

HOW TO BE NORMAL

by Annaleese Jochems

Charley's at the old playground, sitting on the bottom of the slide and concentrating. When the bell rings, she'll walk back to class – but first, she'll wait till at least half the other kids have done the same. She's improving herself. This week, she's fixing her habit of being back at her desk too soon. It's unnecessary, and it singles her out. Once Charley's made herself less weird in every way, the others won't notice her. Then she can concentrate on what's important: her drawings and her dreams. Last week, she taught herself to eat apples without chomping. Already she's feeling more relaxed.

The bell rings, but she's feeling good. Things are always better when you have a plan. She counts the seconds on her fingers and watches the others go inside. After thirty seconds, Charley stands and brushes herself off. She wants to jog but forces herself to walk. When she gets nearer to the classroom, she sees the door's shut and walks quicker. Now she can see through the windows: they're all at their desks. Her heart pounds.



The door screeches when it opens. Everyone turns to look. Charley's desk is right at the front, a long way from the door, and she has to weave between the others to get there. Her classmates laugh and chat, but as she passes each group, she feels them go quiet. Someone throws a piece of chewed-up paper, and it hits her leg. She can't look up to see if it was aimed at her. All she has to do for everything to be all right is put one foot in front of the other.

Her hip whacks someone's desk.

"Owww!" It's Michaela. This is the worst thing that could've happened. "Mr Bennett! Charley just rammed my desk and hurt my foot!"

Mr Bennett turns from the whiteboard. "I'm sorry to hear that, Michaela. Will you be OK?"

"How would I know? Owww!"

"If you need first aid, go to the office," Mr Bennett says with careful patience.

"Can someone come with me?"

"No."

The door opens and shuts. There's a muffled laugh as a boy pulls his chair back and sits down with his friends. Sounds like Flynn. Charley made good progress while the others were watching the micro-drama between Michaela and Mr Bennett, but now she feels their eyes swivelling back to her.

"Maybe Charley should apologise?" says Trinity.

Charley's at her desk, finally. Her chair scrapes when she pulls it out, but that's fine. It's over. She doesn't look at anyone else in her group, just finds her maths book and opens it. But Amy, the new girl, is watching. They've never talked. Amy's the only person in the whole class worse than Charley. She's far from normal, and she's extremely short.

Charley needs to draw a line down the middle of her page before she can start. The page needs to be divided into columns, but she can't do it with Amy in her face.

Amy makes a choking noise, then speaks up. "Don't be a sook, Michaela." She enunciates each word loudly and with force. It sounds like she's about to cry.

The room hushes. "Oh, wow," Trinity says under her breath.

Mr Bennett puts his whiteboard marker down. "Michaela," he says. "I'll ask you one more time, and then we won't talk about it again: Do you want to go to the office?"

"No, I'll be fine," Michaela says smugly.

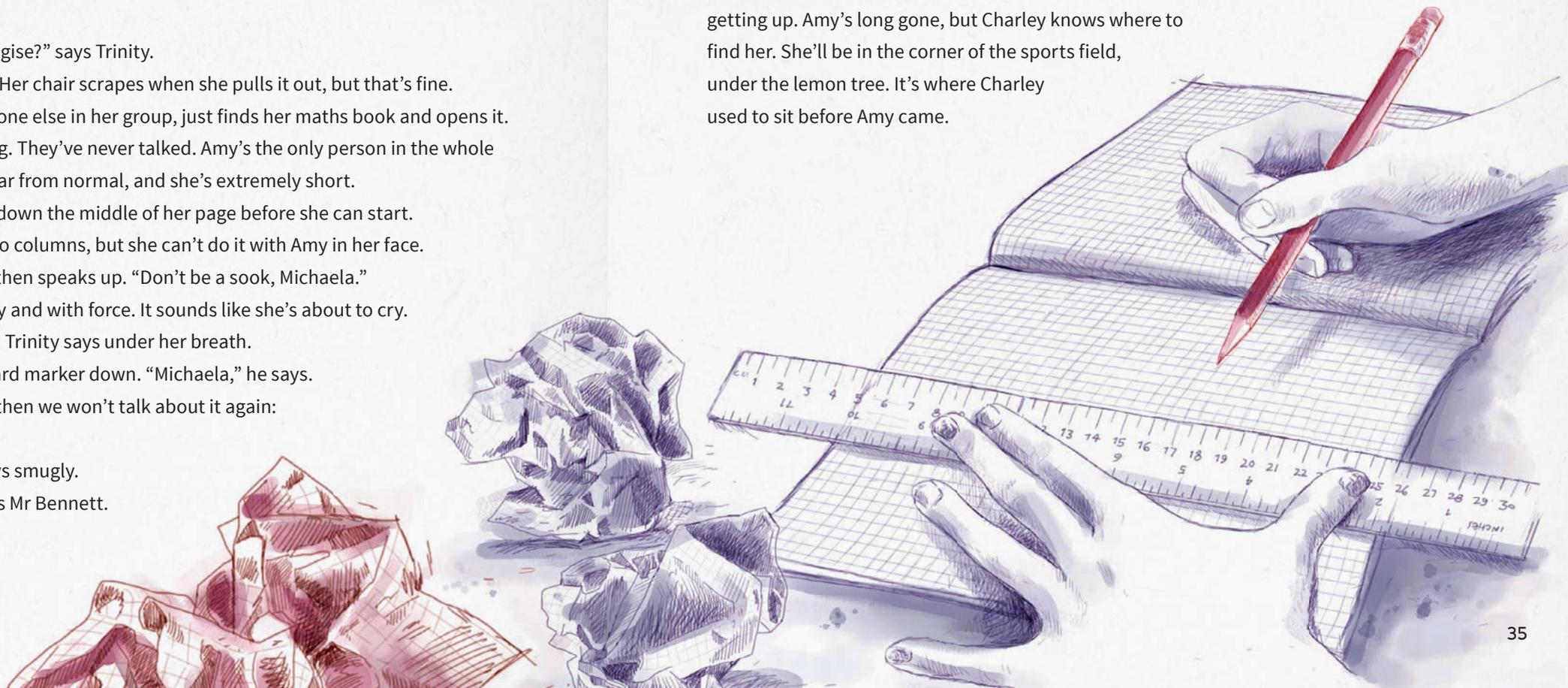
"OK then, let's move on," says Mr Bennett.

