

I glanced at the shadow standing next to me. Uh oh, I thought. Not again, please. I shut my eyes tight, hoping it was all a dream. But when I opened them, the shadow was still there. I closed my locker, a few books and a pen cradled in my arms. Then I swiftly turned around, trying to walk fast with my head down and eyes focusing on the floor.

“Hey!” I heard behind me. I pretended I wasn’t paying attention. I kept walking, past all the shoes on the hallway floor. I lost her, I thought, daring to look up straight. To my left and to my right there was no one. Clear. A sigh of relief washed over me as the tension in my neck lightened, and I straightened my posture. Just then I heard another,

“Hey, Lily!” Suddenly my freedom was being pulled away. I tried, but couldn’t do anything about it. Without my control, my eyes went down to the floor, and I found my legs moving at an unusual speed. Behind me, the steady and confident rhythm of clicks and clacks from boots were amplified in the silent end of the hallway. My eyes watched in dismay as the boots came up alongside me and stopped. My heart sank. It was no use running. I stopped too and looked up.

“Hey...Brittany,” I said in a quavering voice. “What’s up?”

“You know,” she replied coldly. Yes, I did know. I reached my shaking hand into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around two folded dollar bills, pulling them out slowly, and placing them carefully in Brittany’s outstretched hand. She pulled her hand away quickly, so I couldn’t take the money back, and then turned swiftly down the hall. I turned in the opposite direction, and once again focusing my eyes on the floor. Only this time, it was in shame.

For another day, the hall was dim, taking in the dark light from the overcast sky. I walked through it silently, my shoulder brushing the wall. My eyes wandered from bulletin board to bulletin board, the papers and papers filled with writing. Then my eyes caught at the

neon yellow poster that stood out from all the rest. "Lily for student council," it read. That was followed by,

- I will encourage more afterschool activities
- I will motivate kids to show good character

And

-I will take a stand against bullying.

The last point made me swallow. I am Lily, I thought. My name is on this poster, and what I believe in is on this poster. But was that last idea really honest? I asked myself.

My mind flashed back to the day three weeks ago when the announcement had come over the loud speaker announcing the student council representatives. When my name was called, a smile lit up my face. At the time, I didn't know what was to come.

Obviously people believed in me, I thought. My peers voted for me because they believed I would benefit the school. Would I? I questioned myself. Would I? Or was I just making promises I could never fulfill? How could I prevent bullying if I was too scared to stand up to it myself?

My head was mixed up with all these questions, all these thoughts, crying for a break. I glanced around me to see if anyone was looking, and in frustration, viciously tore the poster off the wall, digging my fingernails into the top of the hard paper.

"It needed to come down anyway," I mumbled. Just then, my best friend Jennifer pulled up alongside me, her backpack thrown lazily over one shoulder. Immediately, my grip on the poster loosened and it fell to the ground. I hurriedly bent over, and picked it up, embarrassed.

"Hey," Jen said.

"Hey," I replied.

"What's up with the poster?" She asked. "You don't have to take it down for another two days. Besides, it adds some color to the hallway."

"It's alright, I said, trying to smile. "I better take it down before I forget." Jennifer looked at me skeptically, confidently placing her hands on her hips before continuing.

"Makes sense. Well, I have Spanish now so I'll see you later."

"Sure thing," I said, saluting her. She saluted back and turned down the hallway. I continued walking in the opposite direction, and clutched the poster as the jumbled up thoughts seeped into my head once more.

Later that day, I sat at the lunch table with no food in front of me. Only three more periods in the day, I thought. Then I could finally go home and just think about what a disappointment I was.

That's when I saw the figure that did not match the size of the first graders it stood next to. I looked closer... Brittany. Her hand reached into a tray that belonged to a child and pulled out a chicken tender. A fretted first grader looked over her shoulder, staring wide eyed at the giant standing over her. What a heartless person, I thought. If only I had the courage to say that to Brittany's face. Do something! I thought. Stop being a bystander! But I couldn't bring myself to move. I was glued to my seat. I watched in dismay as Brittany kept picking on the child's lunch.

Brittany started to walk away from the first grade table, her steady and confident stride turning into a rushed walk as she passed the eighth grade table. That's when all the pieces came together. This isn't just about me, I thought. Brittany is a bully, to many people, who needs to be stopped. I have to do something, I thought. I have to. I have to break out of my cowardly shell and stand up for something. After all, I thought, that's what a leader does.

A period later, the hallway was once again dark and lonely, even with everyone in it. I was determined to do something about Brittany. I had to... otherwise I was no more than a liar...a failure. I stood outside the English classroom, reading my watch. Four minutes early, I thought. I pulled out my copy of "The Hunger Games", hoping it would help me forget about all the drama that had been going on lately. I leaned against the wall, and began to read.

Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation up my spine. I was not alone. I whirled around to see Brittany over my shoulder. This is my chance, I thought. Say something, now! I opened my mouth to say something- anything, but no words came out. Instead, Brittany took the opportunity.

"Nice book." Before I could respond, Brittany snatched the book from my hand and turned down the hall.

My head was confused with the sudden movement. As soon as it cleared, I looked around to see if anyone had seen what Brittany had done. No one. Should I walk down the hall and take it back? I asked myself. No, then Brittany would pick on me even more. I looked behind me, spotting Brittany at the other end of the hall. She was waiting in line for her next class. Her arms were crossed, and she seemed to be avoiding any social interactions. She tried to squeeze herself into the wall, as a group of eighth graders walked by, pushing her to the side, refusing to share the hallway. She seemed like a nobody. Maybe bullying me is her source of power, I thought

But that was my book that I had bought with my own money. I thought. I clenched my fists by my sides, enough anger in my heart to send me down the hall to Brittany, but as soon as I took one step forward, I quickly took it back. What was wrong with me? As much as the part of me wanted to snatch my book back, the other part of me just couldn't do it. Why couldn't I do anything right? My cowardly self! As I dwelled on these

thoughts. I traveled to the back of the line that had formed behind me just as the science teacher motioned us in for the period to begin.

