



*** **Red** ***



It's no big deal.
It's something so small.
No one else even sees it.
Only me.
I point at Tommy's cheeks.
"You're... You're blushing..."

I wink at Paul. Paul grins at Freddy.

Lisa bursts out laughing.



We whisper color into Tommy's cheeks.

From tomato to strawberry to cherry red.

"Leave me alone!" says Tommy with a sigh.

But there's no stopping us.

"Do it again! Do it again!" we tell him.



It's like magic.

A snap of the fingers, and his cheeks start glowing.

Tommy's face is as red as a fire truck.

"Leave me alone!" Tommy says again.

Paul laughs.

Every time Paul laughs, Tommy gets a little quieter.

And quieter.

And Paul gets louder.

Much louder.



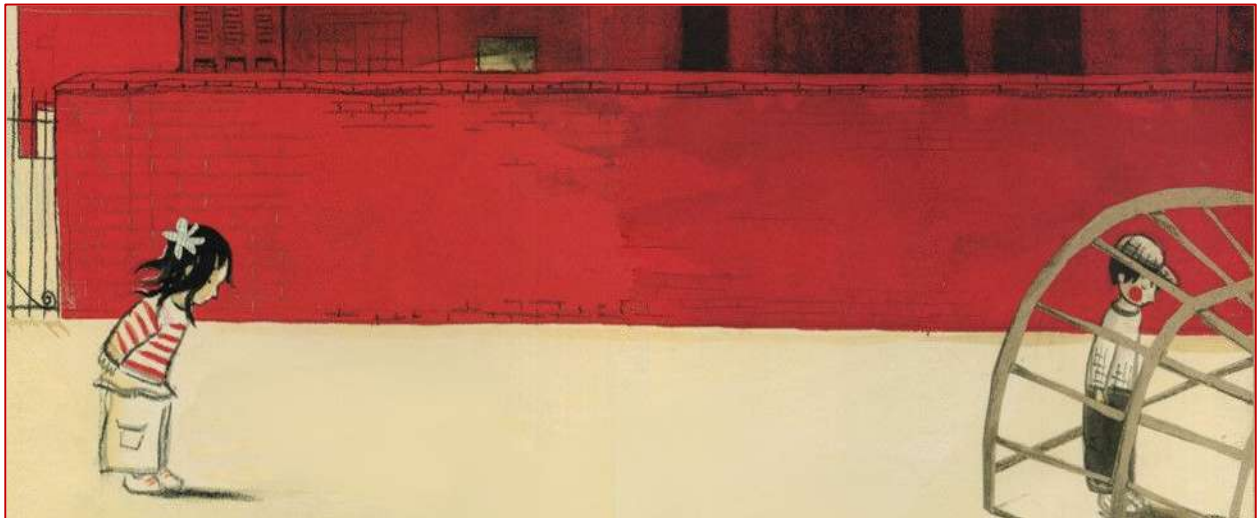
This isn't funny anymore.

I want it to stop.

I want Paul to stop right now.

I actually think Tommy is pretty nice.

But it doesn't stop.



Paul stares at me.

"Got something to say?"

He gives Tommy a push.

I shrug my shoulders and bite my lip.

I don't say anything.



I'm scared of Paul.

His tongue is as sharp as a knife.

And his fist is as hard as a brick.

He's twice as strong as me.

There's no way I can stand up to him on my own.



"Who saw what happened?" our teacher asks.

Should I say something? Why me?

Me? Against the rest of the class?

No way. I'm not crazy.

What I want to do is scream really loud.

And pound my fists.

And yell that it has to stop.

But I stay silent.

The teacher asks again.

"Did anyone see what happened?"

Silence.

You could hear a pin drop.

Paul grins.

I gulp.

My mouth won't move, but my hand wants to go up.



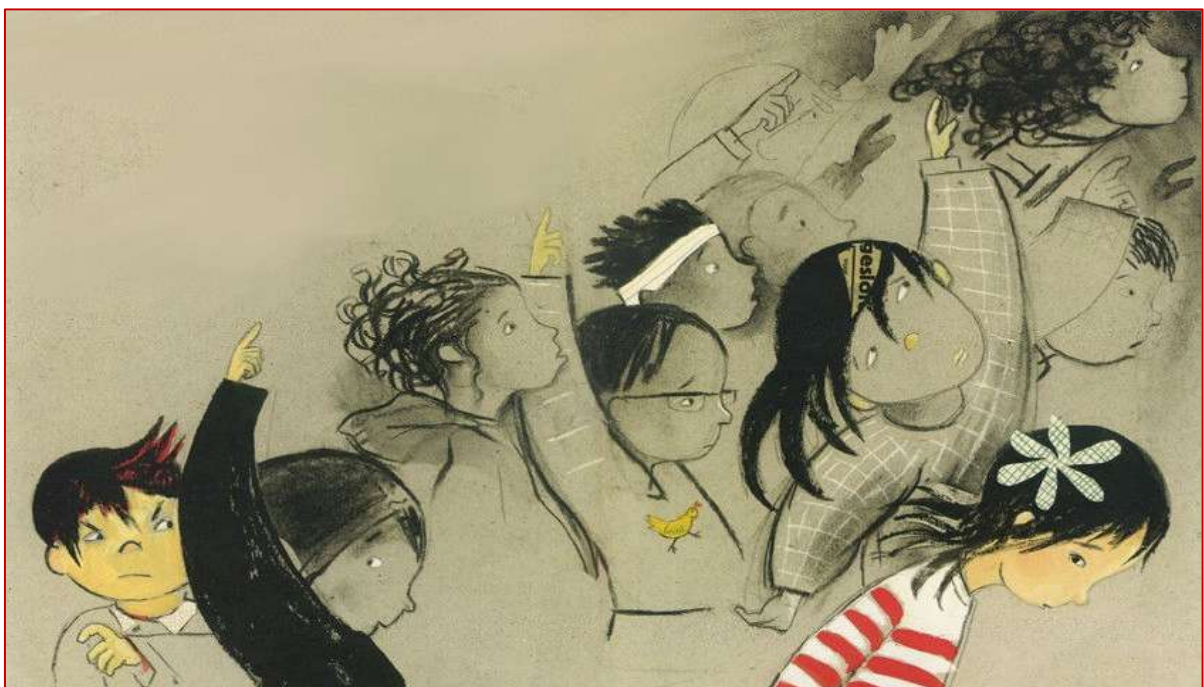
No, I don't want to do that.

Not all on my own.



Then Lisa raises her hand.

"I saw it too," she says.



Freddy is next.

Then Dan and Lars.

Hands in the air.

Everyone saw what happened.

We all talk at once.

I can breathe again.

I'm not all on my own.

It's not over yet.

Paul storms up to me.

"You!" he growls, with his fists up.



Lisa comes to stand beside me. So does Freddy.

"Is there a problem?" says Lisa.

"Got something to say?" asks Freddie.

Paul turns around.

Paul's face has gone green.

Like he's just bitten into a sour apple.

He's not laughing now.



Tommy smiles at me.

"Sometimes I go red," he says.

"Who... who doesn't?" I stammer.

"Want to play soccer?" asks Tommy.

I nod. My cheeks are glowing now.

I give the ball a kick.



Jan De Kinder

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