How Bad Could It Be?

A prank doesn’t really hurt anyone. Right?

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he thing was, Kevin had this way about him. It made Ben want to do what Kevin was doing, partly because it looked like fun, but more because it made Ben nervous not to. Just this morning at the bus stop, as a fall chill hung in the air, Kevin told Ben about his newest great idea.

“When we get on the bus,” Kevin said, “you sit next to that weird kid, the one nobody ever sits with.”

“Truman?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, him. I’ll take the seat across the way,” Kevin continued.

Ben looked down. He didn’t like the sound of this already. He flicked at some dirt with the tip of his sneaker. It wasn’t like Kevin was so big and tough or anything. He was smart, but he wasn’t some genius mastermind. The truth was, Ben didn’t really know why Kevin had so much power over him. All he knew was that Truman hadn’t done anything to anyone. Truman was quiet. He was really good at art, and he kept mostly to himself.

Ben didn’t agree, but he didn’t refuse, hoping that maybe Kevin would forget about his idea by the time the bus came. But of course, he didn’t.

“Oh, man. Don’t tell me you like Truman,” Kevin said, as if that were the worst thing in the world.

“No,” Ben answered quickly.

“OK then, so when the bus makes that one sharp left, we both lean into Truman and squish him. Get it?”

**Ben got it. He just didn’t feel like doing it.**

“That’s dumb,” Ben told Kevin, and when they got on the bus, Ben didn’t sit down next to Truman.

He knew it was a risk to ignore Kevin’s instructions, but how bad could it be? Instead, Ben sat, like he always did, next to Kevin, and Kevin didn’t say anything more about his Truman-squishing idea.

See, no big deal?
But when the bus made that sharp turn onto Main Street, Kevin pressed all his weight into Ben and kept pressing hard the entire rest of the way to school.

“What did you do that for?” Ben asked Kevin as they stepped off.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kevin answered.

**Ben rubbed his shoulder, but it wasn’t worth getting into a fight.** It was over. The bell rang, and they both headed off to their classrooms. Ben didn’t see Kevin again until third-period art, and wouldn’t you know it, Truman was at the table right in front of Kevin and Ben.

“Well, it’s Halloween next week,” Mr. Caleb, the art teacher, announced. He walked around between the tall art tables and stools. “And your grade is in charge of this season’s hall decorations.”

Art wasn’t Ben’s best subject, but he really liked Mr. Caleb. Everyone liked Mr. Caleb. It was the way he listened like he was really interested, the way he helped kids with their work, so even if you weren’t the best at drawing, your project came out looking pretty good.

Mr. Caleb never got mad at anyone for no reason, and he never raised his voice, even if he was angry.

“So make sure to give your best effort,” Mr. Caleb went on. “These will be on display for the whole school.”

Truman was already busy, standing over his table, putting the finishing touches on last week’s art project. Ben knew Truman’s pumpkin face would be one of the best.

“Hey, Peanutboy,” Kevin leaned forward and said when Mr. Caleb was searching in the supply cabinet. Everyone knew that besides being really good in art, Truman had a serious peanut allergy.

**“Wanna Snickers bar?”**

Truman didn’t hear, or pretended he didn’t, but
either way he didn’t answer. Luckily, at that moment, Mr. Caleb turned back around holding an armload of floppy orange construction paper.

Ben had seen the other fifth-grade classes’ giant pumpkin faces, the triangle eyes and the black accordion legs and arms dangling down, hanging in the hall outside the art room. It would be hard to mess up, but still, he wanted his pumpkin to look good. His name would be on it.

“Oh, shoot,” Mr. Caleb said. He stood at the front of the classroom. “I forgot the template. I must have left it in the main office.” He pressed START on his CD player. “I’ll be right back. No one leave their table.”

Classical music filled the room. Mr. Caleb would most likely return in less than a minute, but that was more than enough time for Kevin to start in on Truman again.

“Hey, Ben, what do you say we go trick-or-treating with Truman this year? He’d probably have to give us all the candy he gets.”

Kevin poked Ben in the ribs with his elbow. “Or maybe he still goes with his mommy so she can make sure he doesn’t eat any of it.”

Truman didn’t even turn around.

Again, Kevin poked Ben, but this time he didn’t say anything out loud. Instead, he used his gaze to point at Truman’s empty stool as Mr. Caleb walked back into the room.

Ben knew exactly what Kevin was saying with his eyes. Boys pulled seats out from under other kids all the time. It was hilarious. Just as some poor kid was bending his knees, leaning back, letting his weight go, another boy yanked the seat away. And boom.

Everyone would laugh. No harm done.

