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“The thing is,” Jack’s mum was saying to Mrs Wirksworth an hour later in the same classroom, while Ellie looked at books and Jack pretended to. “The thing is, at home, Jack is really clever and interested in loads of things. Like the other week, he invented a complete code alphabet! You know, giving each letter of the alphabet a different symbol? A was a cross and B was an eye and C was... what was C in your alphabet again Jack?”

“A dagger.” Jack didn’t look up from his book.

“That was it, a dagger... And all the letters had symbols, right the way to Z. He copied it out for Max and they’ve been writing to each other in code ever since!”

Mrs Wirksworth nodded her head and smiled brightly in a way that Jack recognised. It meant *I know I need to look like I’m interested in what you’re telling me, but there are things I need to be telling you!* He saw that smile often in school.

“Jack is a bright boy,” Mrs Wirksworth continued now. “He could do well. But he just won’t settle down. He doesn’t listen, he talks all the time, he fidgets, he messes about and he doesn’t put effort into his work.

He's just not applying himself and he's distracting others, including Max. And he always looks so bored!"

"Well..." Jack's mum glanced across at him.

"He really should be much further along with his numeracy and literacy by now."

"I'm sure if we could just find a way to make him more interested..." Jack's mum began.

There was a silence. Mrs Wirksworth closed her eyes and, for a moment, looked almost sad. She took a deep breath. "I have thirty children in this class, Mrs Everett, and I have to constantly monitor the progress of every single one. I have a huge list of learning objectives to get through, endless tests to prepare the children for, and our school is due for another inspection any day now. Mr Clipper is determined that we will do better this time. There is simply not the time or space for me to do what you suggest. Jack has to start fitting in and getting on, and he needs to do it soon. Or he's going to get labelled as 'difficult'. And that won't be good when he goes up to secondary school!"

There was a thud from over in the reading corner as Jack dropped the book he was looking at.

"Jack?" said Mrs Wirksworth, in a different, brighter tone. "What about we set up a Behaviour Chart? Every day you come to school and manage to really listen and learn, I'll give you a golden arrow sticker. And when you get enough, I'll give you a reward. A sweet maybe! What do you think?"

Jack looked at his mum's face.

"Okay, okay," he said wearily.

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"Mum, do you remember when I was little, I said that trees were like broccoli?"

Half an hour later Jack, his mum and Ellie were sitting in a café waiting to be served. Jack's mum was still looking worried and he was trying to cheer her up. Talking about when he was little usually did the trick. It made him feel better too. It gave him such a *whole* feeling. This time, though, he noticed that his mum barely smiled. He tried again.

"Do you remember when I put the washing up gloves on my feet to be a penguin?"

They often came to a café for a drink and a cake when there was something to celebrate or, as in this case, something serious to discuss (though cake was never offered on those occasions, he noticed). It seemed there were some things that just needed a cup of tea his mum didn't have to make herself. And it stopped things turning into an argument, which they often did.

This particular café was strange, very strange, and quite a new addition to the Kerry Road shops. Jack didn't know it yet but it was also somewhere that was about to change his life forever.

"It's good we came here, Mum," he said, looking round, already the bad feeling of school slipping away. Cafes were always coming and going along this bit of Kerry Road but Jack had been noticing this one for ages now. For weeks, the windows had been blacked out with paper so no one could see in, which made you really want to, and there had been lots of comings and goings of delivery vans and builders and packages. Then, a few days ago, some huge green plants and leaves had appeared in the windows, so thick you still could hardly

see in, which made it even more intriguing. Yesterday, a big sign had gone up – **Café Amazon** – and today, as they looked for somewhere to go, a notice on the door said **Open!**

So here they were. And inside, the café was even more strange! The huge plants and leaves that nearly blocked out the light from the window were also growing all around the room. There were even some creepers hanging down from the ceiling, giving the whole place a weird green light. And attached to the walls were strange wooden things – Jack couldn't make out if they were weapons or musical instruments – and some black and white photographs showing brown skinned people with not a lot on. Jack wasn't sure if the people of Kerry Road would want to look at pictures of naked people in a café, even if they were foreign and only in olden day black and white. But it would be interesting to observe!

In the background, instead of music, there was a soundtrack of strange and wonderful birds, cooing and squawking and chattering in a bird language that definitely was not English. It felt peaceful and exciting at the same time and Jack smiled as he moved a bit of creeper that was hanging down too close to his head.

"It's like Max's room in *The Wild Things* book, remember? When it's half changed into the woods?"

His mum smiled a little bit and at that moment a man appeared from the back of the café, wiping his hands on the front of a big white apron. He was quite old, about Jack's grandad's age, and he was a bit brown skinned too, but only from the sun. He had a dusty, happy feeling about him and he made Jack think of *far away*.

