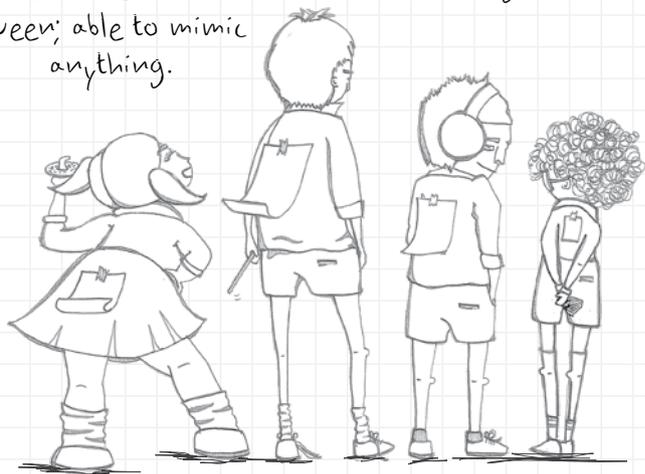


MEET OUR SUPER-DUPER EXTRAORDINARY ~~LOSERS~~ HEROES!

Janice Chan Xiao Wen
Dramatic donut
queen; able to mimic
anything.

Darryl
Big and crusty ears;
has super-duper
hearing.



Clandestino
Perpetual nose
block; has the
ability to move
really fast.

Mundi
Too shy
to speak;
megabrain.

CHAPTER I MISS-TERY IN CLASS



The classroom that morning was the same: musty, dusty and carrying the odour of 40 hyperactive students. It was one of those classrooms that – no matter how much you cleaned it – looked and smelled the same.

Someone had left the fan on and it was whirring eerily in the empty classroom. Blue lint and eraser dust drifted slowly in the air. After all, it was only the first week of school and the children were fascinated with their new stationery (they had been over-erasing) and uniforms (pulling out loose threads from their newest clothes). So, understandably, the classroom wasn't at its cleanest.

A girl crept into the Primary 1 classroom. She was an average child, with the average height and weight of a Primary 6 girl. It was only when you looked directly at her that you realised that her almond eyes drooped miserably, her hair had a few odd strands of white, her uniform was faded and her fingernails were bitten as far back as possible. Her nondescript bag was slung lazily across her chest.

"These Primary 1 students have no idea what's going on. Easy target for me," she whispered to herself through her buck teeth. Her loose socks hung sadly around her skinny ankles. She pulled them up in nervousness and shifted her stained belt, gearing up for the task. Just then, she heard the dreaded sound of footsteps.

Why were there footsteps in the Jupiter building now? Weren't all the Primary 1 kids at a special assembly to attend a talk on "Integrating into Brightstar Primary School"? The girl looked at the clock on the wall. It showed 8 am. She was supposed to have another good 15 minutes before any of them would return to class.

Who could be coming? Why now? she thought nervously. Quickly, she slid behind the classroom door and held her breath for a while, straining to discern the footsteps. They were more of a pitter-patter belonging to easy-to-threaten kids rather than the fear-inducing high-heeled click-clack-click of a teacher. *Could they be Primary 1 students?*

"Quick! We're late," a tiny boy muttered as they ran past the classroom.

"Sorry, I was having a stomach ache!" another boy replied. "Don't worry, I will explain to Mr Grosse," he said as he grabbed at his tummy.

"Okay, hurry up!" his friend urged. All of a sudden, he stopped in his tracks and turned his attention to the classroom that the girl was hiding in. He scratched his head in puzzlement.

"Wait, why is the fan in our classroom switched on? Did you leave it on?"

"Not me, it was you who left the classroom last!"

"It was you!" the boy argued. "You know how strict they





are here about switching everything off." He stepped into the classroom, looked around then jumped to reach the switch that turned off the fans. Finally, after three jumps, he was able to reach it.

"Something feels weird," he said thoughtfully to himself.

"Whatever!" The boy who was having a stomach ache was still squirming in pain. "We need to go, like NOW!"

"Yes. Let's hurry up!"

As they ran past their own classroom, they were completely unaware that from behind the door, a pair of dark and stormy eyes was watching them. She hated all the Primary 1 kids. She hated them more now that they were going to disrupt her plan. As soon as the footsteps subsided, she slowly emerged from the door.

The average-looking girl scanned the classroom quickly. Unfortunately for her, there were no wallets lying around. No lunchboxes left behind. It was time for some brainwork. Not so easy this time. Who was rich, who was not? Which bag to check? Which desk to raid? Each bag was a chest of treasures, sitting and waiting to be rifled through. After all, new books and branded Smiggle stationery were wasted on Primary 1 students.

What do they know about brand new things? she thought.