Everyone opens their books to the page number Mr Bennett's written on the whiteboard. Charley just needs to rule that straight line, then she can open hers too – but she can't do it. Amy's not looking anymore, but Charley's so angry she can't concentrate. She lines her ruler up and forces her hand down the page, but the pencil gets caught and tears the paper. She rips it out and tries again, three more times, but the lines keep coming out crooked. Who does Amy think she is, sticking up for her? Before Amy turned it into a big deal, Charley and Michaela might have been sharing an in-joke. Charley's just lost her final shot at becoming normal.

Everyone's looking at their books now, working. She can hear pencils moving. If she can't draw a line, she'll get behind. She tries again, ripping the page out before she's even reached the bottom, then gives up.

It's after she's put her pencil down that Charley realises what she's got to do. At lunch, she'll explain things to Amy. She'll be very clear but not unkind. After that, they'll never have to speak again.

Mr Bennett reads them a newspaper article about plastic bags, and they write the answers to some questions in their topic books. The bell rings. Charley waits for half the others to leave before getting up. Amy's long gone, but Charley knows where to find her. She'll be in the corner of the sports field, under the lemon tree. It's where Charley used to sit before Amy came.



When she gets there, Amy's sitting against the tree with her eyes closed. Charley stands, waiting, but Amy doesn't move.

Eventually Charley nudges her knee.

"Oh, hi." Amy looks up, smiling. "I can go if you want to be alone?"

"I don't want to be alone."

"OK."

"So, look, Amy. I don't need anyone to stick up for me, ever. Especially not you."

Amy looks surprised. "Um, sure. OK."

"Yeah. Well." Charley walks off to go sit in the library.

She draws horses. She draws horse after horse. Some are in forest glades or wading through water. One is part of a herd with a foal by its side. Each horse has a different marking on its face. She shades in their muscles and gives them little patches of shine on their hooves. After a while, she feels better. Charley's secret is that she's part horse. Not in an awful, childish way; or really, it's not as childish as it sounds. It's just that her soul is like a horse's soul.

She looks down and realises that one of the drawings is the best she's done in her life. It's the horse in the forest glade, a scene she's drawn more times than she can count – but in this one, she's captured the animal's essence. It looks right at her with real intelligence. It's a horse that really understands things: how they are and how they should be. She needs to show it to somebody right now. She might never draw anything this good again.

Charley stands up, holding the picture, and looks around. The librarian who usually looks at her drawings is helping some kid in the reference section, and it's a sunny day. Everyone's outside. Charley's out the door and across the field before she knows it.

Amy hasn't moved from her spot in front of the tree. She's reading. She puts her book down and looks at Charley's picture a moment before taking it. "Wow. That's amazing," she says. "Thanks so much." She runs a finger lightly over the horse's back and down the front of its neck.

Charley stands waiting for Amy to give the drawing back, but she doesn't. She's looking at it intently. "It's really beautiful," she says. Then she adds, "The book I'm reading is about a girl whose mum died."

"OK," Charley says, realising she's not getting her picture back. She's sure she'll never draw a better horse, ever, and she studies it carefully. Then she sees what's special about it. Something in the horse's eyes. They're clear and infinitely deeper than the paper.

After she's looked at the drawing for long enough, she nods goodbye to Amy and walks back to the library.



illustrations by Adele Jackson

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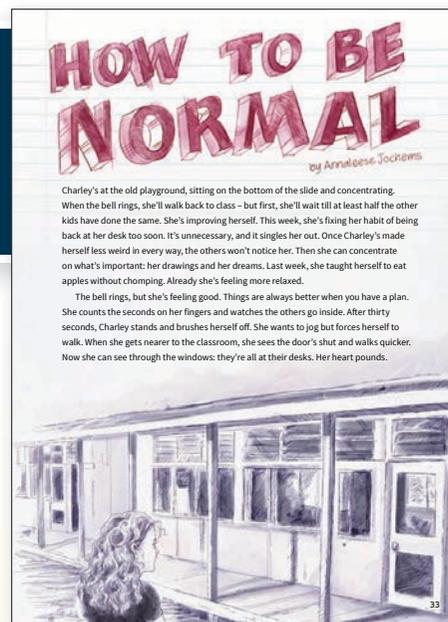
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