“OK, I’m back.” Mr. Caleb held up the happy pumpkin-face template. “Exactly where I left it.”

Kevin signaled to Ben.

“Everyone can take their seats now,” Mr. Caleb said.

“Do it,” Kevin whispered to Ben.

There was no time to think.

At the exact moment Mr. Caleb turned his back to pick up the stack of orange construction paper, at the exact moment Truman looked like he was about to sit, Ben stepped forward and pulled Truman’s seat away.

It all happened so fast: Truman didn’t fall backward like he was supposed to, landing hard and unhurt on
his bottom. He fell forward. Everybody in the class turned to the sound of two heavy thuds, one as Truman’s face hit the edge of the art table, and another when he landed on the ground. No one was laughing.

Truman stood up slowly.

See, he’s OK, Ben told himself. And he thought he might be able to start breathing again, until someone yelled out, “Oh look! He’s bleeding!”

Mr. Caleb dropped all the orange papers on the floor and rushed over. Blood was coming from Truman’s mouth.

This is it. I’m finished, Ben thought. I’m going to be in trouble for the rest of my life.

“Truman,” Mr. Caleb said, “are you all right?”

Truman nodded, holding his hand over his nose and chin. Then Mr. Caleb looked right at Kevin and Ben. “What happened?”

Ben felt sick. Mr. Caleb knew what had happened. He was nice, but that didn’t mean he was stupid.

“What happened here?” Mr. Caleb asked again, louder and more firmly. “Truman, let me see.”

“It’s nothing. I’m OK,” he said. His voice was muffled, but he kept his face hidden.

“You’re not OK, Truman,” Mr. Caleb said. “You’re bleeding. What happened?”

Now Mr. Caleb is going to hate me, Ben thought. He knew it. And he knew he deserved it.

“This is the last time I am going to ask,” Mr. Caleb demanded. There was a long silence and then Truman answered, “I slipped.” Blood was starting to drip past his fingers and onto his chin. It probably hurt pretty bad too.

“I’m fine,” Truman said.

“You need to get to the nurse. Now,” Mr. Caleb said. He turned to the class. “Does anyone want to accompany Truman?”

Usually it was a girl. Girls always wanted to walk to the nurse’s office. But Ben threw his hand up in the air before anyone else could.

“I do. I will. I want to,” he practically shouted.

Ben didn’t turn to see, but he was certain that Kevin was staring right at him, as if he were throwing down a challenge. This time it would take more than just ignoring Kevin.

“Can I go with Truman?” Ben asked.

Maybe Mr. Caleb knew what had happened. Then again, maybe he didn’t. But if there were second chances, Ben wanted one.

Mr. Caleb looked to Truman. “Well, if that’s OK with you?” Truman nodded.
“OK then, go. Go.” Mr. Caleb handed Ben some folded paper towels and sent them out into the hall.

Ben could have sworn he heard the classical music swell up dramatically, just like in the movies, as he and Truman stepped out of the art room. But when the door closed behind them, the hallway was silent. They walked quietly for a while. Cheerful orange pumpkins were looking down on them the whole way. Seeing. Judging.

Oh, what did they know?

At the end of the hall, the Halloween decorations suddenly stopped. This is where his class’s pumpkin heads would be hung. Twenty-two new faces. Forty-four watchful eyes.

Finally, Ben said something. “Are you OK?”

Truman didn’t respond. Of course, he was mad. He must be furious and hurt and maybe sad, but he hadn’t told on him. Ben wasn’t in trouble.

“Truman, are you all right?” Ben asked again.

They turned the corner just past the stairwell and headed down the corridor. They stopped when they got to the nurse’s office.

“Truman?”

“I’m OK,” Truman said.

“Truman, I’m really sorry,” Ben said.

“I know.” Ben reached for the handle, but Truman put his hand out first to open the door. He paused.

“I just want to know why you did it,” Truman said.

Why did he do it?

And that’s when Ben realized he had no idea. Was he trying to get Kevin to like him? Or was he more afraid of how bad it felt to be the one who was getting picked on? Whatever it was, whatever the reason, it wasn’t worth it. Ben could not imagine feeling any worse than he did right then.

Kevin wasn’t going to change, and Truman probably knew that too.

“I don’t know,” Ben answered, but from that day on, for Ben at least, things were going to be different. He would make sure of that.

Truman shrugged. Then he pulled open the door and held it. He looked right at Ben, and together they walked inside.

Imagine you are Ben, and you have thought about Truman’s statement, “I just want to know why you did it.” Write a letter to Truman explaining your answer and telling him how you will be different in the future. Send your letter to “Ben and Truman Contest” by October 15, 2015. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Ruby on the Outside by Nora Raleigh Baskin.