

Bonus episode #135 - They never saw it coming

Episode description

In this episode, Andrew tells the story of how he surprised his parents at Christmas. He shares the big reveal, their shocked reactions, and how they spent the holiday. He also talks about what he did during the rest of his visit and how he felt about surprising them. This real-life story will help you improve your English skills and become a better communicator.



Note: The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Have you ever surprised somebody so much that they were **taken aback**, and speechless, and they didn't know how to react? Well, that's what happened to me recently when I surprised my parents at Christmas, and in this episode I'm going to tell you that story. My name is Andrew and I help you improve your English fluency through real-life stories and lessons.

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So, in this episode, I'm gonna tell you the story about going back to my hometown, Kelowna, to spend some good old family time with my folks and my brother and sister over Christmas. Let's get started. Here we go.

Chapter 1: The Pre-Surprise Setup

I arrived in Kelowna on Christmas Eve morning. My brother was kind enough to come and pick me up at the airport, and after he picked me up, we went to a local restaurant to grab some breakfast together. It was really nice just to catch up over some eggs Bennys. Eggs Benedict, do you know what this breakfast dish is? It's just an egg dish. I think it's usually served on an English muffin, which is a kind of bread. And on each half of the English muffin there is some ham or some bacon, and then there's a poached egg put on top. And it's usually served with Hollandaise sauce, which is this kind of creamy, tangy sauce. Anyways, it's a pretty good breakfast dish. It's really popular in Canada, and so I ordered an eggs Benny because I don't think I've ever seen it on the menu at a place here in Seoul. So, it's not too popular where I'm based right now, but in Canada, they're pretty

popular. So, I ordered an egg Benny, my brother ordered an egg Benny, and we just spent the morning catching up and chatting and planning for how we were going to reveal the surprise to my parents. Because they didn't know that I was in Canada. They didn't know that I was going to surprise them for Christmas.

Now my brother and my sister, they were **in the know**. They knew what was happening, but my parents didn't know at all. So, to set up the surprise, my brother had invited my parents over to his place for a Christmas Eve dinner. And as we were eating our breakfast, we chatted and plotted about how I would make the big reveal and surprise them for Christmas Eve.

Chapter 2: The Big Reveal

So, at around 5 p.m., my parents were scheduled to arrive at my brother's place for his Christmas Eve party, and my little sister would also be **tagging along** and joining. Of course, as I mentioned, she was in the know. She knew that I was already in Canada, in town, at my brother's apartment, but my parents had absolutely no idea. My brother was the host of the party, so that means that he had to cook, and so he provided some food for us. He cooked some pizzas and some egg rolls, kind of an interesting combination of food. But hey, it was delicious, and I appreciated the gesture of being the host and setting up the surprise for me.

And then my parents finally did arrive at my brother's place, and they texted and they said, "Hey, we're outside, can you come and let us in?" They had texted my brother and asked him to go to the front door and let them into the apartment building where he lives. So, my brother went and did that, and I followed him. I went along with him to the front door, and it was a little bit awkward because there were some other people who were coming in and out of the apartment at the same time. So, I couldn't really find, like, a good angle to hide or to do anything like that. And yeah, in fact, I wasn't sure if I should hide and make it, like, a big surprise, like pop out of somewhere and shock them that way. But my parents are in their 70s right now and yeah, I don't know if it's good to give them a big shock like that. So

I decided I'm not gonna do that, and because of the other people coming and going in and out of the building, I wasn't able to do that.

But I just went to the front door, and I opened the front door with them, and both my mom and dad were in total disbelief. Like, my mom, the look on her face and the sound of her voice, was just total, total shock and surprise. And my dad, on the other hand, didn't really say very much. He was kind of just like... I think maybe he thought something bad happened, like he was just totally clueless about why I would have been in Canada, and just totally taken aback. And to be taken aback means to be really, really surprised and shocked about something. So my dad had this kind of look of concern, like "Did something bad happen? Why are you here?" He was taken aback. My mom, on the other hand, was just shocked, and she got so surprised that she actually had to sit on a bench in the lobby of the apartment building.

So, the surprise was a success. They were very surprised. They had no idea at all that I was returning home for Christmas. But after I surprised them, I wondered, is this the best way to do things? Like, maybe I shouldn't have done this. I felt a little bit guilty because they were so surprised, so surprised. And eventually, in a good way, once I calmed them down and I was like, "Yeah, I'm just here to celebrate Christmas. It's been a really long time since I've been back, and I had some time in my schedule, so I just popped back to Canada, wanted to spend a family Christmas." After, I think my sister did the calculation and it was over 12 years since we had been together for Christmas, all of my family with my brother and my sister and my folks. So, once I had calmed them down, then they really appreciated that I came back, and they enjoyed the surprise. But initially, I was worried. Like maybe she was going to have a heart attack or something like that, because she looked so shocked and surprised.

