

Squealer

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Toby was a treasure hunter. He knelt upon the ground, excavating his latest find. So many children must have stepped over it, but Toby had an uncommonly good eye for interesting things.

Snail shells, colourful leaves, shiny objects, and forgotten toys filled his bedroom. His mother had begun to refer to it as *the garden*. Their real garden, once full of wonders, was sadly depleted. The school grounds had much more to offer the eager seeker.

At last, the dirt released its hold on the treasure. Toby tossed his stick aside and polished the object on his shorts. It was smoother than any other rock in the ground, and much shinier. Shortly, he began to notice other colours in the stone – bright stripes of orange and brown between the black.

‘What are you doing?’

Toby looked up. A girl in his class smiled down at him.

‘Finding treasures.’

Mackenzie’s round blue eyes fixated on his hand. ‘What’s that?’

Toby stood and presented his find.

Mackenzie appraised it with her lips scrunched to one side.

‘It’s a tiger rock,’ he explained. ‘A tiger from a thousand years ago must have laid it here.’

Her eyes glittered in awe. Toby’s chest swelled. He allowed himself a smile.

Suddenly, Mackenzie’s hands shot to her hips.

‘You’re not allowed to play with rocks. I’m going to tell on you.’

Toby's gaze snapped to Mrs Gryffin. She stood by the sandpit in a fluoro vest. He closed his fist around the tiger rock as Mackenzie pivoted towards her.

'Wait!' Toby exclaimed. He dug within his pockets and pulled out three acorns, a blue button, and a piece of bark with colourful layers you could tear off piece by piece. 'You can have one of these if you don't tell.'

Mackenzie gazed at the items in disinterest.

Toby fished more from his pockets. A cork, a flower bud, a little stone which was perfectly flat, and a silver coin.

Mackenzie's eyes glittered. 'That one,' she said.

Toby was sad to give away the coin. He liked the way it sparkled in the sun. That's how he had found it by the canteen.

'And you have to play with me for the rest of recess,' Mackenzie demanded, stowing the treasure away.

Toby's gaze went again to Mrs Gryffin. He thought about her loud, booming voice.

'Ok,' he said.

Toby followed Mackenzie. He knew precisely where she was leading him—to a little bar in the playground she liked to flip on.

Mackenzie sat upon it. She curled her legs around the bar and tipped back, hanging upside down by her knees. 'Do it,' she said. 'It's easy.'

Toby had tried enough times to know it was not easy. He usually ended up on the mulch with the wind knocked out of him. Slowly, he shook his head.

'Watch me!' Mackenzie pulled herself up again to attempt another trick.

Toby's eyes scanned the ground, searching as he always did, for more treasures.

There was a sprinkling of tiny stars on the woodchips. Toby didn't know where they had come from. Perhaps a birthday card?

There was a red one, and a purple one, and a green one, and...

'Toby, look at me!'

He turned.

Mackenzie executed a perfect front flip on the bar.

'That's cool,' Toby said.

'I'm going to do it again.'

'Ok.'

Toby bent to the ground.

'Are you watching?'

'Yes.'

No.

He quickly stashed the stars in his pocket and stood up as Mackenzie righted herself.

'I don't know why you can't do it, Toby. It's so easy.'

To Toby's relief, the music started to play, signalling the end of recess. Both children hurried back to their classroom and joined the line outside the door.

'Let's be partners.' Mackenzie squeezed Toby's hand in hers.

The bell sounded.

Mrs Slinks appeared at the door, dressed in her usual polo shirt, and looking in her usual sour temper.

She instructed them to sit on the floor. The class chatted and giggled amongst themselves as she wrote on the whiteboard.

Mackenzie leant over to Toby and whispered, 'You're a crocodile.'

Toby smiled. 'You're a elephant.'

'You're a dog.'

'You're a sheep.'

‘You’re a cow.’

‘You’re a pig.’

Mackenzie’s hand shot into the air. Toby frowned at her.

At last, Mrs Slinks turned around. ‘Yes, Mackenzie?’

‘Mrs Slinks, Toby called me a pig!’

Toby gaped.

‘Toby, corner!’ Mrs Slinks pointed imperiously.

