His Favorite Sweatshirt

by Myka-Lynne Sokoloff
illustrated by Susie Lee Jin

Genre Comprehension Skills and Strategy

Realistic fiction
• Compare and Contrast
• Draw Conclusions
• Visualize

Suggested levels for Guided Reading, DRA™, Lexile®, and Reading Recovery™ are provided in the Pearson Scott Foresman Leveling Guide.
Vocabulary
departure
desperately
enlisted
exhaled
garment
hesitated
neglected
resumed
superstitious
technically

Word count: 2,159

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Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.
“Jason, are you really leaving tomorrow?” Carly Jean demanded.

Carly Jean’s big brother looked down at her with a warm smile. It was a long way down. At six feet tall, Jason towered over his kid sister, a mere third grader.

“That’s right,” he answered. “Off to boot camp.”

“Do you have to go?” Carly Jean nagged.

Jason sighed, “Well, yeah, I enlisted in the U.S. Army, and once you sign up, you have to show up. I can’t back out now.”
“First comes boot camp, right?” Carly Jean wanted to know for about the fifth time.

“That’s right,” her brother answered patiently.

“Why do they call it boot camp?” Carly Jean asked, once again.

“I don’t know,” said Jason. “I guess ’cause you wear boots all the time as you learn to march and stuff. I’m sure you learn to polish your boots too.”

“And then you get sent off to war somewhere?”

“I don’t know yet. After boot camp, I’ll find out what I’ll be doing and where I’ll be going.”

“And how long are you going to be gone?” Carly Jean demanded.

“That hasn’t been determined yet either. I could be gone for a year or two.”

“Tell me again why you enlisted.”

“CJ, we have been over this before. I want to serve my country,” Jason explained, starting to lose patience.

Just then, Mom came in with an armload of items for Jason to pack. “Don’t forget the sunblock and a baseball cap. I don’t want you getting a bad sunburn,” she said, sounding just like a mom as she dropped everything onto her son’s bed.

“Ma, I’m not supposed to take all that stuff with me,” Jason reminded her gently. “I’ll get my uniform and pretty much everything else I need when I get there.”

“Do you have to wear the same uniform every day?” Carly Jean wanted to know.

“Well, I guess I’ll have a couple of changes of clothes. But they’ll probably look exactly alike.”

“Boring!” Carly Jean announced. “I would never wear the same outfit two days in a row!”

That remark would come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Carly Jean Randall. She was known to change outfits three times before she even left for school in the morning. As long as the clean clothes didn’t end up on the floor or in the laundry, her parents didn’t bother her about it too much.
Mom left the room without a word. Carly Jean knew that Mom, too, was having a hard time dealing with Jason’s departure.

“There’s one more thing, Jason,” Carly Jean said seriously.

“Now what?”

“Can I have your room while you’re away?” Carly Jean continued rapidly, hoping that Jason wouldn’t interrupt and say no. “Anyway, Mom said when you come home, you probably will want to get your own apartment or go off to college.”

She hadn’t yet admitted it, even to herself, but Carly Jean was going to miss her big brother. Maybe if she moved into his room, it wouldn’t feel like he was quite so far away.

“Would you keep it exactly like it is now?” Jason challenged.

Carly Jean glanced around the room. The Army recruiting posters, sports trophies, and electronic games displayed around the room weren’t really to her taste.

“Um...never mind,” Carly Jean said as her brother shooed her out the door so he could pack.

The next day, Carly Jean’s older bother left to join the Army.
Time passed slowly. Carly Jean tried to keep busy and stay focused on her third-grade activities.

Had she been awake late one night, Carly Jean would have overheard her mother tell her father, “I’m concerned about Carly Jean. It’s bad enough worrying about Jason, but now I’m also worrying about Carly Jean moping around the house.”

“She just misses her brother, like the rest of us,” said Mr. Randall.

“She just looks really sad to me,” Mrs. Randall replied.

“Pssst, CJ, do you want to come to my house after school?” Kendra whispered during the spelling test the next day.

