

ENCOUNTERS

The great pretender

See also research article by Afifi and colleagues on page E324 and at www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.131792

There he is, pretending to be a good person — again. He should have been an actor instead of working in an office.

She looks happy. He's telling some story about how when he was a kid, he used to play baseball with his dad, and after, they would eat his mom's apple pie. And how he takes me to the park once in a while to play. It's all a big lie. Grandpa died when he was little, and Grandma was too busy running the family business. She didn't have time to cook or to take care of him and Auntie Ann. And we haven't been to the park in years.

"His height and weight look good, seems like he's still on the shorter side for his age group, but don't worry, he'll hit his growth spurt and then he'll be shooting up. How's he doing?"

"He's doing great! He doesn't cause trouble at school, but he and his brother do like to roughhouse quite a bit. He's been complaining of stomach aches though, over the last few days."

The doctor writes more notes at her tiny desk. He glares at me, his eyes bulging. That look means *no funny business or you'll get it later*. I glare back, but my hands get sweaty and my stomach gets that cold feeling. The doctor asks him more questions, but I can't hear them. I'm so angry.

YOU'LL BE SORRY! I scream in my head. I wish my eyes could shoot laser beams. The doctor is still smiling and nodding. I start to hate her too. My insides burn as I glare at her back. Why can't she tell that he's lying? Aren't doctors supposed to be smart?

"George?" She's looking at me, and I panic. Did she see my death glare? That weird kid, Robby, was taken out of school. A social worker came one day and took him away. He's creepy, and always sits by himself on the swings because no one wants to play with him. I don't want to be like him.

"How about you be a good boy and you get up on this bed here, and we look at your belly. Dad's been saying you've been having stomach aches.



Ingram Publishing/Thinkstock

Does it hurt now?"

"No. It's fine now. But it was hurting yesterday, and my teacher told me that I should go home and rest."

"Yeah, I was pretty worried when I got a call from the school."

He's messing up his hair with one hand. He always does that when he's lying. He doesn't say that he yelled at me because it was "inconvenient" for him to pick me up at school.

The doctor nods. "I understand your concern. Let's get you checked out, George."

She lifts my shirt up and pokes my belly. In the room beside us, a baby starts to cry real loud, and behind her, I see him jerk. He hates crying. But then his face relaxes. He's at the doctor's office. He can't get mad now.

He fidgets in his seat. She's busy listening to my stomach and doesn't see. She asks me to take off my shirt.

"Oh, are these from roughhousing?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the smirk slide off his face as he tries to think up another lie. The doctor touches my elbow. There's a giant bruise there, with a scrape. My palm is scraped too.

"Did you fight with your brother?"

"No, I got this one playing soccer at school. My friend pushed me."

It's almost true. Yesterday he shoved

me and I fell in the driveway. Did she believe me? I don't want to be taken out of school. What would my friends think of me if a social worker came to my class? Would I have to sit by myself at lunch too?

"We better put a Band-Aid on that."

She cleans the scrape. It stings, but I force myself to sit still. I don't want him to know how much it hurts. She puts a big Band-Aid on it and goes back to her desk. I look at him as I put my shirt back on. He's looking out the window at the view of downtown. He needs to get back to the office.

"He seems like a healthy, active boy to me." She looks at me. "Take care of your dad for me."

She winks at me and then leaves. The sound of the baby crying gets louder as she opens the door, then quieter when she closes it.

He's rushing out the door. I grab my backpack. When we go into the hallway, I can hear the doctor talking to the baby's dad who lets out a great big laugh that makes me smile. Then I feel a little sad inside.

Kristel Leung BSc
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC

CMAJ 2014, DOI:10.1503/cmaj.140314