In hindsight, I think maybe that wasn't the best way to do the surprise. If I could do it over again, I would change some things. I would probably just send them a text message in advance and tell them I was at my brother's place. Maybe that would have been a kinder, gentler way to do the surprise. But as I mentioned, once they calmed down and settled

down, then it was just great to have a nice family dinner together at my brother's place to celebrate Christmas Eve.

Chapter 3: Christmas Day

So the big reveal was a massive success, and after our Christmas Eve party, I went back to my parents' house with my sister. And I decided to spend the night at my parents' house so I could wake up early and spend Christmas morning with them. My brother usually likes sleeping in on Christmas Day, so he's not like a Christmas morning type of guy. He'll join us for the evening for Christmas dinner, but Christmas morning he likes to just relax and sleep in. So, because of that, I decided to go back with my parents to their place and spend the night there.

Now, my parents are empty nesters, and if you listened to a recent Culips episode, a Chatterbox episode that I recorded with Anna, we actually talked about this term "empty nesters." Do you remember what it means, or do you know what it means? An empty nester is just a parent whose child has left the family home. So my parents are empty nesters because I have moved out, my brother has moved out, my little sister has moved out. And after we all moved out, they downsized from a home to a one-bedroom apartment because they don't need, like, a big home anymore. They're empty nesters. They don't need all that space, so they just live in a one-bedroom apartment, which means that it's a little bit uncomfortable when the whole family gathers in their place. I mean, it's fine for a dinner, but when you're staying overnight, then it's a little bit uncomfortable. So of course, my parents had no idea I was coming, even so, they weren't prepared for me at all. But my mom put together a **makeshift bed** for me, and she wanted me to sleep on the sofa, but I think I've lived in Korea for too long because now I actually prefer to sleep on the floor. And this is a traditional Korean way of sleeping, just sleeping on the floor. So I told my mom, "No, no, no, I'm not gonna sleep on the sofa. I'm going to sleep on the floor."

So I set my bed up on the floor in the living room area, and my sister was sleeping on a cot in the kitchen. Then my parents were in their room, of course, but it was alright. It was just

for the night. We woke up, we had a lovely Christmas morning just exchanging gifts and drinking coffee, and my mom made a delicious Christmas breakfast as well. We had some pancakes and some bacon and eggs and hash brown potatoes, lots and lots of coffee. I think I drank too much coffee on Christmas. It's like a long day! You're just hanging out. There's nothing really to do. All of the shops are closed. There's nowhere to go. There's nothing on TV to watch, so you do just spend a lot of time hanging out with your family, sitting on the sofa in your PJs, and drinking coffee. And I was chugging coffee. And "chugging" is, like, an expression that comes from smoking, to chain-smoke, and that's where you have one cigarette after another cigarette after another cigarette. I don't recommend doing that, and I also don't recommend chain-drinking coffee, but that's what I was doing. So I had a lot of coffee. I was caffeinated up, and I spent a nice afternoon and morning with my folks and sister. And then later in the evening, my brother came over. Plus we had two additional dinner guests, which was something I wasn't expecting at all, but in the end it turned out to be really fun.

Chapter 4: Meeting New and Old Faces

The two additional guests to our Christmas dinner celebration were my brother's new girlfriend and my mom's friend's son. So the new face was my brother's new girlfriend. Well, actually they've been dating, I think, for over a year now, but this was the first time that he introduced her to the whole family. I had actually met my brother's girlfriend when I was back in Canada last time in the summer. We hung out and went to the beach together, and she's a really lovely person, and I enjoyed meeting her. But you know, when you're in the early stages of a new relationship, I think at that time they had probably only been seeing each other for like nine months or ten months or something. So, it's a little bit awkward and you don't want to **jump the gun** or do something too quickly and introduce this new person in your life to your whole extended family right away. I mean, it's case by case. Sometimes you might want to do that. Who knows, everybody's different, but I think my brother plays things pretty cautiously, and so he wanted to make sure everything was good in the relationship before introducing his girlfriend to the entire family. But finally it

was time for him to do that, so he brought his girlfriend to the dinner party.

But also, my mom invited a special guest, and that was her friend's son. OK, my mom's friend's son. And he's the same age as I am. We actually grew up together, like my mom and her friend were very close when they were younger, and I guess they still are really close, but they live in different places now. Whereas back when I was a child, we used to live in the same area. And so, that son is the same age as me, and he had recently moved to Kelowna, but I think because he's new in the city, maybe he doesn't really know too many people yet or something like that. Anyways, I'm not sure, but my mom had invited him to Christmas dinner before she knew that I was coming. She was like, "Oh, I didn't know that you were coming, Andrew, so I invited my friend's son." Let's just call him Corey, OK? I'll give him this nickname, Corey. "So, I invited Corey, and if I had known you were coming, I wouldn't have invited Corey, but I didn't know." And so anyways, I was like, "Ah, it's fine." **The more the merrier** is an expression that we use in English in this situation. It just means that if you have more guests and more people at an event, then it's more fun. The more the merrier.