“Quiet down, girls,” warned Miss Wei.

Carly Jean was grateful for the teacher’s interruption. She would need to make up an excuse for not going to Kendra’s house. Carly Jean knew her best friend was feeling neglected. Even so, she wanted to get home immediately after school, just in case her brother called or had sent a letter.
Carly Jean raced off the school bus that afternoon and grabbed the mail from the mailbox. Junk mail, junk, bill, bill, junk. There was nothing from Jason.

She sighed and tiptoed into Jason’s room. Everything looked exactly as it had the day he left. Carly Jean lightly touched the trophies gathering dust on the bookshelf. She realized she was missing Jason—desperately, even—more than she had ever imagined she would. She slid open a bureau drawer and pressed her face against Jason’s favorite sweatshirt.

Carly Jean shook out the garment and pulled it over her head. The sleeves hung well past her fingertips. The bottom of the sweatshirt billowed around her knees like a dress.

She traced the fading backward letters of the Go Army logo in the mirror. The worn-out sweatshirt felt like a big bear hug sent long-distance from Jason. And that was precisely what Carly Jean needed.

Carly Jean remembered a conversation she had had with Jason before he left. He said he would have to wear a uniform every day. A thought flashed clearly through Carly Jean’s brain: If her brother had to wear the same uniform day after day, maybe she should too!

Carly Jean pirouetted in front of the mirror. She felt much better and galloped off to do her homework.
Parent-teacher conferences were held just a few days later.

“Mrs. Randall, I have to admit I’m a bit concerned about Carly Jean,” began Miss Wei.

“Isn’t she keeping up with her schoolwork?” Carly Jean’s mother asked.

“Oh, no, that’s not it at all. Carly Jean is a fine student.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Miss Wei hesitated. “It’s, um, her outfit. She’s been wearing the same sweatshirt every day. I’m afraid the other kids will start teasing her.”

Mrs. Randall exhaled slowly. “I’m so glad you mentioned it. You see, her father and I are concerned about that sweatshirt too. I can’t get Carly Jean to wear anything else!”

“Why does she insist on wearing it?” asked the teacher.

“It’s actually her brother Jason’s sweatshirt,” explained Mrs. Randall. “Carly Jean decided she wouldn’t take it off until he came home. I think she’s getting superstitious. She thinks if she takes off the sweatshirt, something bad might happen to her brother.”

“Well, now I understand,” said Miss Wei.
Several evenings later, Mr. and Mrs. Randall resumed what had now become a regular conversation.

“I’m at my wits’ end,” said Carly Jean’s mother. “I don’t know what to do about Carly Jean and that silly sweatshirt. She refuses to take it off, even to let me wash it!”

“Jackie, not long ago you were complaining about her moping around the house. At least she seems happier now,” Mr. Randall replied.

“Honestly, Jim, that sweatshirt is beginning to get a little . . . smelly. Her teacher is concerned that she’s going to get teased.”

“You know, this is something CJ cares so much about that I don’t think having her classmates tease her would make her stop wearing it,” said Mr. Randall.

“I’m going to try to talk to her about it again tomorrow,” Mrs. Randall said.
Carly Jean’s mother carefully raised the subject of the sweatshirt as she drove her daughter to the dentist the next day.

“I’m not taking it off, Mom,” Carly Jean said firmly. “I wrote to Jason and promised him. And that’s final.”

“Sweetie,” Mrs. Randall insisted, “it’s not like it even fits you. The sleeves are so long that they’re covered with pencil and ink marks from your schoolwork.”

Carly Jean was silent. Her mother had a point. The long sleeves actually were in her way. “I’ll make you a deal, Mom.”

“What’s that?”

“What if we cut off the cuffs, since the sleeves are too long anyway? You can wash the cuffs while I’m wearing the sweatshirt. Then I can wear the cuffs while you wash the sweatshirt. That would pretty much be the same as my not taking it off because I would always have part of it on,” Carly Jean explained.
“What about when you take a bath?” Mom objected.

