



St Cuthbert's Wild School for Boys

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To Joe and Eve with love

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One



The day Jack first heard about St Cuthbert's Wild School for Boys began as any other. He woke early, tried not to think of *certain things*, turned on his torch and reached for the book at the end of his bed: a collection of twenty different Master Mazes, each more twisted and tortuous than the last. Jack was on number 11, a mass of writhing, knotted snakes he had to find a way between. Tricky! But he was getting there. And there was still an hour before *the dreaded...* He clipped his torch onto an old tie he had turned into a headband, allowing maximum light and freedom for both hands, and set his mind to tackling the snakes.

“Jack?”

An hour later Jack's mum came stumbling into the room, still in pyjamas, her hair scruffy and her eyes not properly seeing yet. “Come on! Time to get up – we're going to be late for school!”

Jack turned his head so the torch shone directly into his mum's face and she winced at the light. *Like a great all-seeing eye*, he thought. *A Cyclops! Only better, because I've got three eyes, and...*

“Jack!” His mum trod on a bit of Lego and booted it crossly out of the way. “Turn that thing off and get up, will you? And you Ellie.”

Ellie was Jack's sister. She slept below him on the bottom bunk and was different in nearly every way. For a start she was a girl. She was young and he was old (well, old-er) and she was little and he was tall. But also, she had straight yellow hair and his was curly red. She woke up late in the mornings and he woke up early. She loved school and he found it boring. And – the big one – she didn't remember their dad and he did, though he didn't like to go on about that one.

If he had to sum her up, Ellie was small, different and annoying. But she was also funny and had gone along with all of Jack's younger games, including The Great Inspector Drew, Spies, Cowboys and that *brilliant* monkey game he had invented... Plus, she did let him pretend the bedroom was his. He was grateful for that.

Jack's mum drew back the green curtains and light zoomed into their room. Ellie whined, like Zombie their cat, and burrowed under the covers.

What was it with his family and light? They were... *what was it?* Hydrophobic? Claustrophobic? No, that was being scared of small spaces. What was the word for *fear of light*? All the *fear of* words came from Ancient Greek, Jack knew that, so *lightophobic* definitely wouldn't be right.

If only he had a copy of the Complete Reverse Dictionary! The CRD was the latest thing on Jack's list of things that needed to be invented: a book where, instead of looking up words to find their meaning, you look up meanings to find the word you need! So obvious! He was

going to develop the idea and make a lot of money. He just needed to start writing everything down. The papers were somewhere at the end of his bed...

“Jack! Did you hear me? Get up! Ellie you come down with me.”

Abandoning his search for the CRD, Jack jumped down from the top bunk, landing in a crouch. He pulled on his clothes – cotton, denim, cotton, sweatshirt, and then sock, sock. Lying on the carpet for a moment to yank up his second sock, he caught sight of the space under the bed; a place he totally forgot existed until every so often, at ground level, he would find himself peering into it. Amongst the fluff he identified his old watch – *so that's where it is!* – several marbles, a tiny Lego space cart he had made ages ago and a chocolate coin. *A chocolate coin! From last year?* He looked around for a long sweeping implement to reach and retrieve the lost treasures and, very possibly, to eat one of them...

“Jack! Are you coming down or not?”

The clear out would have to wait and he would probably forget again. He took some more socks out of his chest of drawers and arranged them in a rough arrow shape, pointing under the bed, and then raced downstairs.

In the kitchen, Ellie was already dressed and eating the huge bowl of cereal she ate every morning: a mountain of Cornflakes with two Weetabix on top.

How could she consume all that and still be so small? *An enormous tapeworm* Jack had long ago decided, *living in her gut, feeding off the food she eats*. He'd seen a picture of one once – thin and white – with the chilling label:

The longest tapeworm to be pulled from a human body was 37 feet - 11.27 metres - long!

Ugh! But how *did* you pull one from the human body? And how did it get there to start with?

