

from *Black Swan Green*
by David Mitchell

Dark, Light, Dark, Light, Dark, Light. The Datsun's wipers couldn't keep up with the rain, not even at the fastest setting. When a juggernaut passed the other way, it slapped up spumes onto the streaming windscreen. Through this car-wash visibility I only *just* made out the two Ministry of Defence radars spinning at their incredible speed. Waiting for the full might of the Warsaw Pact forces. Mum and me didn't speak much on the way. Partly 'cause of where she was taking me, I think. (The dashboard clock said 16:05. In seventeen hours *exactly* my public execution'd take place.) Waiting at the Pelican crossing by the closed-down beautician's she asked me if I'd had a good day and I said, "Okay." I asked her if she'd had a good day too and she said, "Oh, sparkling creative and deeply fulfilling, thank you." Dead sarky, Mum can be, even though she tells me off for it. "Did you get any Valentine's cards?" I said no, but even if I'd had some I'd've told her no. (I did get one but I put it in the bin. It said "Suck My Dick" and was signed by Nicholas Briar, but it looked like Gary Drake's handwriting.) Duncan Priest'd got four. Neal Brose got seven, or so he reckons. Ant Little found out that Nick Yew'd got *twenty*. I didn't ask Mum if she'd got any. Dad says Valentine's Days and Mother's Days and No-Armed Goalkeeper's Days're all conspiracies of card manufacturers and flower shops and chocolate companies.

So anyway, Mum dropped me at Malvern Link traffic lights by the clinic. I forgot my diary in the glove compartment and if the lights hadn't turned red for me, Mum would've driven off to Lorenzo Hussingtree's with it. ("Jason" isn't exactly the acest name you could wish for but any "Lorenzo" in *my* school'd get Bunsen-burnered to death.) Diary safe in my satchel, I crossed the flooded clinic car park, leaping from dry bit to dry bit like James Bond froggering across the crocodiles' backs. Outside the clinic were a couple of second or third years from the Dyson Perrins School. They saw my enemy uniform. Every year, according to Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard, all the Dyson Perrins fourth years and all our fourth years skive off school and meet in this secret arena walled in by gorse on Poolbrook Common for a mass scrap. If you chicken out you're a homo and if you tell a teacher you're *dead*. Three years ago, apparently, Pluto Noak'd hit their hardest kid so hard that the hospital in Worcester'd had to sew his jaw back on. He's still sucking his meals through a straw. Luckily it was raining too hard for the Dyson Perrins kids to bother with me.

Today was my second appointment this year so the pretty receptionist in the clinic recognized me. "I'll buzz Mrs. de Roo for you now, Jason. Take a seat." I like her. She knows why I'm here so she doesn't make pointless conversation that'll show me up. The waiting area smells of Dettol and warm plastic. People waiting there never look like they have much wrong with them. But I don't either, I s'pose, not to look at. You all sit so close to each other but what can any of you talk about 'cept the thing you want to talk about least. "So, why are *you* here?" One old biddy was knitting. The sound of her needles knitted in the sound of the rain. A hobbit man with watery eyes rocked to and fro. A woman with coat hangers instead of bones sat reading *Watership Down*. There's a cage for babies

with a pile of sucked toys in it, but today it was empty. The telephone rang and the pretty receptionist answered it. It seemed to be a friend, 'cause she cupped the mouthpiece and lowered her voice. *Jesus*, I envy *anyone* who can say what they want at the same time as they think it, without needing to test it for stammer-words. A Dumbo the Elephant clock tocked this: to-mor-row-mor-ning's-com-ing-soon-so-gouge-out-your-brain-with-a-spoon-you-can-not-e-ven-count-to-ten-be-gin-a-gain-a-gain-a-gain. (Quarter past four. Sixteen hours and fifty minutes to live.) I picked up a tatty *National Geographic* magazine. An American woman in it'd taught chimpanzees to speak in sign language.

Most people think stammering and stuttering are the same but they're as different as diarrhea and constipation. Stuttering's where you say the first bit of the word but can't stop saying it over and over. *St-st-st-stutter*. Like that. Stammering's where you get stuck straight after the first bit of the word. Like this. *St.....* AMmer! My stammer's why I go to Mrs. de Roo. (That really is her name. It's Dutch, not Australian.) I started going that summer when it never rained and the Malvern Hills turned brown and fires broke out. Miss Throckmorton'd been playing Hangman on the blackboard one afternoon with sunlight streaming in. On the blackboard was

NIGH-ING—E

Any *duh*-brain could work that out, so I put up my hand. Miss Throckmorton said, "Yes, Jason?" and *that* was when my life divided itself into Before Hangman and After Hangman. The word "nightingale" kaboomed in my skull but it just *wouldn't come out*. The *n* got out okay, but the harder I forced the rest, the tighter the noose got. I remember Lucy Sneads whispering to Angela Bullock, stifling giggles. I remember Robin South staring at this bizarre sight. I'd've done the same if it hadn't been me. When a stammerer stammers their eyeballs pop out, they go trembly-red like an evenly matched arm wrestler, and their mouth guppertguppertguppert like a fish in a net. It must be quite a funny sight.