“Hmm. Okay, here’s another idea. You can skip washing the cuffs altogether. I’ll wear them when I take a bubble bath. That way, they’ll get clean and I won’t technically be taking off the sweatshirt at all.”

Carly Jean’s mother knew she was not going to win this battle. “You may have just found a solution, CJ,” she admitted.

Several weeks later, Miss Wei gave her third graders an assignment to write about someone they think of as their hero. They would be presenting their essays to the class in one week.

_I know what I’m going to write about_, thought Carly Jean without a moment’s hesitation.

Carly Jean got started that night, gathering and rereading all of the letters that Jason had sent her over the past few months. She found maps and photographs to help explain where her brother had been deployed and what he was doing. She cut articles from the newspaper and pasted all of her research onto a large poster board. She spent all weekend writing and rewriting her essay until it was just right.
During the presentation, Carly Jean showed her maps and described the work Jason’s platoon was doing. The soldiers were rebuilding schools in a foreign country. The buildings there had been destroyed by war.

“Carly Jean, don’t you miss your brother?” Thomas asked.


“Doesn’t he miss you too?” asked Domingo.

The corners of Carly Jean’s mouth twitched a little before she answered. “We try to send him care packages every couple of weeks.”

“What goes in a care package?” Sarah wanted to know.

“Oh, we’ll send anything that’s fun or useful: a jar of bubbles, a batch of cookies, pictures of us, a funny comic strip. Anything that might make him feel closer to home.”

Miss Wei was impressed with the effort Carly Jean had put into her report. “Class,” she announced a few days later, “wouldn’t it be nice if we somehow adopted Jason Randall’s platoon? We could write to the soldiers and let them know how much we admire them. We could send them care packages too.”

In no time at all, Miss Wei’s students got busy writing letters. They set up a collection box in the lunchroom to gather items for the care packages.

Word spread, and pretty soon the entire third grade at Carly Jean’s elementary school was pitching in. One Saturday a month, several families made an assembly line to sort, pack, and send the items they had collected.

Jason and his buddies were thrilled. “You have no idea how good it feels to know people back home are thinking about us,” Jason wrote. “Every card and package really brightens our day, especially for the guys who don’t usually get much mail from home.”
Months passed. One night Dad checked his e-mail just before Carly Jean went to bed. There was great news from Jason!

“Hey everybody—guess what? I’m coming home for two weeks! I can’t wait to see you all. You can’t believe how much I miss everybody there!”

The next day, Carly Jean told Kendra. Kendra told their teacher. Miss Wei spread the news in the teachers’ room at lunch. Parents spread the news at the bus stop. Soon the whole school knew that Carly Jean’s brother was coming home on leave.

Jason arrived home on Saturday. He expected to see his parents and his kid sister when he stepped off the bus. He didn’t expect that the entire town would turn out to greet him . . . and that they would all be wearing Army sweatshirts to show their support. Some sweatshirts even said Welcome Home, Specialist Randall.

The sweatshirts, of course, were clean.
The uniforms worn by soldiers in the U.S. Army are covered with a pattern called camouflage. This pattern helps the soldiers blend into their environment, making it harder for enemies to see them.

The United States adopted the use of camouflage around the time of World War I. Some of the earliest camouflage designers were artists, including painters and sculptors.

Special camouflage patterns are used in different parts of the world. Most camouflage uses the browns and greens of nature to imitate sunlight, leaves, and shadows. During the Vietnam War, soldiers wore uniforms to blend in with the jungle. Today, soldiers in desert areas wear sandy-colored patterns.

1. Compare Carly Jean before she decided to wear Jason’s sweatshirt and after wearing the sweatshirt. How was she the same? How was she different? Use a diagram like the one below to record your answers.

2. What did you visualize while reading page 20? What words helped you visualize? How did visualizing help you understand the story?

3. Someone who believes in superstitions is superstitious. Wearing the same sweatshirt every day because you believe it will keep someone safe would be a superstition. Name two other examples of things people are sometimes superstitious about.

4. Think of a time when you or someone you know had to spend time away from family. How did you feel? How did you cope with the separation?