

- [15] "Clean up time," Mrs. Robertson announces with her hand on the light switch. "Another afternoon has flown!"

I pack up my things and stack my chair on my desk. Then we line up, sweating in our coats as we wait for Mrs. Robertson to say good-bye. She takes her time with dismissal, but somehow it's still my favorite time. She doesn't sprint for her car the way some people do. (Yes, I saw you, Mrs. Mueller.) Instead, she says good-bye to each of us separately as we file past her in line. If you've had a bad day, she says, "Tomorrow will be better," and doesn't look grouchy. If you've done well on a test, she gives you a high five. She'll tie a small piece of yarn around your finger to remind you to bring a form back. Sometimes, she just says simple things, like "It was fun having you in my class today." No other teacher at Thomas Jefferson Elementary does that.

The beads of sweat are running down my back by the time she finally gets to me. I'm the tallest girl, so I'm always last. I hate this puffy coat. It's my old one from last year. The dirt stains won't come out, and my wrists peek through.

When it's my turn, Mrs. Robertson puts her hands on my overly padded shoulders. "I had a wonderful poem you wrote today, Maria Elisa. I'm still thinking about it!"

My whole inside goes even warmer. Mrs. Robertson is teaching us how to write poems, and we can write about anything that matters to us. Today I wrote about trash, which some people at Table Four said was a dumb topic. I don't care. Newspapers, plastic straws, and used coffee cups blow into our playground all the time, and I hate it.

- [20] *Pollution is nasty; garbage is, too. Why isn't the sky a clear, clean blue.*

She read the whole thing out loud to the class.

"You're a poet and an environmental activist,"<sup>1</sup> she says as she flips off the lights and pulls the door closed.

"Thank you, Mrs. Robertson," I say.

And just like that, I forget all about how Charlene makes me feel.

\* \* \*

[25] I take the long way home along Ellwood Avenue and stop to look in the store windows as I go. I want to make sure they haven't sold out of what I want to buy for Mrs. Robertson. The air outside is chilly enough to cut through my coat, and there's a metallic scent in the air that tells me snow is on the way. My breath makes little clouds on the glass as I look at all the things I'd like to buy myself if I could. New hairbands and rainbow colored toe-socks. A new hoodie. A three-tier art set that folds out like stairs with markers, watercolors, and color pastels.

I won't get any of that, though. Mami already warned me that we're going to have a "simple *Navidad*"<sup>2</sup> this year. That means one present for each of us. I hope she'll pick the art set and not another pair of "sturdy jeans at a good price" like last year. They look like farmer pants, and they were so stiff that I couldn't even bend my knees in gym class for a month.

The real problem is that Mami never "wastes money," and almost everything qualifies as "waste." She cuts my hair (which explains my crooked bangs), and we never eat out anywhere, not even french fries at Bustlin' Burgers, which has the best ones. Mami would be much happier getting a toaster than any fancy perfume.

But Mrs. Robertson isn't like Mami. She wears lipstick, and she loves imagination. Plus, she's so supersmart and nice that she deserves something clever. Sure, she'll like her mug and her almost-real earrings and her satin-dressed doll. But I've chosen something that is even better.

And there it is, still sitting there in the middle of the store-front window at Gone Bananas Shop.

[30] A Chia Pet.

\* \* \*

Mami stares at me as I explain my idea.

I point to the picture in the flyer: a clay sheep covered in grassy hair.

"You put the chia seeds inside and water it, and it grows fur," I tell her. "Isn't it fantastic? We learned about germination"<sup>3</sup> last month."

She's just gotten home from the Queen for a Day Laundromat, where she works as an attendant. Some people come with Santa Claus-size bags of dirty clothes, but she doesn't mind. Mami is the only person I know who actually loves doing laundry. "You can see the results of your effort," Mami says. Plus, not speaking English isn't a problem. All you need to say are the days of the week, numbers, and *Have a good day*.

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1. someone who works toward protecting the environment  
2. Spanish for "Christmas"  
3. the process of a plant growing from a seed

[35] She studies the flyer, scanning the words she doesn't understand. There's lint caught in the hinges of her glasses, and she smells pleasantly of detergent. Suddenly she frowns.

"¡Diez dólares!" Her eyes go wide. Ten dollars! "We can't go around buying people presents that cost ten dollars!"

"It's not just anybody, Mami. It's Mrs. Robertson!" I say. "She's my favorite *maestra!*"<sup>4</sup>

"Do the math, Maria Elisa — and don't use your fingers. If we buy even five people something like that, we'll be out our grocery money for a whole week. We can't go hungry!"

"Pero,<sup>5</sup> Mami!" I say, stumbling over my Spanish. My stomach is in a knot, and tears start to cloud my eyes. "A Chia Pet is perfect!"

[40] "Don't be ridiculous!" Mami says. She slips off her shoes and stretches her back. "Why would she want that grassy thing? She's not a cow, for heaven's sake! ¡Que locura!"

"It is *not* crazy!" I follow her to the kitchen, where she reaches under the sink for pots and pans to start dinner. "Mrs. Robertson loves science! Besides, everyone will give her a good present. It would be rude not to give her something. I'll be the only one who is empty-handed!"

She puts the pan on the burner, exasperated,<sup>6</sup> and turns to me. "Who said you'd be empty-handed?"

I stop in my tracks, worried.