It wasn't funny for me, though. Miss Throckmorton was waiting. Every kid in the classroom was waiting. Every crow and every spider in Black Swan Green was waiting. Every cloud, every car on every motorway, even Mrs. Thatcher in the House of Commons'd frozen, listening, watching, thinking, *What's wrong with Jason Taylor?*

But no matter how shocked, scared, breathless, ashamed I was, no matter how much of a total flid I looked, no matter how much I *hated* myself for not being able to say a simple word in my own language, I *couldn't* say "nightingale." In the end I had to say, "I'm not sure, miss," and Miss Throckmorton said, "I see." She did see, too. She phoned my mum that evening and one week later I was taken to see Mrs. de Roo, the speech therapist at Malvern Link Clinic. That was five years ago.

It must've been around then (maybe that same afternoon) that my stammer took on the appearance of a hangman. Pike lips, broken nose, rhino cheeks, red eyes 'cause he never sleeps. I imagine him in the baby room at Preston Hospital playing *eeny, meeny, miney, mo*. I imagine him tapping my koochy lips, murmuring down at me, *Mine*. But it's his hands, not his face, that I really feel him by. His snaky

fingers that sink inside my tongue and squeeze my windpipe so nothing'll work. Words beginning with *N* have always been one of Hangman's favorites. When I was nine I dreaded people asking me "How old are you?" In the end I'd hold up nine fingers like I was being dead witty but I know the other person'd be thinking, *Why didn't he just tell me, the twat?* Hangman used to like *Y*-words, too, but lately he's eased off those and has moved to *S*-words. This is bad news. Look at any dictionary and see which section's the thickest: it's *S*. Twenty million words begin with *N* or *S*. Apart from the Russians starting a nuclear war, my biggest fear is if Hangman gets interested in *J*-words, 'cause then *I won't even be able to say my own name*. I'd have to change my name by deed poll, but Dad'd never let me.

The only way to outfox Hangman is to think one sentence ahead, and if you see a stammer-word coming up, alter your sentence so you won't need to use it. Of course, you have to do this without the person you're talking to catching on. Reading dictionaries like I do helps you do these ducks and dives, but you have to remember who you're talking to. (If I was speaking to another thirteen-year-old and said the word "melancholy" to avoid stammering on "sad," for example, I'd be a laughingstock 'cause kids aren't s'posed to use adult words like "melancholy." Not at Upton-on-Severn Comprehensive, anyway.) Another strategy is to buy time by saying "er..." in the hope that Hangman's concentration'll lapse and you can sneak the word out. But if you say "er..." too much you come across as a right dimmer. Lastly, if a teacher asks you a question directly and the answer's a stammer-word, it's best to pretend you don't know. I couldn't count how often I've done this. Sometimes teachers lose their rag (specially if they've just spent half a lesson explaining something) but *anything's* better than getting labeled "School Stutterboy."

That's something I've always *just* about avoided, but tomorrow morning at five minutes past nine this is going to happen. I'm going to have to stand up in front of Gary Drake and Neal Brose and my *entire* class to read from Mr. Kempsey's book, *Plain Prayers for a Complicated World*. There will be *dozens* of stammer-words in that reading which I *can't* substitute and I *can't* pretend not to know because there they are, printed there. Hangman'll skip ahead as I read, underlining all his favourite *N*- and *S*-words, murmuring in my ear, "*Here*, Taylor, try and spit *this* one out!" I *know*, with Gary Drake and Neal Brose and everyone watching, Hangman'll *crush* my throat and *mangle* my tongue and *scrunch* my face up. Worse than Joey Deacon's. I'm going to stammer worse than I've ever stammered in my life. By nine-fifteen my secret'll be spreading round the school like a poison-gas attack. By the end of first break my life won't be worth living.