Toby stood on trembling legs. The whole class had fallen silent.

‘But she...’ Toby began.

Mrs Slinks’ firm expression was unwavering. Toby knew the look well. He also knew there was no point trying to explain himself. He’d only get yelled at for talking back.

He shuffled to the corner at the front of the room, face flushing pink.

The other children watched him for a while, then gradually turned their attention to Mrs Slinks as she began the lesson.

Toby looked at Mackenzie. A little smile played on her lips. She seemed to be trying hard to contain it. Her eyes glittered in the same way they did when she saw the coin.

Toby’s eyes were starting to glitter too, but with tears. He sniffed, trying, and failing, to keep them in.

At long last, his sentence reached its end. Mrs Slinks led him back to the table he shared with Mackenzie and made him apologise.

‘That’s ok,’ Mackenzie said, graciously bestowing him with a glowing smile.

She kept up a pleasant demeanour through the lesson, which Toby did not attempt to return.

When lunch arrived, Toby got his box out of his bag and sat down.

Mackenzie had retrieved more than just her lunchbox. A sheet of stickers rested beside it, full of shiny insects in an array of colours. Some of the beetles even had glittery shells. The stickers were raised and appeared to have a squishy texture. Toby longed to touch them.

Mackenzie picked up the sheet. 'You can have one if you play with me at lunch.'

Toby hesitated. The stickers shone alluringly. He clenched his little fists under the table.

'I'll play with you!' said a girl across from them.

'Ok!' Mackenzie beamed. 'Which one do you want?'

'The dragonfly.'

'No, that one's my favourite.'

'Can I have that butterfly?'

Mackenzie pinched her lips to the side. 'You can have the bee if you want?'

'Ok!'

Mackenzie got up and placed the sticker on Olivia's chest.

Shortly, everybody at the table but Toby had been anointed a sticker. With so many new friends at her disposal, Toby was swiftly forgotten.

When the bell released them into the yard, most of the class ran towards the junior fort.

The school had three.

The middle fort was across the oval for the grade threes and fours. The senior fort was tucked behind buildings at a distant corner of the school. Toby had not yet gathered the nerve to venture there himself.

He paused halfway to the junior fort, watching the little flock which trailed Mackenzie to the bar.

It was no longer safe to go treasure hunting there. Mackenzie might threaten to tell a teacher on him again. She might take more of his treasures. Or worse, Toby might be forced to watch her flip for the rest of lunch.

Swiftly, he made his decision.

He turned and ran across the basketball courts, past the canteen, and around the corner towards the senior classrooms. When he was out of sight of the junior fort, Toby did what he loved to do best.

He found many more interesting things.

First, a pure white rock in a gutter. Second, a bouncy ball hidden within a garden bed. Third, a spiky green thing which had fallen from a tree over the fence. He liked this one the best. Toby played with it in his pocket, enjoying the prickly sensation on his palm—even if it did make his skin start to itch a little.

‘Oi, get off!’

Toby jumped. A grade six boy, twice Toby’s height, strode towards him. He carried a ball under his arm.

It occurred to Toby that he had wandered into the middle of their game.

He scampered to the side, and was just taking cover behind a staircase, when a much kinder voice spoke behind him.

‘Hi, what’s your name?’

A group of girls sat at the top of the steps. They were cutting and glueing things. The girl who spoke to him had warm, brown eyes. He liked the way they creased when she smiled. He swung on the bar of the steps.

‘Toby,’ he mouthed. It came out scarcely above a whisper.

‘My name’s Beth. You can play with us if you want.’

Toby *did* want.

He looked at the pipe cleaners and coloured paper. The googly eyes and pompoms. The sequins.

Toby nodded shyly and edged up the steps.

‘I’m making origami.’ Beth produced a pair of flowers folded out of coloured paper. ‘But you can make anything you want.’

Toby smiled. He was still squeezing the spiky ball in his fist. He took it out and put it down in front of him.

After some deliberation, he picked up a pipe cleaner. Experimentally, he tried stabbing it into the ball. It slid in. Toby leant over to retrieve a pair of scissors.

He tried to cut the pipe cleaner.

‘Let me help you,’ Beth said.

