

Three



For the hundredth time that weekend, Jack thought of the dark blue pamphlet. Where was it? Why couldn't he look at it? What did it say?

In Café Amazon, after only a moment, Jack's mum had taken it and put it firmly in her bag, as if she knew that once opened, it would be hard to close. She had politely thanked Rupert Woolacraft for his kind suggestion and made it very clear that they wanted to finish their drinks. In private. Rupert Woolacraft was very gracious.

"Of course," he said, leaving them at once.

Later, he held open the door and passed a small card to Jack's mum. "My number. In case you want to find out more."

And now here Jack was on a Sunday afternoon, with only homework ahead of him. Ellie was out at a birthday party, his mum was ironing and he was on the sofa, bored. He drummed his hands against the arm.

"Can I go on the computer?" There was this cool game that he and Max had discovered, where you shoot zombies and each one dies a different kind of weirdo death: dissolving, turning into dribble, going green and

shrinking, desiccating (that meant going dry, like his mum's cooking); exploding... He was on Level Six but he was sure he could get to Level Ten if...

"No way Jack. You've been on it all morning." His mum reached for a shirt from the ironing pile and shook it out. "I'm sick of the sight of you staring at that screen and banging away on the keyboard. Find something else to do."

"Telly then?" he asked, hopefully.

"No! That's no different!"

"It's TOTALLY different!" Jack sometimes could not believe the small understanding his mum had of modern technology. She only seemed to grasp the very surface functions of anything.

"It's still a screen you're staring at," she said, smoothing the shirt onto the ironing board. "You know what I mean. Go and do something else."

"There's isn't anything else! I'm bored of everything we've got." Jack could hear the whine creeping into his voice. The whine she didn't like. The whine that made her cross. But it was true: there *was* nothing else to do!

"Well go in the garden and get some fresh air! Play football!" She started ironing, pressing the iron down hard.

"Our garden's tiny! And it's concrete! And you can't play football on your own."

"Well think of something else then!" His mum was getting really annoyed now. He could feel it. "Look at Ellie! She doesn't mope around saying she's bored. She just gets on with it."

"Ellie!" Jack kicked the floor. 'Ellie! Ellie's little! And she's a girl. And maybe I got on with it when I was her age. What I'm saying is I'M BORED NOW!"

"Jack!" His mum banged the iron down hard. "When I was your age, I didn't have half the things you have and I played all day long. Stop being such a pain!"

"Yeah?" he shouted, leaping to his feet. "Were you allowed out to play in the streets? Yes! Were you allowed to the park on your own? Yes! Could you go and call for your friends and do what you wanted? Yes! You've told me hundreds of times about when you were little, but I'm not allowed to do any of it! I'm sick of only going to the park with you and I'm sick of our road and I'm sick of everything!" And he kicked the end of the sofa with his trained foot, hard, leaving a dusty smear.

"Don't you DARE do that!" his mum yelled, red and fiery.

But it was true and she knew it and she sat down heavily in the old armchair and put her curly head in her hands. "The thing is Jack," she said in a weary voice, looking up. "Life often isn't fair. Times have changed since I was little. I just don't feel ready to let you go where you want. Anything could happen. You have to learn to do stuff where you are. Or at Max's house."

Jack groaned and covered his face. In the darkness he felt there was no way out of this boredom and it would possibly never end; an endless, airless tunnel of brown boredom, with only computer games and sports clubs to break it up. And even if she did let him out, what would he do? Where would he go? There was just traffic, gritty streets, parks with no children...

He just couldn't escape the feeling that there was something wrong, something missing, something more that people weren't telling him...

"Anyway," Jack's mum said suddenly, in a different tone. "Shouldn't you be doing your homework?"

“Agghhh!!!” He fell to the floor in frustration. *This is how an animal feels when it's trapped!* he thought. And he saw, for a moment, the lions in the zoo: eating, sleeping and, when they understood, roaring and pacing their cage.

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Half an hour later Jack was lying on the floor, pencil in hand, revision worksheet by his side. Ellie, back from the party, was playing upstairs. This is what he had to do:

Adjective and adverb recap!! Complete the 10 questions. Fill in the blank spaces with your own good describing words. Remember to notice if you are describing an action or a thing:

1. The ____ man went ____ into the ____ garden.
2. The ____ bird flew ____ across the ____ sky.
3. The ____ children laughed ____.
4. A ____ mouse...

Jack was on number two and so far he had written:

1. The *happy* man went *quickly* into the *big* garden.
2. The *happy* bird flew...

But he had lost interest a while ago. Instead, he was sketching a design for a new weapon, the weapon to end all weapons and alter hand to hand combat for ever: a long straight, jagged blade which curved gently at the

end; a mixture of sword, saw and scythe. He would call it the Super S.S.S and...

“Jack! What *on earth* are you doing?” His mum appeared behind him, carrying a shopping bag. “You’re meant to be doing your homework!”

“Well I’ve started it!”

“Let me have a look. Oh Jack...” she put down her bag. “This isn’t very good!”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Well you say all the time you like words and you’ve just put ‘happy’ both times. This is your chance to show Mrs Wirksworth what you can do! This is exactly what she was talking about on Friday Jack and it’s just lazy!”

“I’m NOT lazy!” Jack threw down his pencil and turned on his back, his arm over his eyes, a tight feeling squeezing his chest.