As much as she despised them, she continued to focus on a higher purpose. Finally, her shifty gaze fell on a bulging Dora

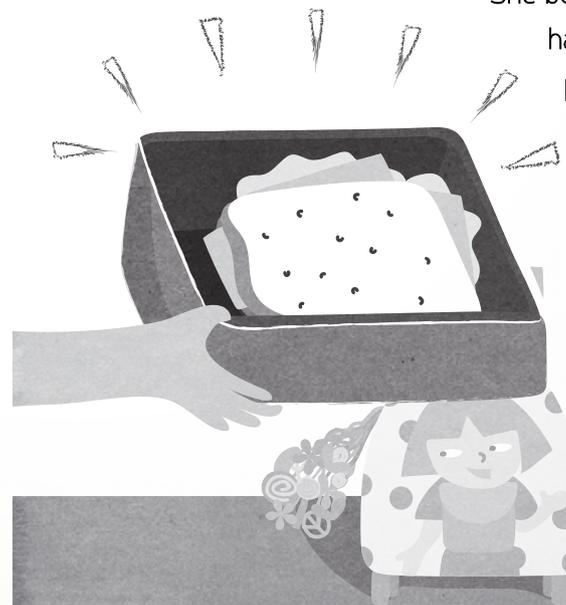
the Explorer bag. It was pink and dangling with key chains that weighed more than the books inside. Another pampered, spoiled-rotten, childish little girl whose parents definitely made sure was never hungry, not even for a minute. A girl who probably got whatever she wanted – the latest phones, plane trips, fine dining and overpriced dolls.

The front pocket was bulging, hiding something in it.

"There must be something in there!" the intruder said to herself. Her eyes widened and inside she glowed like a paper lamp. It was a mixture of excitement and thrill that she felt as sweat broke out on her brow. Her heart began to flutter like a pinned butterfly as she inched her way to the defenceless bag.

She bent low and with a clammy hand, quickly unzipped the pocket of the bag.

"I knew it!" She beamed. There in the pocket, rested a white Tupperware container. She opened it immediately and an incredible aroma wafted to her nostrils. It was the





best smell of the day, one of ham, cheese and fresh bread. She took another whiff and was almost devouring the snack with her nose when the urgency of the task dawned on her.

She snapped the box shut quickly and dug around for more theft-worthy goodies in the bag. What else was there? A packet of chocolate milk and an apple.

She unzipped her own bag this time and with two hands, placed her prizes neatly in the pocket compartment. She smiled when she fingered the rest of the items in there. There was a G-Shock watch and some gold dollar coins. They were the "well-earned" trophies she had stolen the day before. Then she slung her bag across her hunched shoulder. A wicked grin flashed across her face.

"Dear P1s, that's how you integrate into Brightstar Primary School. You SHARE things with people," she said as she flicked the fan switch to ON and stepped out of the classroom.



"Girls and boys of Brightstar Primary school, all of you, please keep your valuable things properly. There have been cases of theft in our school. Five lunchboxes, five wallets and two watches have been reported missing by the P1s," Mr Grosse, the discipline master, announced over the PA system.

Some children in my class were sniggering. They felt that it was funny that lunchboxes were getting stolen.

"Stop laughing! This is a serious matter!" Mr Grosse's voice blared through the speakers.

It was as though he could see us laughing.

"The culprit will be dealt with severely."

His voice faded into white noise and then silence.

"Da-Da-Darryl, what are we going to do now?"

Mundi rocked in his seat. We were in class waiting for Madam Siti, our Science teacher, to arrive. "Already five lunchboxes, five wallets and two watches have been stolen. An-an-and if my calculations don't fail me, which they usually don't... I think the thief has stolen something once every few hours..."

Mundi's chair was rocking precariously as he did the math.

"Be careful, Mundi," I warned. "You might fall off."

"Of course not, no? Darryl?" he said in his peculiar way of speaking. "I know what this chair can take. It can take a weight of up to 80 kg and can swing left and right to a maximum angle of 38 degrees from the ground."

"I wonder what was in those lunchboxes..." Janice mused as she licked her lips. "Donuts... mmm... if I could just have some right now..."





Mundi, upon seeing that Janice wasn't interested in his mad math, whispered into my ear, "The Lunchbox Thief should be planning his next theft in approximately 8,220 seconds..."

"Lunchbox Thief?"

"Yes. I named him the Lunchbox Thief. No?"

Clandestino cut in. "Mundi, Mundi, do you have to count everything? I would go crazy if my mind were full of numbers!"

He took out his pens and began to juggle them high in the air. No matter how many times we saw that magical spectacle, we never got tired of watching Clandestino perform his marvellous feats. It was like a magic show each time, except that it was free and there was no animal abuse involved, like pulling a white rabbit out of a hat by its ears. Take it from me, I am the ear specialist.

"I would go simply craaaazy if my lunchbox was stolen. Especially if it was filled with..." Janice was still imagining sugar, cream and round rings of crispy deep-fried flour. She was in donut heaven. Until...

"Stop it, everyone!" I said. "Clandestino and Janice, listen up. Mundi has a point and perhaps he is right. The Lunchbox Thief might strike again. SOON."