Soon, the spiky ball had four pieces of pipe cleaner sticking out of it. They looked like tiny legs.

Toby selected a pompom and used another piece of pipe cleaner to jam it into the ball. Then, he stuck two googly eyes on the pompom.

He admired his creation as he waited for the glue to dry.

He was having much more fun than he’d ever had at the junior fort. Here, there were treasures, craft, and nice girls who didn’t make him watch them when he’d rather be looking at other things.

He didn’t want the music to start playing. He didn’t want the bell to ring. He didn’t want to return to the classroom with Mackenzie and Mrs Stinks—a name he had affectionately appointed to his teacher during his time in the corner. He wouldn’t dare use it to her face, of course, but it made him feel better to refer to her as such in his head.

He curled the rest of the pipe cleaner around his finger. It squeezed tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

He exhaled and slipped it off.

Toby tipped his head to the side. It looked just like a pig’s tail.

He picked up his creation and slid the back of the pipe cleaner into its butt.

There. All done.

‘Ooh, that’s cute!’ said a girl across the circle.

Toby smiled.

‘What’s its name?’ asked Beth.

Toby gazed at his pig thoughtfully.

‘Squealer.’

‘It’s like a little pet,’ she said. ‘Will you make me one?’

‘Ok!’ Toby emptied his pockets, searching for something else he could use. He picked up his flat rock, a pinch of sequins, a scrap of paper, and a googly eye.

He worked diligently, hoping to bring an even bigger smile to Beth’s face.

He was soon rewarded for his efforts.

‘I love it!’ Beth said, taking her fish. It was complete with colourful scales and a tail fin, secured with sticky tape.

Toby beamed.

‘Make one for me now,’ said another girl.

Shortly, Toby had turned his stripy rock into a crouching tiger, his flower bud into an octopus, and one of his acorns into a nesting bird.

Then, the dreaded music began, bringing an end to Toby’s pleasure.

The girls started to pack up.

As Toby stood to wave goodbye, Beth said, ‘Do you want to play with us again tomorrow? I’m going to bring shells, I think, and Emily’s bringing stickers.’

Toby nodded quickly, his little heart glowing in anticipation.

‘I’m going to find more things,’ he promised.

Nothing could dampen Toby's spirits for the final hour of the day—even the computer room troll who had a particular aversion to children. All he could think about was the fun he was going to have tomorrow with his new friends.

Toby had never spent a happier week at school.

He swiftly gained acclaim amongst the seniors. His little creatures were so popular in Beth's class that Toby was inundated with lollies, marbles, massages, and piggyback rides in exchange for one (or more) of his creations.

During lunch on Friday, the boy who had scared him off the court offered Toby a ride around the whole school in payment for a duck he'd made from a cork.

Toby would never forget the way the kids on the junior fort turned to see him parading by on the back of the biggest boy in the school, trailed by a group of senior friends, all holding his creatures.

A couple of kids from Toby's class came over to see what all the fuss was about. They were swiftly swept up in the pack.

'Can you make one for me?' Olivia asked on their way back to class. 'I can give you my sticker?'

Toby looked at the little bee, which had not moved from her chest in the last week.

'Ok.'

She tore it off and presented it to Toby.

She was not the only one from Toby's class to ask. Three more did after school.

Toby worked very hard over the weekend on all his creatures. He even used his mum's paint to add spots, stripes, and smiling mouths.

He felt some trepidation bringing them into school. He thought Mrs Slinks might yell at him for playing with rocks, but she made no comment as the creatures started appearing on the tables.

Perhaps a rock is not a rock if it has eyes, Toby thought to himself.

At recess, as Toby was taking his lunchbox from his bag, Mackenzie sauntered up to him.

‘Can I have one of your creatures?’

Toby considered her offer. Never before had he demanded payment, but there was something that he wanted from Mackenzie.

‘If you give me a coin.’

‘Ok!’ Mackenzie dashed to her bag and returned with the very same silver coin he had found by the canteen.

Making good on his promise, Toby procured a creature from his own bag.

‘You can have Squealer if you want?’

Mackenzie laid her round, glittering eyes upon the pig. She carried him carefully to their table and stood him upon her pencil case.

Toby felt a smirk playing at his lips as the lesson commenced.