The grotesquest thing I ever heard was this. Pete Redmarley swore on his own grave it's true, so I s'pose it must be. This boy in the sixth form was sitting his A levels. He had these parents from hell who'd put him under massive pressure to get a whole raft of A grades and when the exam came, this kid just cracked and couldn't even understand the questions. So what he did was get two Bic Biro's from his pencil case, hold the pointy ends against his eyes, stand up, and head-butt the desk. Right there, in the exam hall. The pens skewered his eyeballs so deep that only an inch was left sticking out of his drippy sockets. Mr. Nixon, the headmaster, hushed everything up so it didn't get in the papers or anything. It's a sick and horrible story but right now, I'd rather kill Hangman that way than let him kill me tomorrow morning.

I mean that.

Mrs. de Roo's shoes clop so you know it's her coming to fetch you. She's forty or maybe even older, and has fat silver brooches, wispy bronze hair, and flowery clothes. She gave a folder to the pretty receptionist, tutted at the rain, and said, "My my, monsoon season's come to darkest Worcestershire!" I agreed it was chucking it down, and left with her quick. In case the other patients worked out why I was there. Down the corridor we went, past the signpost full of words like PEDIATRICS and ULTRASCANS. (No ultrascan'd read *my* brain. I'd beat it by remembering every satellite in the solar system.) "February's *so* gloomy in this part of the world," said Mrs. de Roo, "don't you think? It's not so much a month as a twenty-eight-day-long Monday morning. You leave home in the dark and go home in the dark. On wet days like these, it's like living in a cave, behind a waterfall." I told Mrs. de Roo how I'd heard Eskimo kids spend time under artificial sunlamps to stop them getting scurvy, 'cause at the North Pole winter lasts for most of the year. I suggested Mrs. de Roo should think about getting a sunbed.

Mrs. de Roo answered, "I shall think on."

We passed a room where a howling baby'd just had an injection. In the next room a freckly girl Julia's age sat in a wheelchair. One of her legs wasn't there. She'd probably love to have my stammer if she could have her leg back, and I wondered if being happy's about other people's misery. That cuts both ways, mind. People'll look at me after tomorrow morning and think, "Well, my life may be a swamp of shit but at least I'm not in Jason Taylor's shoes. At least I can *talk*."

February's Hangman's favorite month. Come summer he gets dozy and hibernates through to autumn, and I can speak a bit better. In fact, after my first run of visits to Mrs. de Roo five years ago, by the time my hay fever began everyone thought my stammer was cured. But come November Hangman wakes up again, sort of like John Barleycorn in reverse. By January he's his old self again, so back I come to Mrs. de Roo. *This* year Hangman's worse than ever. Aunt Alice stayed with us two weeks ago and one night I was crossing the landing and I heard her say to Mum, "*Honestly*, Helena, when are you going to do something about his *stutter*? It's social suicide! I never know whether to finish the sentence for him or just leave the poor boy dangling on the end of his rope." (Eavesdropping's sort of thrilling 'cause you learn what people really think, but eavesdropping makes you miserable for exactly the same reason.) After Aunt Alice'd gone back to Richmond, Mum sat me down and said it mightn't do any harm to visit Mrs. de Roo again. I said okay, 'cause actually I'd wanted to but I hadn't asked 'cause I was ashamed, and 'cause mentioning my stammer makes it realler.

Mrs. de Roo's office smells of Nescafé. She drinks Nescafé Gold Blend nonstop. There're two ratty sofas, one yolky rug, a dragon's-egg paperweight, a Fisher-Price toy multistory car park, and a giant

Zulu mask from South Africa. Mrs. de Roo was born in South Africa but one day she was told by the government to leave the country in twenty-four hours or she'd be thrown into prison. Not 'cause she'd done anything wrong, but because they do that in South Africa if you don't agree that colored people should be kept herded off in mud-and-straw huts in big reservations with no schools, no hospitals, and no jobs. Julia says the police in South Africa don't always bother with prisons, and that often they throw you off a tall building and say you tried to escape. Mrs. de Roo and her husband (who's an Indian dentist) escaped to Rhodesia in a jeep but had to leave everything they owned behind. The government took the lot. (The *Malvern Gazetteer* interviewed her, that's how I know most of this.) South Africa's summer is our winter so their February is lovely and hot. Mrs. de Roo's still got a slightly funny accent. Her "yes" is a "yis" and her "get" is a "git."

"So, Jason," she began today. "How are things?"

Most people only want a "Fine, thanks" when they ask a kid that, but Mrs. de Roo actually means it. So I confessed to her about tomorrow's form assembly. Talking 'bout my stammer's nearly as embarrassing as stammering itself, but it's okay with her. Hangman knows he mustn't mess with Mrs. de Roo so he acts like he's not there. Which is good, 'cause it proves I *can* speak like a normal person, but bad, 'cause how can Mrs. de Roo ever defeat Hangman if she never even sees him properly?