"Toast, Jack?"

"Oh, um, okay."

He always had toast with jam or, if there was time, inventions of his own involving fried eggs and tomatoes, maple syrup and raisins, or various other *Jack Specials*.

His mum passed a plate across, saying: "Come on, get a move on!" And then, more quietly: "Now, what else do I need to remember?" She was always talking to herself like this, under her breath. At one point, Jack had even wondered if that was where the word '*mumble*' had come from.

But right now he wasn't listening. He was smearing butter on his toast remembering how, when he was little, his mum would turn it into a flat house, cutting windows and a door, and then use jam to paint the front. *How babyish was that!* And yet, he kind of wanted to try it again, experimentally...

"Have we got any peanut butter, Mum, or something thick?"

"Thick? No...why? Anyway there isn't time." She and Ellie were already pulling on their coats. "You'll have to bring that with you. We're already late."

"Okay, okay..."

School time. Again. Another day. Why did the weekends and holidays go so quickly and the school days come round so often? Why did school have to involve so much... school?

And it seemed to Jack, as he shoved his feet into his trainers, grabbed his bag, put the hood of his coat onto his head and yanked his scooter out of the corner where it was tangled with the hoover, that it was all he ever did really. He had no idea – not a single clue – that today would be the last day in quite a while that 'school time' would mean anything like his particular school. Or, in fact, like any school he had ever heard of before.

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Jack's school was ten minutes walk from his house at the end of a long road of shops. Not too far, but there were so many big and busy roads to cross that he wasn't allowed to go on his own. No children were. Instead, he had to scoot down with his mum, weaving in between her and Ellie and gliding ahead of them where he could along the grey and littered street.

"Jack! Look out! You're too near the road!" His mum grabbed his coat as a lorry laboured past, honking and throwing up clouds of grit into their faces.

Jack sighed. She was always panicking that he was going to get hit by a car or a lorry, or that he would bash into someone else. It was like nothing and no one was safe.

"Okay okay..."

He slowed down so he was gliding along beside them, his scooter needing only the slightest expert touch of his trainer on the pavement to keep going. Vans and cars roared past noisily, sometimes with the pale face of one of his school friends peering from the window.

And the litter and dust swirled and eddied around them.

At the end of the shops, across the road and round the corner were the school gates where by now, crowds of children wearing the green Kerry Road school sweatshirt had merged from every direction to go into school.

Jack searched the sea of heads for Max, his friend, who always wore a red baseball cap. It was no use looking at anything but heads, as the playground was so small and busy and everyone was wearing the same.

He thought again how helpful it would be to develop some kind of Personalised Child Identification Tag for schools with uniforms. Each tag would be individual, perhaps something you could wear on your head, or stick to your back, so you could spot your friend from far away. He personally didn't need a PCIT as he had curly red hair and everyone always saw him immediately including, unfortunately, the teachers. But he would be happy to develop the concept for others and of course wear one to show willing. He fancied a golden eagle, wings spread to full majestic width, right across his back, with the head turned to one side and the curved predator's beak just resting on his shoulder...

"Bye love!" His mum touched his arm. "I'm taking Ellie in now. Pass me your scooter and have a good day."

"Mum... that's not going to happen." He moved out of the way to let some younger girls pass.

"Oh Jack. Not this again." A familiar worried look appeared on his mum's face. "Can't you be a bit more positive?"

Jack sighed. "Can't it be a bit more interesting?"

A loud clanging noise started up from the other side of the playground as the red faced Headmaster, Mr Clipper, rang the bell for school and swept his gaze

around the playground. Jack's mum squeezed his arm and set off towards the younger classes with Ellie, lugging his scooter with her.

Jack turned slowly towards his classroom door.

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Perhaps if Jack had known that this was his last day at Kerry Road Primary School, before heading off on the adventure of his life, he might have enjoyed it more, or at least paid attention more, or even just savoured the finality of it... But he didn't, so he couldn't, and the day passed much as any other.