"Welcome to Café Amazon! How do you like the jungle?"

"Cool!" Jack grinned.

"The rainforest! It's one of my Things, you know. Now, what can I get you?" he looked from one to the other of them and smiled.

"What is there?" asked Jack.

"Is it drinks you want or food or both?"

"Just drinks," said Jack's mum, firmly.

"Well, I have some wonderful juices, made from the little known fruits of the Amazon. There's Guarana berry or Acai."

Jack thought for a moment. "Guarana please."

"Can I have the Acky one?" said Ellie.

"Um... Just a cup of tea for me please. Normal tea that is."

"Certainly Madam. Coming right up." And he left them.

The three sat in silence for a while, fiddling with a teaspoon (Ellie), the salt pot (Jack) and her nails (his mum), while the noise of something being whizzed up somewhere out of sight joined the cacophony of the birds. Jack was about to wander off and get a better look at the weapons/musical instruments – *maybe they're both? In some situations, it might actually be extremely useful* – when his mum reminded him of why they were there.

"So, Jack, what on earth are we going to do?" She stared at him for a moment and, when he didn't answer, added, "Is there another problem with school I don't know about? Are you being bullied? Are you worried about something? Is it still about Dad?"

Jack said nothing.

"Why can't you settle down like Mrs Wirksworth said and apply yourself to your work? I thought we'd agreed

you were going to try harder with your reading and writing?"

Jack sighed. "It's none of that," he said finally. "I just don't like it."

"But why? Ellie likes it there, and Max seems to get on okay."

"I don't know..." Jack felt a familiar tight feeling in his chest. He *hated* being compared to others. "It's just, there are too many rules and tests and stuff. It's boring! Learning is boring!" He put down the salt pot, hard. "I just can't see the point of any of it and I don't want any golden stupid arrows or sweets. How old does she think I am?"

"I know Jack. And I do understand what you're saying, I really do." His mum put her hand on his own. "But you have to go to school, love, whether you find it interesting or not. It's the law. And I'm certainly not teaching you at home. We'd both go mad!"

"But I'm no good at any of it! I probably never will be!"

"Excuse me..."

None of them had noticed the café man who had appeared beside them carrying a tray of drinks: one purple, one rather murky orange-green, and one teacup. "If I may be so bold as to interrupt your discussion..." He looked at Jack's mum and then placed the purple drink in front of Jack and the other by Ellie. "I wonder if I might have the solution to your problem."

Jack's mum looked at him blankly. "I'm not quite sure that..."

"But first," he continued, placing the cup of tea in front of her, "a little test, if I may."

Jack's mum started to make a polite but doubtful kind of noise, but the man turned to Jack who was staring at him with interest.

"You see, many, many years ago," he began, "I left these shores to travel the world, to seek my fortune, if you like. I was a young man, and quite naïve in many ways. But I was full of the spirit of adventure and I wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch new places. So, leaving with only a small amount of money, some spare clothes and a few provisions, I set off, planning to work as I went to earn my food and lodging. Where I travelled and what I did is a long story. And each place, each night, each day, is another hundred stories that we don't have time for here..."

Jack's mum looked like she was going to say something at this point, but luckily the man carried on.

"Eventually, I found my way to the edge of the Amazon Rain Forest. And you cannot imagine, my friend, until you have been there yourself, the sight and feel of that great forest, that great river and all the life teeming within. Imagine for a moment the vastness of the desert: the silence, the dryness, the seeming emptiness... and then, if you can, try to imagine its complete opposite, and you will get close to what I was facing. At that moment I had to decide whether to carry on with my journey, into that great noisy wildness. Or to turn away..."

"Excuse me!" Jack's mum sounded a bit more definite now. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, and it does sound a wonderful story, but..."

"Mum – please! Let him finish!" Jack turned back to the man. "What happened? Did you go in? What did you see? What was it like?"

"Aha!" the man slapped a hand on his apron side. "You've passed the test, my boy!"

"Test...?" Jack and his mum looked at each other and then stared blankly at the man. *What was he talking about?*

"Just my little way of finding out," he continued, still smiling. "Don't worry, I can tell you my travel tales another time. But I see that you, my dear boy, still have within you the spark of interest to seek out and question and experience and learn. With so many children I see it is already dead... But in you, it is very much alive and well!" He turned to Jack's now rather astonished mum and bowed his head slightly.

"Let me introduce myself Madam. My name is Rupert Woolacraft and I wonder whether this" – he held up a finger as if to pause the world while he pulled from his apron pocket a dark blue pamphlet covered with ornate gold writing – "just might be the answer to your problem."

All three of them leant forward to read, in blazing, golden, curling script:

St Cuthbert's Wild School For Boys