

Relative Problems

Lauren Tripod's class was on its way to the Museum of Natural History for a field trip with Mrs. Rogers, the science teacher, and Mr. Pink, the history teacher. The school bus was old and stiff: every time the bus jolted to a stop, Lauren bounced up so violently that the top of her head slammed against its roof. This was horrible for a number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that Lauren was the tallest girl in the class and already self-conscious about it. Now she would have an unsightly purple bruise on her forehead that screamed, "Look at me, I'm so tall, my head consistently hits the ceiling!"

Lauren was sitting alone in her seat. Tasha, Mary, and Vanessa were squeezed into a seat a few rows ahead of her, whispering and laughing. Lauren rolled her eyes. Her best friends were upset with her for not inviting them to her birthday party. It had been a family-only affair. Lauren's parents had forbidden her from inviting any friends. Unfortunately, Beth Canter's family had been at the same restaurant, and Beth had taken a picture of her and Lauren and posted it to Instagram. So now Lauren's friends thought she had invited *Beth* to her birthday and not them. Lauren groaned and leaned her forehead against the grimy window.

Someone swept into the seat next to her. "Everything okay, Tripod?"

She turned to face her new bus partner. "Hi, Billy," Lauren said. "Yup, everything is fine."

"You look kind of down," he said. Billy had a really nice grin, bright white, with a little gap in the center of his two front teeth. Billy and Lauren had been neighbors ever since she could remember, but her parents and his parents didn't get along: something had happened once involving a hedge, and now the families never spoke.

"Yeah, I don't know," Lauren said. Her eyes involuntarily passed toward the front of the bus, where Tash, Mary, and Ness were sitting. They had just had just begun to laugh so loudly that the sound had spread to the back of the bus.

"Ignore them," Billy said. "I don't know what happened, but you guys are always getting into fights and then making up, like, a week later."

Lauren sighed. "You're totally right."

Billy's milky grin widened. "Girls are so weird," he said. "Why can't you just relax and get along?"

Lauren joined him in smiling. "I honestly don't know."

The bus lurched to a stop. They had arrived at the museum, and their classmates were standing and stretching.

"Want to be my field trip buddy?" Lauren asked Billy. Finding a field trip buddy was mandatory; they were all required to keep an eye out for one another when their class went anywhere. Lauren, Tash, Ness, and Mary usually formed two groups of two, but given the circumstances, Lauren figured she should expand her horizons.

Billy's eyes brightened like a couple of small bulbs. "Yeah, I do!" he said.

He sounded enthusiastic. And as Lauren followed him off the bus, she noticed something thrilling: she couldn't see over Billy's head.

The class gathered in the imposing hallway entrance to the museum as Mr. Pink and Mrs. Rogers divided them into groups. Lauren and Billy would accompany Mr. Pink, and Lauren's erstwhile friends would go with Mrs. Rogers. Lauren found that she didn't really mind.

In the front exhibition room, a dinosaur skeleton towered above them. Mr. Pink stopped the group in front of the skeleton and began speaking about how large it was, and how when archeologists initially found it, they imagined that it was the tallest dinosaur skeleton that would ever be discovered.

"That's how I feel," Lauren muttered to Billy, leaning in close so he could hear. He smelled nice.

He began laughing under his breath and grabbed and squeezed her hand. The rest of the class moved forward, trailing Mr. Pink to the hall of Neanderthals. Lauren walked on slower, took her time.

Why had she never really noticed Billy before? Lauren and Billy had grown up together. Well, they had grown up together before their parents had gotten into that argument. Lauren thought back and realized that she hadn't really spent time with Billy since the fifth grade. How strange.

Lauren had fallen somewhat behind the group and hurried to catch up. Billy was waiting for her at the edge of the cluster of other students.

"Want to ditch this and go check out the whale room?" he asked.

"Sure," Lauren said. She suddenly became anxious, her stomach a tight fist.

They feigned interest in the diorama Mr. Pink had just finished describing, and waited until the rest of the group had moved on to the next room. Billy seemed to know exactly where to go, and he led Lauren

through other rooms lined with crammed cabinets until they reached a hulking, dark, cool, blue room. A life-size blue whale hung suspended from the ceiling.

They sat on the dark leather stools under the whale, gazing up at its belly.

"Isn't it amazing?" asked Billy.

Lauren turned her head to look at him. He was focused so intently on the whale: his eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open slightly.

He leaned back on his elbows and sighed. "It's so massive. It makes you feel minuscule in comparison, like your problems are just drops in the bucket, doesn't it?"

Lauren nodded gently, mimicking him and leaning down on the stool.

He chuckled. "You and your friends are going to be fine," he said. "I'm the one with the issues."

"You?" Lauren asked. "What's happening?" Billy was friendly and well-liked; he'd seemed relatively carefree until just now.

His smile faded, and he bit his lip. "My parents are getting a divorce," he half-mumbled. He tilted his head further back, as though wanting to block out everything but the underside of the whale.

Lauren put her hand lightly on his shoulder. As she did, he let out a long, slow breath. Lauren didn't know quite what to say, but she could tell from Billy's face and his breathing that he felt relieved. It was clear that he'd needed to tell someone. The best she could do, she figured, was to listen. So she tipped her head back and joined him in the blue.