And honestly, I thought maybe it would be a good thing to kind of **break the ice** with my brother's new girlfriend, because you never know how things are gonna go, right? It could be a little awkward, this situation, introducing a new significant other to your family could be a little awkward, so I was like, maybe Corey could break the ice and make things smoother. And of course, to break the ice just means to break the icy tension or the awkwardness that sometimes comes with new situations.

And, this is exactly what happened. It was so great. Of course, my brother's girlfriend is great, and there was no awkwardness or anything at all. There was no ice to be broken, and actually Corey turned out to be a really charismatic, friendly, outgoing guy, and I really enjoyed having him at the dinner party. We used to hang out when we were like, I don't know, from elementary school probably until we were 12 or 13. And then they moved away and we sort of lost touch and didn't really keep in touch through our high school years and

beyond. So we were joking like we hadn't seen each other for probably close to 30 years. So that was wild to reconnect, and the first thing that he said to me is like, "You look exactly the same," and I was like, "You too, you look exactly the same." And so it was fun just to hang out with him.

We had a lovely dinner. My mom was busy in the kitchen all day. She cooked a turkey, she cooked a ham, we had yams and turnips and potatoes and pickles. For whatever reason, my parents always serve pickles at Christmas dinner. I love it. I think that'll be my tradition going forward too, is serving pickles. We also had a little bit of wine, and we just had a nice festive dinner to celebrate Christmas.

Chapter 5: Low-Key Days in Kelowna

The remaining four days that I spent in Kelowna after Christmas were really **low-key** and just relaxed. I didn't get up to too much. The weather was nasty, and probably when you imagine Canada in the winter, you're probably thinking lots of snow and wind and blizzards, this kind of thing, low temperatures, right? But no, it wasn't like this at all. My hometown in the winter doesn't get too cold, and in fact, it was really warm. It was like three or four degrees, which is pretty warm for a Canadian winter. So we didn't have any snow. It was a green Christmas, but it was overcast, it was rainy, it was windy, and that damp, wet cold... My hometown's in a valley as well, and the valley gets really clogged up with rain clouds, and it's overcast and foggy and just gray and gross. Plus it's in the winter, so the days are quite short and the sun sets around 4:30 in the afternoon, so it was just not too pleasant.

And originally, when I was thinking about going back to Canada, I thought, I'm gonna do some snowshoeing, I'm gonna do some hiking, I'm gonna do some running, maybe even go snowboarding. But I was just uninspired once I had arrived there, because the weather was so bad. So instead of that, I think I did go running once. There was one afternoon

where the sun peeked out for a little bit, and I took advantage of that to go for a run, actually closer to where my parents live.

But the other times, I was just hanging out with my brother. Thankfully, he had some time off work as well, so we could just chill and hang out together at his place. And we spent a lot of time just watching TV, hanging out and watching TV. And actually, when I say TV, he doesn't even have cable TV at his place, but he does have a very, very big TV, which is amazing. It looks great, it's a very high-quality screen, and it's connected to YouTube and connected to Netflix, so we spent some time watching YouTube and Netflix.

Specifically, my brother has really gotten into chess over the last year or two. And if you're a longtime Culips listener, you'll also know that I really like chess, although I have to admit that I haven't really been playing too much chess lately. But it was so fun to watch some chess videos on YouTube. You can watch these really high-level players play their games, and as they're playing, they explain the logic of why they're moving their pieces the way they do, and their strategy and their thinking, so it can be really educational as well. And after we'd watch a couple of games, then we'd get fired up and we'd go online and play some chess against each other and against other people. So that was a really fun way to spend some time together when the weather was nasty.

Then we also, my brother got me onto this YouTube channel about this guy from Alaska who has this really elaborate pickup truck. And in the back of the pickup truck he's built his own custom home, like a little cabin that sits in the back of his pickup truck. He goes around driving all over North America in this pickup truck with his custom home in the back and documents his travels and his journeys. And so, I kind of got obsessed with that channel and watched a lot of these mini documentaries that he makes about traveling in his pickup truck all across Canada and the USA. So, that was cool.

Then we also binge-watched Squid Game. If you haven't seen Squid Game before, I'd highly recommend it. In my opinion, it's one of the better Korean dramas out there. And yeah, season two was released recently, and so we spent some time watching Squid

Game together. And I thought that was pretty cool because, of course, my home base is here in Seoul, South Korea, and I've lived here for a long time and am familiar with the culture. So it was cool to watch Squid Game with my brother and to chime in from time to time with some little background **nuggets and tidbits** of information that I know about from living in Korea.