Mrs. de Roo asked if I'd spoken to Mr. Kempsey about excusing me for a few weeks. I already had done, I told her, and this is what he'd said: "We must all face our demons one day, Taylor, and for you, that time is nigh." Form assemblies're read by students in alphabetical order. We've got to *T* for "Taylor," and as far as Mr. Kempsey's concerned that's that.

Mrs. de Roo made an *I see* noise.

Neither of us said anything for a moment.

"Any headway with your diary, Jason?"

The diary's a new idea prompted by Dad. Dad phoned Mrs. de Roo to say that given my "annual tendency to relapse," he thought extra "homework" was appropriate. So Mrs. de Roo suggested that I keep a diary. Just a line or two every day, where I write when, where, and what word I stammered on, and how I felt. Week One looks like this:

Date	place	Word	How I felt
12th Feb 1982	dining room	normally	Bad
13th Feb 1982	school gym	Simon & son	stupid
14th Feb 1982	school bus	swimming	bad and stupid
15th Feb 1982	on telephone	Nothing here	awful
16th Feb 1982	Mr Rhydd's shop	re-massaging papers	awful and bad
17th Feb 1982	French lesson	Sure & Pont B. Daignon	bad.

“More of a chart, then,” Mrs. de Roo said, “than a diary in the classical mode, as such?” (Actually, I wrote it last night. It’s not lies or anything, just truths I made up. If I wrote *every* time I had to dodge Hangman, the diary’d be thick as the Yellow Pages.) “Most informative. Very neatly ruled, too.” I asked if I should carry on with the diary next week. Mrs. de Roo said she thought my father’d be disappointed if I didn’t, so maybe I should.

Then Mrs. de Roo got out her Metro Gnome. Metro Gnomes’re upside-down pendulums without the clock part. They tock rhythms. They’re small, which could be why they’re called gnomes. Music students normally use them but speech therapists do too. You read aloud in time with its tocks, like this: ~~here-comes-the-can-dle-to-take-you-to-bed-~~, ~~here-comes-the-chop-per-to-chop-off-your-head.~~ Today we read a stack of *N*-words from the dictionary, one by one. The Metro Gnome *does* make speaking easy, as easy as singing, but I can hardly carry one around with me, can I? Kids like Ross Wilcox’d say, “What’s this then, Taylor?,” snap off its pendulum in a *nanosecond*, and say, “Shoddy workmanship, that.”

After the Metro Gnome I read aloud from a book Mrs. de Roo keeps for me called *Z for Zachariah*. *Z for Zachariah*’s about a girl called Ann who lives in a valley with its own freak weather system that protects it after a nuclear war’s poisoned the rest of the country and killed everyone else off. For all Ann knows she’s the only person alive in the British Isles. As a book it’s utterly brill but a bit bleak. Maybe Mrs. de Roo suggested I read this to make me feel luckier than Ann despite my stammer. I got a bit stuck on a couple of words but you’d not’ve noticed if you weren’t looking. I know Mrs. de Roo was saying, *See, you can read aloud without stammering*. But there’s stuff not even speech therapists understand. Quite often, even in bad spells, Hangman’ll let me say whatever I want, even words beginning with dangerous letters. This (a) gives me hope I’m cured, which Hangman can enjoy destroying later, and (b) lets me con other kids into thinking I’m normal while keeping alive and well the fear that my secret’ll be discovered.

There’s more. I once wrote Hangman’s Four Commandments.

1st commandment:-
Thou shalt hide from
speech therapists.
2nd commandment:-
Thou shalt strangle
Taylor when he is nervous
about stammering.
3rd commandment:-
Thou shalt ambush
Taylor when he is not
nervous about stammering.
4th commandment
Once Taylor is 'spitterboy'
in the eyes of the world
he is yours

Like I said, the First Commandment kicks in whenever I'm with Mrs. de Roo. Tomorrow morning, Hangman's going for the fourth.

When the session was over, Mrs. de Roo asked me if I felt any more confident about my form assembly. She'd've liked me to say "Sure!" but only if I meant it. I said, "Not a lot, to be honest." Then I asked if stammers're like zits that you grow out of, or if kids with stammers're more like toys that're wired wrong at the factory and stay busted all their lives. (You get stammering adults too. There's one on a BBC1 sitcom called *Open All Hours* on Sunday evenings where Ronnie Barker plays a shopkeeper who stutters so badly, so hilariously, that the audience *pisses* itself laughing. Even knowing *Open All Hours* is on makes me shrivel up like a plastic wrapper in a fire.)