"I've already bought Mrs. Robertson a present," she continues. She opens the hall closet and pulls out a big plastic bag. "Your teacher is a working woman, like me." she fishes deep inside. "I know just... what... she needs."

[45] She finally pulls out what she's looking for and holds it out to me.

I blink, hoping it's a mirage.<sup>7</sup>

But no. It's real.

Mami is holding a packaged pair of pantyhose. The woman on the front is sitting half nude, her arms crossed across her naked breasts. The price in the corner says \$1.49.

The room begins to spin. I imagine Mrs. Robertson opening this present in front of the class. I can already hear Charlene's laugh and the boys all ribbing one another and using words like boobies.

[50] "No!" I cry.

"No?" Mami frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I can't give her that! It's all wrong!" Desperate, my tears start to flow. "That lady is naked, can't you see?"

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4. Spanish for "teacher"

5. Spanish for "but"

6. **Exasperated** (*adjective*) irritated and frustrated

7. a visual trick, in which a person thinks they see something that is not really there

"Don't overreact. She's covering herself modestly."

My voice is loud and my nose is running. "Mami," I shout. "This is the dumbest gift ever!"

- [55] Mami's eyes become steely and dark. She doesn't like me to be fresh, and I can see that she's holding her back straight the way she always does when she's made a final decision.

"This is what we'll be giving her, *niña*."<sup>8</sup> She hands over a tube of Christmas paper. "Now wrap it."

\* \* \*

"So, where's your present?" Charlene asks me on Friday afternoon. We're having our holiday party, but I'm not in the mood. "Don't you have anything?" She narrows her eyes, waiting.

"It's there, Charlene." I give her an ugly look and bite the head off a candy cane reindeer.

I'm not lying, not technically. Mrs. Robertson's desk is covered with carefully wrapped presents, but mine is actually on the floor beneath her desk near the trash can, where it belongs. I sneaked back to our classroom during lunch and lodged it there, hoping that she won't see it.

- [60] "You're not fond of cupcakes, Maria Elisa?" Mrs. Robertson asks me. She's walking around the room with a tray of delicious-looking cupcakes frosted in red and green.

"No thanks," I say glumly. "I'm not very hungry."

Charlene grabs the biggest one. "When are you going to open your presents, Mrs. Robertson?" she asks, pointing at the pile. "I want you to open mine first."

I stare at the little lumps of glue that I've left drying inside my desk.

Mrs. Robertson glances at the clock. "Unfortunately, we won't have time," she says. "But I promise to open them at home."

- [65] I breathe a sigh of relief. This might be a real Christmas miracle. If I'm lucky, maybe the custodian will just sweep it away before she even knows it's from me. I hat way she won't think that I don't like her or that I'm not clever enough to give her a good present she deserves.

I gather the new snowman erasers we got and keep my eyes on the clock, praying, for once, for a speedy dismissal. Mrs. Robertson has flashed the lights, and we're all racing for our coats and backpacks, sugared up and excited for vacation.

The bell finally rings, and everyone cheers.

"Happy holidays, everyone!" Mrs. Robertson calls after us. The antlers she's wearing look a little lopsided. "Enjoy your time off."

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8. Spanish for "girl"

I don't look at her or say good-bye. Instead, I keep my eyes down and zoom past her, ashamed, as I make a break for the metal doors.

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[70] I try my best to forget school during vacation.

I make snowmen with my downstairs neighbor, Sofia. I eat all the leftover turrónes from Abuela's *noche buena*<sup>9</sup> dinner, even though Mami says those candies will rot my teeth. (What will she do then, I wonder darkly? Extract my teeth herself so we don't have to "waste money" at the dentist?) I watch cartoons and read and draw pictures with old markers on New Year's Eve, thinking about the day when I'm grown and can buy all the mood rings and Chia Pets I want.

But soon, it's time to go back to school. I zip myself up into my old coat and slide my feet into the fake-fur-lined snow boots that Mami gave me for Christmas, one size too big so they'll last. The whole six blocks to school, I worry about my dumb present all over again. Maybe Mrs. Robertson won't like me anymore. Or maybe she'll think I'm cheap or just a plain weirdo. All I can think about is that silly half-naked lady.

I walk along the hall toward our room. Everything is so shiny and new at school after the holidays. The floors are polished, the desktops have been scoured, and all the bulletin boards have fresh paper on them.

"We have new seats," Mrs. Robertson tells us.

[75] I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm at Table Two now, near the class library, far away from Charlene, who I'm happy to find out, had the chicken pox over the whole break.

When I start to unpack my things, I see a white envelope inside my empty desk. My name is written across the front in Mrs. Robertson's pretty script. I look over my shoulder to make sure no one is looking and open it slowly.

*Dear Maria Elisa,*

*You were so kind to think of me at the holidays. How did you know that I always tear my stockings under the desk? It is so embarrassing! Thank you so much for finding an absolutely perfect gift for me. We can keep this our secret!*

*Your friend,*

[80] *Mrs. Robertson*

I put the note inside my pocket and unpack my books. From under the desk, I check Mrs. Robertson's legs and smile. She's wearing pantyhose, and maybe they're the ones I gave her. Best of all, no one else knows. And just like that, my shame floats away, and everything inside of me feels stronger and new.

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9. Spanish term referring to Christmas Eve night

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