First he had Literacy. Their *learning objective* (that's what his teacher called it anyway) was to revise the use of adjectives and adverbs. They had to use as many good ones as they could in a timed piece of writing, making sure that they planned it all first on a bit of paper and that the beginning and ending of the story were interesting.

Jack found it a strange *conundrum* (oh how he liked that word!) that an activity that kept telling him to be interesting was so boring to do! And he got told off several times for whispering to Max about the Complete Reverse Dictionary.

Next was numeracy. Their *learning objective* was to understand fractions: dividing whole numbers into equal sized bits. Jack got told off for messing around with his watch and putting pencil shavings into little piles.

Then it was lunchtime. Jack and Max got told off for climbing on the low wall that divided the playground ("Not safe!") and for swinging from the low branch of

the one tree they had there (“Dangerous!”) and then for loads of other things.

Jack’s school was strict and seemed to get more strict after every School Inspection they had. There were so many rules now! No running, no bikes and no scooters; no conkers, no marbles, no football cards or any other kind of cards or things to swap; no open-toed sandals (a girl in Year Two had got a chair leg on her toe and had to go to hospital); no chocolate, crisps, nuts, fizzy drinks; no sweet corn, peas or rice (choking!); no climbing, skipping, hopscotch, holding hands or playing in threes (too many arguments); no touching any soil; and no shouting, screaming or singing (some of the songs could be rude). Oh, and no football. Or any ball game. And they never got to play with the younger children.

Jack only ever glimpsed Ellie across the dividing wall, walking around in her red coat with her friends. She looked happier than him.

Lunch itself was a rush, as always. There were too many children, not enough time and the food wasn’t very nice. There wasn’t a kitchen big enough to cook in properly at Jack’s school, so the food arrived in huge trays to be heated up. And it never seemed to really taste of anything. Once, just once, the cook had insisted on making her own biscuits in the small school oven, especially for Easter.

Jack still remembered the melty crumbliness of that biscuit.

In the afternoon Jack’s teacher, Mrs Wirksworth, told them about the interesting new project they would be starting.

“Our theme is Rome!” she announced, as she rifled through a huge pile of papers. “But to save time we will combine it with another of our learning objectives this term, so in PE we will be starting with Roman dance.”

Roman dance. *Roman dance??* Did the Romans dance? How did they? How do we know how they did? Jack really wanted to ask these questions, but knew better than to try. There never seemed to be time for Mrs Wirksworth to explain anything that wasn’t on her list of what they were supposed to learn. And almost every question that *she* asked *him*, she already knew the answer to. It seemed she just wanted to hear that answer back.

And none of the projects ever ended up being as exciting as he thought they would be: Light and Dark, Sailing Craft, the Tudors... They all sounded so good but in the end just involved things the teachers wanted you to say and do, so they could tick them off in their book. They weren’t *really* about exploring light and dark, or sailing boats. Not how Jack would do it anyway. He’d want to grope about in the dark, pretending to be blind. Or sail in a real boat. Or at least make something float on a pond. Or even just in the sink...

So all in all, Jack had stopped bothering with school and questions long ago. It was easier just to do what they wanted you to do. Or ignore it.

Which is what he did now, turning his attention to the extremely interesting experiment he was conducting on his desk. A ruler, balanced on a rubber, tipped down one end and then the other. But if he got the rubber exactly – *exactly, mind* – in the middle, the ruler stayed perfectly in a straight line. He had found balancing point! It must have a name! What could it be? Another

great example of the need for the amazing Complete Reverse Dictionary!

“Jack Everett! Are you listening to anything I say?” Mrs Wirksworth was staring at him in her usual frazzled way. She beckoned him over to her desk. “I would like to see you and your mum up here after school,” she continued ominously. “We have to do something about this terrible lack of attention.”

Oh dear. Not good. Not good at all.