

A Trip to the Aquarium

"Alright, class, listen up!" Mrs. Taylor announced, quieting her chattering, excited students. It was a crisp, chilly autumn morning with a feeble sun shining faintly through the clouds. Flashing a smile at her eager third-graders, Mrs. Taylor spread her hands and said, "Today is the day we've all been waiting for! We will be taking a field trip to the aquarium!" The children cheered and whooped joyously.

The class paraded loudly out of the classroom and to the front of the school, Mrs. Taylor leading them and trying helplessly to quiet them down. A bright yellow school bus was parked in front of the school and the students clambered inside. Mrs. Taylor scrambled in after them. Everyone plunked down on the worn plastic seats, shouting to their friends to join them. Once the class had all been seated and the talking had ceased, the engine started and the bus rattled away, heading towards the local aquarium.

When the school bus skidded to a screeching stop in front of the aquarium, the bus doors hissed open and the third-graders pushed and shoved as they all tried to get off the bus at once. Mrs. Taylor straightened them all into a crooked, single-file line and they marched off the bus, clutching their brown paper bags containing their lunches. As they filed inside the aquarium, the fascinated students uttered a collective gasp at the sight of the millions of fish swimming around inside huge glass tanks. There were fish of all different colors—purple, blue, orange, silver, green, red, yellow, pink—and the children pressed their noses against the glass, awed by the creatures behind the glass.

Mrs. Taylor peered curiously inside one of the aquariums and jumped back in alarm as an energetic dolphin swam up to greet her. Chuckling, she turned around and exclaimed, "Children, look! Dolphins!" The students shifted their attention to Mrs. Taylor and instantly crowded around the dolphin aquarium, tapping the glass and squealing with laughter at the playful dolphins. Everyone was so amazed by the dolphins that none of them saw one student named Phoebe as she slipped away to look at the stuffed animals inside the gift shop.

"Alright, now, class!" Mrs. Taylor said, clapping her hands loudly. Her eyes scanned the crowd of third-graders, checking to make sure everybody was there and none of them had wandered off. Yes, all her students were here. At least, that's what she thought. . . .

"Let's go take a look at the jellyfish, shall we?" Mrs. Taylor said, and the class cheered agreeably. Mrs. Taylor led her students through a dimly lit hallway and into another similar room, but in this room the aquariums contained bright pink jellyfish. Ooh-ing and aah-ing, the students gazed inside the aquariums but did dare to tap the glass because, like all third-graders, they were frightened of the deadly jellyfish, which, according to the signs, could kill you if they stung you.

Meanwhile, Phoebe, the young girl who had wandered off to the gift shop, finished looking at the adorable stuffed animals and skipped out of the shop. She glanced around, searching for her class, but she couldn't see Mrs. Taylor or the students. Frowning, Phoebe hurried back to the place she had last seen her class (the dolphin aquarium), but nobody was there. She stood next to the tank awkwardly for a while, not knowing what to do. Where was her class? Had they moved on to another part of the aquarium without her?

Back at the jellyfish tanks, Mrs. Taylor and the children were getting ready to look at the sharks when one student asked, "Where's Phoebe?" Mrs. Taylor frowned and swept her eyes over the group of students, looking for Phoebe, but she wasn't among them. "Where *is* Phoebe? Class, search the room for Phoebe!" Mrs. Taylor ordered. The third-graders did as they were told, but there was no sign of the little girl. "That's strange," Mrs. Taylor mused, looking at her students' anxious faces. "She must have wandered off."

Phoebe *had* wandered off. As the little girl stood helplessly next to the friendly dolphins, she chewed the curved end of her long, blond braided pigtail and watched visitors come and go through the open doors. She stood there motionless for five minutes, but it seemed like five hours. Where in the world was her class? They couldn't have left the aquarium and gone back to school *already*, could they? Soon they would realize she was missing and they would come back and find her, right? They had to. They just *had* to.

Phoebe waited some more. Oh, where were they? A large tear squeezed out of Phoebe's big sapphire-blue eyes and trickled slowly down her cheek. Choking back a sob, Phoebe wiped her eyes with her school uniform sleeve and absently twisted her single thick braid around her arm while silently watching her tears drop and splatter onto the carpeted floor.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Taylor and her students were having trouble finding Phoebe. She wasn't at the penguin exhibit, or the shark tank, or the octopus aquariums, or the cafeteria. A frantic Mrs. Taylor was about to call security for help when she decided to go back to the dolphin aquarium to see if they'd left Phoebe behind.

Weaving their way through crowds of other people, they paraded into the large room and almost instantly saw the small, blond-haired girl huddling near the dolphins.

"Phoebe!" they cried, sprinting towards her. She jerked her head up, her flushed face stained with tears and her clear blue eyes sad and watery. When she saw her class, she leaped joyously to her feet and ran to them. Surrounded by her chattering classmates, she threw her skinny arms around her best friend, Natalie, and exclaimed, "Where were you all? I just went into the gift shop to look at the toys and when I came out, none of you were there anymore!"

"We went to the jellyfish aquariums," Natalie said, gripping Phoebe tightly, her long, dark tangles of curly black hair tumbling over Phoebe's golden head. "I'm glad you didn't do anything stupid, like leave the aquarium."

"Yeah," Phoebe said agreeably, pulling away from Natalie.

"Phoebe, how many times have I told you to stick together during a field trip?" Mrs. Taylor demanded sharply, frowning down at Phoebe with her piercing emerald-green eyes. Then she pushed back her shoulder-length, caramel-colored hair and smiled exhaustedly, sweeping Phoebe into a warm embrace. "Well, at least you're okay," she murmured thankfully.

A few enjoyable hours later, Mrs. Taylor announced it was time to go back to school. The class scrambled inside the school bus and plunked down on the plastic seats, exhausted yet cheerful from their long day at the aquarium. As the bus drove away, Phoebe glanced behind her at the aquarium. She would never forget this field trip.