"Yis," said Mrs. de Roo. "That's the question. My answer is, It depends. Speech therapy is as imperfect a science, Jason, as speaking is a complex one. There are seventy-two muscles involved in the production of human speech. The neural connections my brain is employing now, to say this sentence to you, number in the tens of millions. Little wonder one study put the percentage of people with some kind of speech disorder at twelve percent. Don't put your faith in a miracle cure. In the vast majority of cases, progress doesn't come from trying to kill a speech defect. Try to will it out of existence, it'll just will itself back stronger. Right? No, it's a question—and this might sound nutty—of understanding it, of coming to a working accommodation with it, of respecting it, of not fearing it. Yis, it'll flare up from time to time, but if you know *why* it flares, you'll know how to douse what makes it flare up. Back in Durban I had a friend who'd once been an alcoholic. One day I asked him how he'd cured himself. My friend said he'd done no such thing. I said, 'What do you mean? You haven't touched a drop in three years!' He said all he'd done was become a teetotal alcoholic. That's my goal. To help people change from being stammering stammerers into nonstammering stammerers."

Mrs. de Roo's no fool and all that makes sense.

But it's sod-all help for 2KM's form assembly tomorrow morning.

Dinner was steak-and-kidney pie. The steak bits're okay, but kidney makes me reach for the vomit bucket. I have to try to swallow the kidney bits whole. Smuggling bits into my pocket is too risky since Julia spotted me last time and grassed on me. Dad was telling Mum about a new trainee salesman called Danny Lawlor at the new Greenland Superstore in Reading. "Fresh from some management course, and he's Irish as Hurricane Higgins, but my word, that lad hasn't kissed the Blarney Stone, he's bitten off chunks of it. Talk about the gift of the gab! Craig Salt dropped by while I was there to instill some God-fearing discipline into the troops, but Danny had him *eating out of his hand* in five minutes flat. Executive material, is that young man. When Craig Salt gives me nationwide sales next year, I'm fast-tracking Danny Lawlor and frankly I don't care whose nose I put out of joint."

"The Irish've always had to live by their wits," said Mum.

Dad didn't remember it was Speech Therapy Day till Mum'd mentioned she'd written a "plumpish" check to Lorenzo Hussingtree in Malvern Link. Dad asked what Mrs. de Roo'd thought about his diary idea. Her comment that it was "most informative" fueled his good mood. "Informative"? Indispensable, more like! Smart-Think Management Principles are applicable across the board. Like I told Danny Lawlor, any operator is only as good as his data. Without data, you're the *Titanic*, crossing an Atlantic chock-full of icebergs without radar. Result? Collision, disaster, good night."

"Wasn't radar invented in the Second World War?" Julia forked a lump of steak. "And didn't the *Titanic* sink before the First?"

"The principle, O daughter of mine, is a universal constant. If you don't keep records, you can't make progress assessments. True for retailers, true for educators, true for the military, true for *any* systems operator. One bright day in your brilliant career at the Old Bailey you'll learn this the hard way and think, 'If only I'd listened to my dear wise father. How right he was.'"

Julia snorted horsily, which she gets away with 'cause she's Julia. I can never tell Dad what I really think like that. I can feel the stuff I don't say rotting inside me like mildewy spuds in a sack. Stammerers can't win arguments 'cause once you stammer, H-h-hey p-p-presto, you've l-l-lost, S-s-st-stutterboy! If I stammer with Dad, he gets that face he had when he got his Black & Decker Workmate home and found it was minus a crucial packet of screws. Hangman just *loves* that face.

After Julia and I'd done the washing up Mum and Dad sat in front of the telly watching a glittery new quiz show called *Blankety Blank*, presented by Terry Wogan. Contestants have to guess a missing word from a sentence and if they guess the same as the panel of celebrities they win crap prizes like a mug tree with mugs.

Up in my room I started my homework on the feudal system for Mrs. Coscombe. But then I got sucked in by a poem about a skater on a frozen lake who wants to know what it's like to be dead so

much, he's persuaded himself that a drowned kid's talking to him. I typed it out on my Silver Reed manual typewriter. I love how it's got no number 1 so you use the letter l. My Silver Reed's probably what I'd save if our house ever caught fire, now my granddad's Omega Seamaster's busted. The worst thing in a locked house in a bad dream, that was.

So anyway, my radio-alarm suddenly said 21:15. I had less than twelve hours. Rain drummed on my window. Metro Gnomes're in rain and poems too, and breathing, not just tocks of clocks.

