

The GIFT



Jim Westcott

red rhino

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1
TRAPPED

My parents are opposites. They never agree.



OTHER OPPOSITES

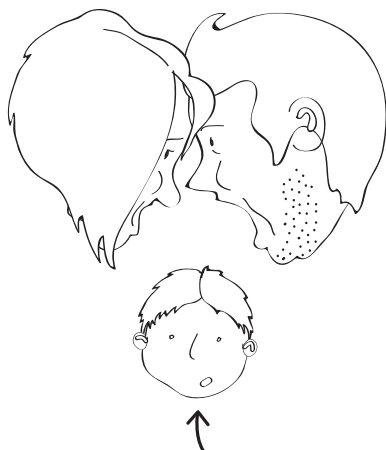
“Come on, Zeke. Practice time,” Dad calls.
“Let’s do it. Three hundred kicks.”

“You don’t have to,” Mom tells me. “Soccer is supposed to be fun.”

“He’s fine. Don’t baby him.” Dad says this a lot.

“Well, Coach,” Mom snaps back. “Keep it up. Soon he’ll hate soccer. And you!”

I feel trapped between them. There’s no way out.



STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

“Tell your mom you like soccer,” Dad shouts.

“It’s okay if he hates it,” Mom yells.

I know they aren’t really arguing about



me. Their problems run much deeper. Still, it's hard to be stuck in the middle.

The truth is, I really like soccer. I'm pretty good too. But Dad coaches my team. He's hard on me. Sometimes he even yells at me during games. My teammates aren't treated this way.

ZEKE!

**COME
ON!**



**GET IN THE
GAME, SON!**

I love my dad. He just gets so worked up about soccer.

One day, Mom tells Dad I want to quit the team. She says it's because of him. I wish she hadn't done this. But I don't respond. My opinion won't matter.

“Is this true, Zeke?” Dad asks in his coach voice.

I just stare at the floor. Dad walks away.

A week later, he moves out. Then it’s just Mom and me. I am no longer part of their tug-of-war.

Mom apologizes. “It’s not your fault,” she says. I know that. Their fighting drove them apart.

Sometimes Mom drives me nuts. She worries so much. Now that Dad’s gone, she never stops.

“What’s wrong, Zeke?”

“You look sad.”

“Is school okay?”

“How are you doing?”

“Talk to me. You can tell me.”

My responses are always the same.

“Nothing, Mom.”



“Everything’s fine.”

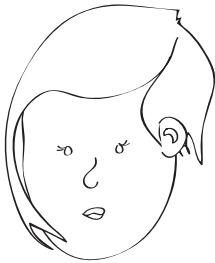
“School is good.”

“I’m okay.”

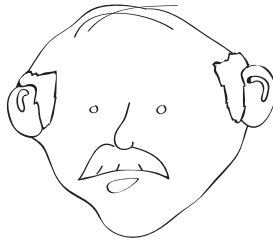
“There’s nothing to say.”

“Nothing.” Mom shakes her head. “I hate that word.”

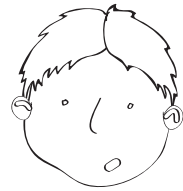
Soon, Grandpa comes to live with us. This feels like a new life. Mom seems happier. But I miss Dad.



↑
MOM



↑
GRANDPA



↑
ME

When I tell Mom school is good, it’s a bit of a lie. I used to have soccer practice to look forward to at the end of the day. But



I'm off the team. It makes me sad. Now my classes feel long and boring. Then one day, a new kid shows up.

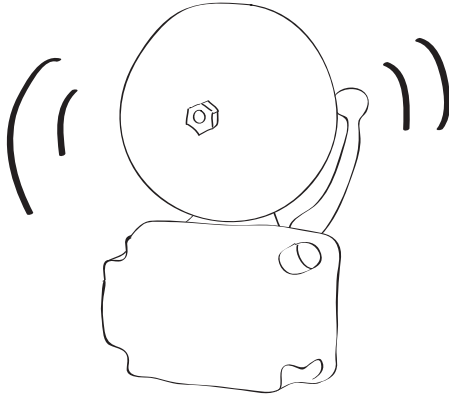


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THE NEW KID

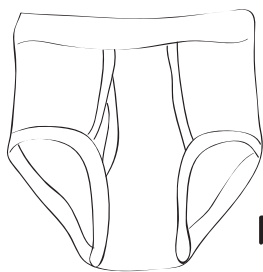
It's a normal morning. The first bell rings. Today, class starts with a state capitals word search. I grab a sheet from the front table. Then I head to my seat.

RIIIING!



The new kid sits in Tim Shay's old chair. Tim moved to Mrs. Somer's class. He had to get away from Max Fisk.

Max is a bully. He's really big for a sixth-grader. There are rumors that he's older. Some kids say he's 16. Tim was Max's main target. The poor kid got swirlies and wedgies—all the mean stuff. With Tim gone, Max is looking for someone new to pick on.



← **THE
WORST
FOR WEDGIES**

A-U-S-T-I-N. Slowly, I circle the letters. It's hard to focus. *B-O-I-S-E*. The new kid



doesn't even have a pencil. He just sits there.

D-O-V-E-R. I stare at the word search. *S-A-L-E-M*. It's no use. The kid is too distracting. Quickly, I sneak a peek. He's looking around the room. I have to say something.

"Hey! Morning work is up there." I point to the front table. "It's a word search. Do you know your state capitals?"

New kids are usually jumpy. But this one isn't. He doesn't even flinch.

Our teacher, Mrs. Barnes, doesn't say anything. She gets right into the lesson.

Hmm, I think. That's weird.

"Okay, class. Who can name the Midwest states?"

The new kid just sits there. I feel bad. Maybe he needs help or something. But



Mrs. Barnes ignores him. She doesn't even introduce him to the class.

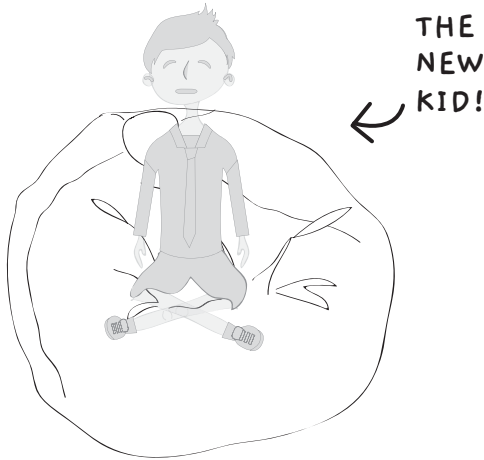
After recess, he's gone. His chair is empty. It stays that way for the rest of the day.



That night, I lie in bed. My room is dark. I close my eyes, then open them again. Slowly, they adjust. It takes a few minutes.

I look around at my stuff. Then my body goes cold. *No way, I think. It can't be.*

The new kid is sitting in my beanbag chair. He's grinning. I dive for the door.



I'm down the stairs in a flash. "Mom!" I pant. "There's someone in my room. It's a new kid from school. He showed up today and acted really weird. Now he's here!"

Mom grabs a heavy pan and goes to my room. I follow close behind her.

