

## Slinging Mud by Ben Davis



Ms Henry was showing a nature documentary in class. As a hippo waddled onto the screen and was rolling forwards and backwards at a lake's edge, getting covered in the sludge - I felt a poke in my back. I turned around and saw Charlotte and Amelia giggling.

'What?' I whispered.

'That's you, Maisie,' Amelia hissed.

'Don't be mean,' said Charlotte. 'The hippo's not that fat.'

I turned away from them, my face burning with anger. Charlotte and Amelia had been my best friends all through primary, but in secondary school, they had turned on me. They started off just ignoring me, but it soon moved on to nasty remarks and notes pushed into my locker.

When I got home from school that day, I shut myself in the bathroom and stared at my reflection. Maybe they were right. I never used to think of myself as fat, but I could be in denial. I pinched the flesh on my tummy. If I got rid of that, maybe they'd take me back?

The answer came with the thud of an apple hitting the back of my head. 'Eat more fruit, fatty,' Charlotte yelled.

My new friend, Libby, saw what had happened and came rushing over.

'Are you going to tell a teacher?' she asked.

I gently touched the swelling on my head and said I'd think about it, but I knew I wouldn't. Ms Henry would tell me I'm being silly. Or maybe she'd tell my parents. What would Charlotte and Amelia do then? They knew where I lived. I'd just have to ignore it and hope they got bored.

A few days later, after the usual names and insults being thrown at me, I got an email. It was from a boy I barely knew. It said, 'What's your problem?' I had no idea what he was talking about. Before I could respond, another one popped up, just swearing at me... then another... each one coming from a different person. I scrolled down and saw what had happened. I'd emailed everyone in our year, calling them stinky losers. Except I hadn't. I'd been hacked! I thought about explaining myself to Libby but it would sound made up. There's no way she'd believe me.

Of course, I knew who did it, but I couldn't tell Ms Henry. I had no way of proving it. And it was my own fault for not changing my password. Besides, I was scared. The idea of telling anyone filled me with dread. I didn't want the fuss, or attention. I just wanted it to stop.

I left school at lunch and walked. I kept walking as far as I could. I stopped on the bridge over the railway line and watched the trains disappear into the distance. I wished I was on one.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked behind me and saw Libby.

'How did you know I'd be here?' I asked.

'I come here when I'm sad, too,' she said. 'I had a feeling you might be the same.'

I turned away and looked at the tracks below.

'I know you didn't send that email, Maisie,' she said.

I sniffed. 'Really?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'You're too nice. Besides, your spelling is way better than that.'

I laughed a little, which felt nice, but weird.

'We're going to talk to Ms Henry,' said Libby.

I looked at her. 'But I'm too...'

'Scared?' she said. 'I know. That's normal. But if you run away, they win. And do you really think they deserve that?'

I went to argue, but stopped. She was right. I'd done nothing wrong. They should be worried, not me.

I took a deep breath and nodded. 'OK,' I said. 'Let's go.'

I wasn't going to let them drag my name in the mud again. Everyone would know what they had done. Libby said I was being really brave and I knew she was right. If I didn't act, it wouldn't stop and I had the power to do something about it once and for all.