Julia's footsteps crossed my ceiling and went downstairs. She opened the living room door and asked if she could phone Kate Alfrick about some Economics homework. Dad said okay. Our phone's in the hallway to make it uncomfortable to use, so if I creep over the landing to my surveillance position I can catch just about everything.

"Yeah, yeah, I *did* get your Valentine's card, and very sweet it is too, but *listen*, you *know* why I'm calling! Did you pass?"

Pause.

"Just tell me, Ewan! Did you *pass*?"

Pause. (Who's Ewan?)

"*Excellent! Brilliant! Fantastic!* I was going to chuck you if you'd failed, of course. Can't have a boyfriend who can't drive."

("Boyfriend"? "Chuck"?) Muffled laughter plus pause.

"No! *No!* He's *never!*"

Pause.

Julia did the *ohhh!* moany noise she does when she's mega-jealous. "God, why can't *I* have a filthy-rich uncle who gives me sports cars? Can't I have one of yours? Go on, you've got more wealthy relatives than you need..."

Pause.

"You *bet*. How about Saturday? Oh, you've got classes all morning, I keep forgetting..."

Saturday morning classes? This Ewan must be a Worcester Cathedral School kid. Posh.

"...Russell and Dorrell's café then. One-thirty. Kate'll drive me in."

A sly Julia laugh.

"No, I certainly will *not* be bringing him. *Thing* spends his Saturdays skulking up trees or hiding

down holes.”

The sound of the nine o'clock news filled the hallway as the living room door opened. Julia switched to her Kate voice. “Got that bit, yeah, Kate, but I still can't get my head round question nine. I'd better check your answers before the test. Okay...okay. Thanks. See you in the morning. G'night.”

“Sort it out?” Dad called from the kitchen.

“Pretty much,” said Julia, zipping up her pencil case.

Julia's an ace liar. She's applied to do Law at university and she's got several offers of places already. (Lawyer-liar, liar-lawyer. Never noticed that before.) The idea of any boy snogging my sister makes me grab the vomit bucket but quite a few sixth formers fancy her. I bet Ewan's one of these super-confident kids who wears Blue Stratos aftershave and winkle-picker shoes and a wedge like the man from *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark*. I bet Ewan speaks in well-drilled sentences that march by perfectly, like my cousin Hugo. Speaking well is the same as commanding.

God knows what job *I*'m going to be able to do. Not a lawyer, that's for sure. You can't stammer in court. You can't stammer in a classroom, either. My students'd *crucify* me. There aren't many jobs where speaking isn't a part of it. Miss Lippetts said once nobody buys poetry, so I can't be a professional poet. I could be a monk, but church is more boring than watching the screen-test card. Mum made us go to Sunday school at Saint Gabriel's when we were smaller but it turned every Sunday morning into torture by boredom. Even Mum got bored after a few months. Being trapped in a monastery'd be *murder*. How about a lighthouse keeper? All those storms, sunsets, and Dairylea sandwiches'd make you lonely in the end. But lonely is something I'd better get used to. What girl'd go out with a stammerer? Or even dance with one? The last song at the Black Swan Green Village Hall Disco'd be over before I could spit out D-d-d-you want to d-d-d-d-d-*dance*. Or what if I stammered at my wedding and couldn't even say “I do”?

“Were you listening in just now?”

Julia'd appeared, leaning on my door frame.

“What?”

“You heard me. Were you eavesdropping on my phone call just now?”

“What phone call?” My reply was too fast and too innocent.

“If you ask me”—my sister's glare made my face begin to smoke—“a little privacy isn't too much to ask. If *you* had any friends to phone, Jason, I wouldn't listen in on you. People who eavesdrop are such *maggots*.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping!” How whiny I sounded.

“So how come your door was closed three minutes ago, but now it’s wide open?”

“I don’t—” (Hangman seized “know” so I had to abort the sentence, spazzishly.) “What’s it to you? The room felt stuffy.” (Hangman let “stuffy” go unchallenged.) “I went to the bog. A draft opened it.”

“A draft? Sure, there’s a hurricane blowing over the landing. I can hardly stand upright.”

“I *wasn’t* listening in on you!”

Julia said nothing for long enough to tell me she knew I was bullshitting. “Who said you could borrow *Abbey Road*?”

Her L.P. was by my crappy record player. “You hardly listen to it.”

“Even if that *were* true, it wouldn’t make it your property. You never wear Granddad’s watch. Does that make it *my* property?” She entered my room to get her record, stepping over my Adidas bag. Julia glanced at my typewriter. Lurching with shame, I hid my poem with my body. “So you agree,” she said, her real meaning as subtle as nutcrackers, “a little privacy isn’t too much to ask? And if this record has a *single* scratch on it, you’re *dead*.”