“Well try harder then! Show her!”

“Show her what?!”

“Show her what good words you know! Show her that you’re clever and that you can do it! Try and get good marks! Otherwise it’s like she says, they’ll think you’re no good and that’s going to make everything harder when you move schools.”

“I – DON’T – CARE!” Jack hit the floor with his fists. “You don’t get it, do you? She’s not interested in me or what’s in my head. And I don’t want to do it. It’s BORING!”

He leapt up, slammed out of the room and rushed to the bedroom where Ellie, frozen mid-game, stared at him in alarm.

“GET OUT OF MY ROOM!!!!” he yelled.

She went, double quick, leaving him alone and angry and miserable. And very possibly crying.

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A long while later, when the anger had gone and Jack was feeling drained and miserable, his mum knocked on the door and came in. She was carrying a plate with his favourite sandwich invention: white bread, cheese, mango chutney, cucumber and mayonnaise. She put it down on the chest of drawers. It was perfect timing: any earlier and he would have thrown his pillow at the door; any later and he would have got too hungry and been forced to go downstairs – a humiliating defeat.

“Sorry,” said his mum.

“Sorry,” said Jack, and they hugged each other tightly, his mum wanting to carry it on longer than he did, as usual. And for a moment he really smelt his mum, the way you do when you hug people and you’re squashed against their clothes and maybe a bit of their skin and hair. They smell so much of themselves like that, but with a bit of what they’ve been doing too: cooking tea, sleeping, or being outdoors. His mum smelt of strawberries always, from her shampoo, and a deep homely, woolly smell that was just *her*. His mum.

You can even smell of the night Jack thought. His dad used to, when it was winter and he came home after work in the dark.

“Hey – what’s that?” Over his mum’s shoulder, Jack caught sight of something dark blue with a flash of gold, under the sandwich plate.

“Oh – that!” His mum un-hugged herself. “I don’t know if it will do any good looking at it, or if it’s just a waste of time. But I don’t want you to be unhappy at school Jack, or unhappy here. I just thought that maybe

we should at least have a look at the Wild School leaflet and... well, just see if it gives us any ideas.”

Wild School... Even the name thrilled Jack!

“But I’m telling you now, I can’t afford to pay for a private school. And I don’t want you leaving home.”

“Okay okay!”

Jack leapt down from his bunk and together they knelt on the floor to look at the pamphlet. The gold letters on the front danced and shone back at them and his mum opened the cover and carefully folded it back. Inside, there were just two pages of thick, creamy coloured paper with dark blue writing and coloured photographs. On Jack’s side, it said:

Rules of the School

1. *No Targets*
2. *No Worksheets*
3. *No Tests*
4. *Only essential Health and Safety Rules*

Jack looked up. “What’s Health and Safety?”

“Rules to keep you from having accidents. You know, like at Kerry Road.”

“Oh.”

And then:

5. *No computers, phones, hand-held devices or screens of any kind*

Oh! Not so cool.

Underneath there was more writing, which his mum was now reading aloud. Jack heard the words

broad curriculum... physical development... outdoors... learning through experience... but his attention was caught by something much more interesting: the photographs. There were two of them. The top one showed a group of boys walking together across a green lawn. They were filthy, covered in mud, laughing and smiling, as if after some kind of extreme rugby or football game, which they had won, or at least massively enjoyed. *As if... but not quite.* Jack noticed that they weren't wearing sports kit, just their own slightly torn and muddy clothes.

The second one was even more intriguing. It was a big photograph that took up nearly half of the second page and it showed a huge, beautiful old house with a drive leading up to it, meadows and trees stretching away on either side.

"Is that the school?" It didn't look like a school. It looked like a mansion.

"Hang on Jack. I'm still reading... But yes, that must be the school."

"Cool!"

"A lot of private schools are in amazing old buildings but you have to pay a lot of money to go to them and they exclude so many people... Oh, actually... Look at that! That's interesting..." His mum pointed to some writing under the photograph:

Education at St Cuthbert's Wild School for Boys is at no cost to boys and their families, but all boys must be specifically recommended to us by one of the members of our Board.

"Perhaps I should phone Rupert Woolacraft and find out more..." his mum's voice was thoughtful. "After all, it can't do any harm just to get information. Shall I do that? Yes, I'll do it now." And she left the room, still *mumbling* to herself.

But Jack wasn't listening. He was still looking at the photograph of the house, at something he could see – or thought he could see – in the trees.

Quickly he went to the wooden desk that he shared with Ellie and yanked open one of the drawers on his side, rummaging through a mixture of swimming certificates, diagrams of monsters, and here and there a fossil, a crystal, a sweet, until he found what he was looking for: his super-power magnifying glass. He rushed back to the brochure on the floor and examined the photograph again, through the lens.

It *was* what he had thought! There, in one of the trees at the side of the meadow, was a wooden construction, a very complex kind of tree house that with normal vision had just looked like part of the tree – if it wasn't for the flag that Jack had spotted sticking out above it. He adjusted the lens. Yes, there was the flag... it had something on it but it was too faint to see. It looked like a kind of bird.

And there, poking out at the side of the tree house, visible only with Jack's extra strong lens, was the head of a boy, hair on end, his face wearing an expression of what could only be described as pure and utter glee.