So that was my time back in Canada. In the end, it was a great success. It was wonderful to see my family, and of course, they were very happy to see me as well, especially my parents, who I really, really surprised. And in retrospect, I think next time, if I ever do something like this again, I'm gonna need to give them a little bit of **a heads up**. I don't know, what do you think? **If you were in my boots**, if you were in my situation, what would you have done? If you were going to do a surprise like this to one of your family members or your friend or a loved one, how would you go about doing it? Would you just do the same style that I did, like a complete shock and surprise? Or would you give some advanced warning?

Let me know. Share a comment with me on our Discord server or on the YouTube page or Instagram page, and I'll be looking forward to hearing what you guys have to say about your thoughts about surprising people.

And also, I need to share with you the completion code for this week. So for this week, the completion code is going to be: **Surprise**. Maybe you're not surprised to know that the completion code is "surprise," but that's what it will be. You can leave a comment with the word "surprise," or an example sentence using the word "surprise," on our Discord community, on our YouTube page, on our Instagram page, and that will signal to me and signal to our entire community that you studied all the way to the end of this lesson.

And guys, I really do appreciate that you took some time out of your busy schedule to study English with me today. But be assured that the time you spent here was worthwhile. Every second and minute and hour that you spend with English will help get you closer to your fluency goals.

Don't forget that there's a free interactive transcript and vocabulary glossary for this episode that you can get just by following the link in the description. Plus, if you're a Culips member, then you'll also get ad-free audio and a comprehension quiz, plus tons of other great learning resources and tools and materials as well. To sign up and become a Culips member, just visit our website Culips.com.

So everyone, take care, and I'll talk to you in the next Culips episode. Until then, goodbye.

Glossary

1. **To be taken aback:** This means you feel suddenly surprised or shocked. In the episode, Andrew used it when describing how his dad felt very surprised after seeing him at the door. *Example: I was taken aback when my friend showed up at my house with a big gift.*
2. **To be in the know:** This means you have information that other people do not. In the episode, Andrew said his brother and sister were in the know about his secret holiday plans. *Example: I wish I were in the know about who is going to win the art contest.*
3. **To tag along:** This means to join someone when they go somewhere, usually without being the main person in charge. In the episode, Andrew mentioned that his sister would tag along to his brother's place for Christmas Eve. *Example: I asked my friend if I could tag along when she went to the new bakery.*
4. **A makeshift (something):** This means an item or setup that is quickly put together with what you have on hand. In the episode, Andrew talked about sleeping on a makeshift bed at his parents' place. *Example: The kids used an old tablecloth and boxes to build a makeshift fort in the living room.*
5. **To jump the gun:** This means to do something too soon or before the right time. In the episode, Andrew used it when talking about introducing a new girlfriend to family too quickly. *Example: If we choose a vacation spot before saving enough money, we might jump the gun.*
6. **The more the merrier:** This means having extra people or things makes an event more fun. In the episode, Andrew used it to describe how more guests at Christmas

made the celebration even better. *Example: If you want to bring your friends to the party, the more the merrier.*

7. **To break the ice:** This means to do something that helps people feel more relaxed in a new or awkward situation. In the episode, Andrew mentioned that having another friend at dinner helped break the ice with his brother's new girlfriend. *Example: I told a funny joke to break the ice on the first day of school.*
8. **Low-key:** This means something is simple, relaxed, or not too fancy. In the episode, Andrew said his days in Kelowna were low-key after Christmas because the weather was bad. *Example: I'm having a low-key birthday this year, just pizza and a movie at home.*
9. **Nuggets:** This means small pieces of interesting information or facts. In the episode, Andrew said he shared little nuggets of knowledge about Korea while watching Squid Game with his brother. *Example: My teacher gave us nuggets of history that weren't in our textbook.*
10. **Tidbits:** This means small, helpful, or interesting pieces of information. In the episode, Andrew mentioned he gave tidbits about Korean culture when they were watching TV. *Example: My grandmother always shares tidbits of advice when I visit.*
11. **A heads up:** This means a warning or notice given to someone in advance. In the episode, Andrew wished he had given his parents a heads up before surprising them. *Example: If you plan to drop by tomorrow, give me a heads up so I can tidy the house.*
12. **To be in someone else's boots/shoes:** This means to imagine yourself in their situation, but using "boots" is a non-standard version and "shoes" is more common. In the episode, Andrew asked listeners what they would do if they were in his boots when surprising family. *Example: If you were in my shoes, you would understand why I decided to change schools.*

Episode credits

Host and preparation: Andrew Bates

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