Through the ceiling’s coming not *Abbey Road* but “The Man with the Child in His Eyes” by Kate Bush. Usually Julia only plays Kate Bush when she’s hyperemotional or when she’s got her period. Life must be pretty brill for Julia. She’s eighteen, she’s leaving Black Swan Green in a few months, she’s got a boyfriend with a sports car, she gets twice as much pocket money as me, and she can make other people do whatever she wants with *words*.

Just *words*.

Julia’s just put on “Songbird” by Fleetwood Mac.

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Dad gets up before it’s light on Wednesdays ’cause he’s got to drive to Oxford for a midweek meeting at Greenland HQ. The garage is below my bedroom, so I hear his Rover 3500 growl into life. If it’s raining, like this morning, its tires *shssssssh* on the puddly drive and the rain shplatterdrangs on the swiveled-up garage door. My radio-alarm glowed 06:35 in numerals of Mekon green. One hundred and fifty minutes of life left, that was all. I could already see the rows and columns of faces in my class, like a screen of space invaders. Guffawing, puzzled, appalled, *pitying*. Who decides which defects are funny and which ones are tragic? Nobody laughs at blind people or makes iron-lung jokes.

If God made each minute last six months I'd be middle-aged by breakfast and dead by the time I got on the school bus. I could sleep forever. I tried to push away what was in store by lying back and imagining the ceiling was the unmapped surface of a G-class planet orbiting Alpha Centauri. Nobody was there. I'd never have to say a word.

"Jason! Up time!" yelled Mum from downstairs. I'd dreamed I'd woken in a gas-blue wood and'd found my granddad's Omega, in one piece, in fiery crocuses. Then came running feet and the thought it was a spook running home to Saint Gabriel's graveyard. Mum yelled again "*Jason!*" and I saw the time: 07:41.

I mustered a muzzy "Okay!" and ordered my legs out of bed so the rest of me'd have to follow. The bathroom mirror, worse luck, showed no signs of leprosy. I thought about pressing a hot flannel to my forehead, drying it, and then complaining to Mum of a temperature, but she's not that easy to fool. My lucky red underpants were in the wash so I settled for my banana-yellow ones. It's not a P.E. day so it won't matter. Downstairs, Mum was watching the new breakfast TV on BBC1 and Julia was slicing a banana into her Alpen.

"Morning," I said. "What's that magazine?"

Julia held up the front cover of *Face*. "If you touch it when I'm gone I'll strangle you."

I should've been born, hissed Unborn Twin, *not you, you cow*.

"Is that expression supposed to mean something?" Julia hadn't forgotten last night. "You look like you're wetting yourself."

I could've retaliated by asking Julia if she'd strangle *Ewan* if *he* touched her *Face*, but that'd've been admitting *I was* an eavesdropping maggot. My Weetabix tasted like balsa wood. After I'd finished, I cleaned my teeth, put today's books in my Adidas bag and Bic Biro's in my pencil case. Julia'd already gone. She goes to the sixth-form site of our school with Kate Alfrick, who's already passed her driving test.

Mum was on the phone telling Aunt Alice about the new bathroom. "Hang on, Alice." Mum cupped the phone. "Have you got your lunch money?"

I nodded. I decided to tell her. "Mum, there's—"

Hangman was blocking "something."

"Hurry up, Jason! You'll miss the bus!"

Outside was blowy and wet, like a rain machine was aimed over Black Swan Green. Kingfisher Meadows was all rain-stained walls, dripping bird tables, wet gnomes, swilling ponds, and shiny rockeries. A moon-gray cat watched me from Mr. Castle's dry porch. *Wished* there was some way a boy could turn into a cat. I passed the bridleway stile. If I was Grant Burch or Ross Wilcox or any of the council-house kids from down Wellington End, I'd just skive off and hop over that stile and follow the bridleway to wherever it went. Even see if it leads to the lost tunnel under the Malvern Hills. But kids like me just can't. Mr. Kempsey'd notice *straight off* that I was absent on my dreaded form-assembly day. Mum'd be phoned by morning break. Mr. Nixon'd get involved. Dad'd be called out of his Wednesday meeting. Truant officers and their sniffer dogs'd be put on my trail. I'd get captured, interrogated, skinned alive, and Mr. Kempsey'd *still* make me read a passage from *Plain Prayers for a Complicated World*.

Once you think about the consequences, you've had it.

