

# Not now, Brody

Mrs Wilson was really very nice. Brody's mum was determined that this was so, having met her once at the supermarket, and there was no persuading her otherwise. It annoyed Brody because all the kids knew that the only reason Mrs Wilson had started working as a midday supervisor at the school was that she loved to lord it over children.

Mrs Wilson was a demon in the lunch hall, brandishing her cleaning spray like an automatic weapon, wiping you off your table the moment the last spoonful of dessert reached your mouth. Brody had often wondered if someone would keel over one day from disinfectant poisoning. It was as though Mrs Wilson was on a mission to

erase every last trace of forensic evidence of these verminous children from the school hall.

Outside, she patrolled the playground with the



grimness of an army major whose latest bunch of recruits was a terrible disappointment. Brody knew his class wasn't particularly bad. Nor were any of the other classes actually, though Mrs Wilson maintained the whole lot of them were disobedient and rude. If you fell over and grazed your knee, she would march you inside, and while you were pinned to the chair she'd give you a lecture about how the children in previous years had been so much less rough, so much politer. If you believed what she said then the year-group who'd just left had been actual angels. But Brody had a brother in that year, so he knew this wasn't true. When he asked his brother, his brother said Mrs Wilson had always told children the same thing. It was pathetic, Brody thought. Did she really think kids didn't talk to each other?

Brody had got stuck in the chair once – only once, mind you – and had been on the receiving end of this tirade while Mrs Wilson swabbed his leg with enough antiseptic to sanitise an entire hospital. He was sure she used as much as possible because she knew it hurt. And there was no gentle dabbing either. It was rub, rub, rub! None of the other midday supervisors were like that. Since then, Brody had always got up as quickly as he could, dusted himself off and run on, even when his eyes watered with the pain. You didn't want to get caught.

The trouble was, it was more or less impossible to

avoid Mrs Wilson. She seemed to be everywhere, storming across the hall or playground like she'd just been waiting for an excuse. One thing Brody particularly hated about her was the way she would make up rules on the spot, always things you weren't allowed to do or games you weren't allowed to play. It was no use appealing to the other supervisors either, even though some of them were teaching assistants. They just did what adults always do and stuck together.

"You need to listen to what Mrs Wilson tells you," they would say. "If she doesn't want you do something, there's bound to be a good reason."

Nobody ever specified what this reason might be, and Brody was sure he'd once seen Miss Taylor raise an eyebrow at Mrs Halliard when she said it. He hoped one of the teachers might say something, even perhaps Mr. Pewsey, if everyone else was too chicken. But the headteacher just wrung his hands and approached Mrs Wilson with a face like a dog that expects to be kicked. No, it was a part of Brody's life at St. Andrew's Primary that Mrs Wilson was a law unto herself.

The day that changed was a Wednesday in May. The willows were in full leaf, which was more significant than it might seem, and the air was still and hot. The Reception children finished their lunch first, and came out in their

sun hats to play on the main part of the playground, followed soon after by the Year Ones. The younger children didn't generally play on the field at lunch play, so they were unaware of the presence of a very unusual visitor inside the school grounds.

In the staff-room, one of the teachers was flicking through the news on her phone, but it was the national news she was looking at and the story hadn't travelled that far yet. It would. It would be one of the biggest stories of the year and would earn the children of St. Andrew's half a day off school a fortnight later, as well as all the fabulous disruption and distraction caused by the presence of journalists. That went on for some time after the police, fire service, ambulance crews, and zoo staff had gone.

The first Brody knew of it was the shrieks of a gaggle of Year Three girls who had wandered up the field to sit in the shade of the willow tunnel, and who now scattered. The tunnel had been planted two years before and had grown into quite a thicket, and the school's groundsman had begun this morning pruning the long fronds that had sprouted across the inside, so that the children would be able to go along it again. He'd begun at the far end, before being called away unexpectedly, which meant that what lay inside was invisible from the playground.

Brody watched the girls cluster together again at a

safe distance, heads bent, seemingly comparing notes. Then one girl, Rashida, detached herself from the group and tiptoed over to the willow tunnel again. Curious, Brody headed up the field to see what had caused the kerfuffle.

He was half way across the grass when Rashida leapt backwards. "It is!" she shrieked. "There's a tiger!"

Brody broke into a trot, towards the willow tunnel rather than away from it, undeterred by Rashida pelting down the field past him. He wondered if he was making a mistake, but the mere thought that a tiger might be in the school grounds was both so exciting and so fantastically unlikely that he wanted to know the truth as soon as possible.

As he got close, he slowed down and crept forward quietly, as if he really were stalking a tiger. From just a few paces away, it was impossible to see anything through the blade-like leaves that covered the tunnel. Brody didn't feel sure there was anything to see anyway. True, Rashida had seemed genuinely scared, but logic decreed that it was much more likely she was somehow mistaken. Perhaps it



was a large toy animal, put there as a joke by the groundsman, or perhaps ... Brody couldn't think of any other explanation.

About half a metre away, he stopped and stared into the willows, listening intently for the slightest noise. His heart had started to pound, getting louder with every beat so that it felt like it might be enough to frighten the fiercest animal away. There was no chance of hearing a tiger's breathing over that, not that a soft toy would breathe.

Then, between the leaves, he saw a small, swift movement. He blinked. It must have been a bird, he told himself. He didn't know whether he wanted that to be true or not. He edged closer. His blood thrummed in his ears. There it was again. Only this time, he saw it properly. Not a bird. It was the flick of an ear. Through the willow wall he saw a swivelling motion. A great head turned soundlessly towards him. Huge, amber eyes appraised him. Every hair on Brody's skinny arms stood up.

Now that he'd got his eye in, he could clearly see the rest of the tiger stretched out in the shade: the enormous front paws nestled among the leaves the groundsman had cut off, while the back legs lay casually to one side beneath the long, sinuous body, the tail curled round the powerful haunches. A part of Brody's brain marvelled at how

camouflaged it was. Its tawny fur ought to have been obvious against the green of the grass and leaves. Yet its stripes made it blend perfectly with the shadows.

He held his breath. In the ten long seconds that followed, a remarkable number of thoughts passed through his head: he considered how much flesh there was on his own body, and weighed this against the possible appetite of the tiger; he recalled a film of a tiger hunting, and tried to work out whether he had any chance of outrunning it, if it should decide on him for dinner; he evaluated the various means of putting distance between him and the animal, trying to decide whether slow and steady would be better than swift and surprising; and lastly, he wondered if anyone was going to come soon enough to rescue him, whether by fighting the tiger off or – more likely – by providing a more appealing meal prospect.



In fact, most of the children were now down at the far end of the playground, drawn by the wails of the Year Three girls who had fled to a safe distance. The staff on playground duty were down there too, attempting to restore calm and establish what had happened, in the face of growing hysteria. Only Mrs Wilson was up at the top of the playground, pinning Carlos Lopez to the fence and shouting at him.

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