It was two minutes to dismissal and I was eager to go home. I was at the back of the line, my usual spot, away from the noise of gossip and rumors. Just then, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Jennifer.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Nothin’ much”

“Did you lose a book, by any chance? “The Hunger Games” maybe? How did Jen know?”

“Yeah,” I replied surprised. “Have you seen it?” Jennifer pulled the book out of her book bag. “In math class, Brittany was reading it. The teacher took it from her and found your name in the inside cover. I promised I’d return it to you.” Jennifer handed me the book.

“Thanks!” I exclaimed appreciatively.

“Sure. Did you lend it to her or something?” My excitement and relief faded into nervousness and doubt. Should I tell her the truth? I asked myself. Should I tell Jennifer that Brittany stole it from me? No, it’s my problem, so I should deal with it, right? But I knew I’d never muster up enough courage to deal with it.

Meanwhile, this pause was making Jen curious. Her eyes narrowed. Could I lie to her? I asked myself once again? After all, she just wanted to help.

“Brittany took it from me,” I said, slowly and softly, hoping she was no longer paying attention. But Jennifer was paying full attention. She frowned in response.

“Did you tell anyone?” I shook my head.

“No.”



"I was scared," I said, in a voice gentler than the last. Jen looked at me, confused. She couldn't understand. I looked at the situation from Jennifer's point of view. If she was getting bullied, she wouldn't be afraid to stop it. She wasn't a coward like me.

"Do you want me to tell a teacher, maybe?"

"No, don't tell anyone, okay?" I said quickly

"Are you sure? I can talk to Brittany if you'd like."

"I'm sure I can handle it." That last statement was a lie.

"Okay," Jen said, placing her hands on her hips, not sure if she should take my word. "But let's practice. I'm Brittany headed for class. What are you going to say?" I sighed, but figured I'd play along. I could see Jen was concerned. She was just trying to be a good friend.

"Brittany, I am sick of your nonsense. Leave me alone." A gentle smile slowly spread across Jen's face.

"Perfect."

The next morning came too quickly. For the first time in a while, the hall was filled with sunshine. The beams of bright light spilled through the windows. The hall was buzzing with noise, everybody talking about their weekend plans. But I talked to no one. I had too much on my mind. My heart pounded. Would I really be able to walk over to Brittany and say something? What was I thinking? I couldn't do it! But I promised, I thought, sighing with regret. Then a thought occurred to me... Why was I doing this for Jen? I should be doing this for myself, because this is what I had wanted. I should be doing this as a leader, because that's what leaders do. My heart beat faster, faster, faster. My eyes spotted Brittany, by her locker, gathering her books. I took one step forward, and held it there, refusing to take it back. Then I planted my other foot. I knew that I looked like some weird robot, but I didn't care. My heart was pounding now, vibrating

like a coo coo clock constantly going off inside my chest. My bones were bending backwards, trying to force me to turn around but I wouldn't listen to them. What will I say? I'll say what I practiced yesterday. Wait, what did I practice yesterday? I was too nervous to worry about it anymore. I took the remaining steps across the unfriendly gray to Brittany's locker, standing next to her. Brittany saw me out of the corner of her eye, and looked at me confused. I had never confronted her. This was my chance, and this time, I was determined to take advantage of it.

But once again, Brittany beat me to it.

"I forgot my lunch money again." She reached out her hand, expecting me to place in it the two dollar bills as the usual routine was. I didn't know what to do except role my eyes. Smart move Lily, I thought.

Come on!" Brittany said impatiently. "Stop wasting time!" I panicked, not knowing what to say. I reached my now shaking hand into my pocket, feeling the two folded dollar bills. I bent my fingers around them, ready to pull them out. If I just give her the money now, I thought, this can all be over. I wasn't controlling my fingers anymore, and I felt them slowly pulling the money out of my pocket. By now I knew Brittany could see the top of the bills. NO! My mind screamed. I managed to gain control of my hands and force the money back into my pocket. Brittany's eyes were wide open, surprised at this action.

"Stop it with the nonsense Lily!" Brittany shouted at me. Frustration sprung tears to my eyes, and my throat burned. But I made myself swallow and calm down.

"Just leave me alone, okay? I'm so sick of putting up with your nonsense by now, so just quit it! You're just a bully, no more. You pick on little kids. What kind of person are you?"

Brittany rolled her eyes, trying to suppress her hurt. Had I gone too far? No, this is what I had wanted, right? I needed to tell Brittany to stop, and isn't that what I did? Was this how things were supposed to be? Was I supposed to hurt Brittany's feelings? She would stop now, wouldn't she?

I looked at Brittany, the depressed look still stuck to her face, which also had a sense of coldness to it. She might as well have said "Leave."

I reached my hand into my pocket and gave the money to Brittany.

"I'm sorry," I said. I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do, but I knew it would help. Both Brittany and I knew if she took this as a sense of weakness, she was wrong. Brittany had seen I was capable of confronting her. Still, I had to use the money to try to make peace between us.

That moment felt like the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders. I was no longer a failure, a liar, a disappointment, a coward. I had tried my best to fulfill my promise. I had taken my first step to becoming a leader. Satisfied with where I was at, I turned down the hall. As I walked, I moved away from the walls, though not yet ready to walk through the middle. I walked away, into the comforting sunshine of the hallway that seemed to guide my way.