Mundi looked down at his watch. Beep! Beep! The big red watch went. It was a gift from the school's security

guard, and it had saved Mundi's life recently. Well, I'd like to think that we had played a part in saving Mundi's life and the watch just helped a little.

"What are you doing, Mundi?" Janice grabbed his skinny wrist. Next to her arm, his looked like a toothpick. And hers looked like round rolls of... never mind.

"See! I have set the timer to go off in two hours and 13 minutes. That's how much time we have left before the thief strikes again," Mundi said.

Clandestino was getting restless. "Must we really get involved, guys? Is it that big of a deal?" He snorted, scratching his reddened, blistered neck. "Those are just lunchboxes, wallets and stationery from the P1s. They are not worth millions of dollars!"

Clandestino had been through bigger things in life. It was no wonder the loss of a few lunchboxes and wallets really didn't bother him at all.

"What do you mean those are just some lunchboxes? They contain FOOD. F.O.O.D. Every few hours, a Brightstar is going to go hungry because his or her lunchbox was cruelly taken away," Janice said, emoting. She was getting a little too riled up. "Have you ever gone hungry before?"

"Yes..." Clandestino said.

"Me too. It can't be more painful to lose a watch than to go hungry."





Janice's eyes began to well up a little and her lips began to quiver. Then she quickly checked her pockets. "Phew! Good thing my chocolate bar is still in there," she said, wiping a tear from her face. She loved her food and it showed in her stomach nearly bursting to get out of her blouse.

"Mr Grosse did warn us to take care of our valuable things," Clandestino continued.



"Yes, Clan. And Janice, it is not just about food!" I said. "We need to stop these thefts before they escalate. Many burglars or robbers always start small. Maybe when they were kids. And then they grow up to be real thieves."

"Yes... yes... remember the Lunchbox Thief has taken wallets too," Mundi pointed out. "Very true, no? What Darryl has said. One of my relatives was a thief in school when he was a kid. Stealing small things, no? Like erasers and stuff... Then when he grew older, this emboldened him to rob banks and even kidnap people for money. No?"

Clandestino put away his pens. "So you mean... we are seriously going to get to the bottom of this?"

"Yes, Clan. Let's find those LUNCHBOXES!" Janice exclaimed. "I mean the thief. Not lunchboxes. Not lunchboxes." She folded her arms defensively over the ball of her belly when she realised she was thinking about food again.

We all burst out laughing. Janice really could not stop thinking about food.

"Okay. Now, seriously, are we all in?" I looked at them and they returned my intense stare. We stretched out our hands and did our secret handshake. It involved a fist bump, lacing fingers and knuckle cracking. Very odd but it was our secret code, our treaty and the oddest thing in





the world that cemented our friendship. NO one could ever replicate it because it was so special.

“Okay, so now what do we do? Where do we start?” Janice asked. “The Lunchbox Thief is targeting the P1s. It is very obvious.”

Mundi was counting every second that we were wasting. “Two hours 43 seconds, 42 seconds, 41 seconds...”

“They are newbies! That’s why,” Clandestino said. “P1s don’t know anything. They even pee in their pants.”

Mundi looked away quickly, for he had been guilty of that.

“So, I think we should hang around their level during recess. And nab the thief in the butt. I mean bud. We should nip him in the bud,” I said. “Since there are four classrooms, we should each take one. Hide in one for the whole of recess.”

“That is not such a good idea,” Janice said. She stomped her foot. The ground shook a little. “That means we have to skip recess! That means going hungry.”

I swore I saw her eyes water again!

Mundi suddenly blinked hard. It was surely signalling the birth of a very ingenious idea in five, four, three, two...

“I know!” he said. “Let’s set up our handphones in each class to secretly record any activity in the classrooms. Then we don’t really have to miss the whole of recess.”

“You can have half of your recess to eat, Jan.” Clandestino smiled. “And I get to spend half of recess running around and playing basketball!”

Clandestino could never keep still. He was always hyperactive. He had to move. He had to run around. His hands and feet would feel numb if they just did nothing.

All of us thought for a moment about the mobile phone plan. We all looked at each other. I had nothing much to lose. Mine was an old Nokia handphone that no one in my family wanted. But Clandestino had the latest gold iPhone. Janice had a Samsung phone which had all kinds of girly apps and Hello Kitty stickers on it. And Mundi had an old LG phone with number stickers!

There were four P1 classrooms. And there were four phones among us. It wouldn’t work if any of us backed out. But none of us did. A strategy was born.



In a classroom

Tables in a straight line
Children are aligned



Some think they're bright
Teacher shouts, "I'm right!"

We have to sit and write
There's no taking a bite



Despite my restless plight
I have to sit upright

The teacher stops a fight
Now she's very uptight.



We keep our uniforms white
And try to be polite



CHAPTER 2 CRIME TIME