Outside the Black Swan girls were clustered under umbrellas. Boys can't use umbrellas 'cause they're gay. ('Cept for Grant Burch, that is, who stays dry by getting his servant Philip Phelps to bring a big golfing umbrella.) My duffel coat keeps my top half dryish but at the corner of the main road a Vauxhall Chevette'd soaked my shins. My socks were gritty and damp. Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard and Nick Yew and Ross Wilcox and that lot were having a puddle fight but just as I got there, the noddie-eyed school bus pulled up. Norman Bates looked at us from behind his steering wheel like a sleepless slaughterman at a sty of ripe pigs. We got on board and the door hissed shut. My Casio said 8:35.

On rainy mornings the school bus stinks of boys, burps, and ashtrays. The front rows get taken by girls who get on at Guarlford and Blackmore End and just talk about homework. The hardest kids go straight to the back, but even kids like Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard behave themselves when Norman Bates's driving. Norman Bates is one of those cracked stone men you shouldn't mess with. One time, Pluto Noak opened the emergency exit for a doss. Norman Bates went to the back, grabbed him, dragged him to the front, and literally chucked him off the bus. Pluto Noak cried up from his ditch, "I'm taking you to court I am! You bust me flamin' *arm!*"

Norman Bates's reply was to remove his cigarette from the corner of his mouth, lean down the steps of his bus, stick out his tongue like a Maori, and stub out the still-glowing cigarette, slow and deliberate, actually on his tongue. We heard the hiss. The man flicked the stub at the boy in the ditch.

Then Norman Bates sat down and drove off.

Nobody's touched the fire door on his bus since that day.

Dean Moran got on at the Druggers End stop, just at the edge of the village. "Hey, Dean," I said, "sit here if you want." Moran was so pleased I'd used his real name in front of everyone he grinned and plomped right down. "*Jesus*," said Moran. "If it keeps pissing it down like this the Severn'll burst its banks down at Upton by hometime. And Worcester. And Tewkesbury."

“Definitely.” I was being friendly for my benefit as much as his. On the bus home tonight I’d be lucky if the Invisible Man’d want to sit by J-J-J-ason T-T-Taylor the s -sss-s-ssschool s-sss-s-ssstutterboy. Moran and me played Connect 4 on the steamed-up windows. Moran’d won one game before we even got to Welland Cross. Moran’s in Miss Wyche’s form at school, 2W, which is the next-to-bottom class. But Moran’s no duffer, not really. It’s just that everyone’d give him a hard time if his marks were too good.

A black horse stood in a marshy field looking miserable. But not as miserable as I was going to be in twenty-one minutes and counting.

The heater under our seat’d melted my school trousers onto my shins and someone dropped an eggy fart. Gilbert Swinyard roared, “Squelch’s dropped a gas bomb!” Squelch grinned his brown grin, blew his nose on a Monster Munch packet, and chucked it. Crisp bags don’t fly far and it just landed on Robin South in the row behind.

Before I knew it, the bus swung into our school and we all piled off. On wet days we wait for the bell in the main hall instead of the playground. School was all skiddy floors this morning, damp steaming anoraks, teachers telling kids off for screaming and first years playing illegal tag in the corridors and third-year girls trawling the corridors with linked arms singing some crappy pop song. The clock by the tunnel to the staff room where kids are made to stand as a punishment through their lunchtimes told me I had eight minutes to live.

“Ah, Taylor, splendid.” Mr. Kempsey pinched my earlobe. “The very pupil whom I seek. Follow. I wish to deposit words into your auditory organ.” My form teacher led me down the gloomy passageway leading to the staff room. The staff room’s like God. You can’t see it and live. It was ahead, ajar, and cigarette smoke billowed out like fog in Jack the Ripper’s London. But we turned off and stepped into the stationery storeroom. The stationery storeroom’s sort of a holding cell for kids in the shit. I was wondering what *I*’d done. “Five minutes ago,” Mr. Kempsey said, “a telephone call was channeled to myself. This telephone call was regarding Jason Taylor. From a well-wisher.”

You just have to wait with Mr. Kempsey.

“Petitioning me to grant a last-minute act of clemency.”

Mr. Nixon, the headmaster, dashed past the doorway, emitting fumes of anger and tweed.

“Sir?”

Mr. Kempsey grimaced at my dim-wittedness. “Am I to understand that you anticipate this morning’s form-assembly with a level of trepidation one might describe as ‘debilitating dread’?”

I sensed Mrs. de Roo’s white magic but didn’t dare hope it might save me. “Yes sir.”

“Yes Taylor. It seems your dedicated speech therapist holds the opinion that a postponement of this morning’s trial by ordeal may be conducive to a longer-term level of self-confidence vis-à-vis the Arts of Rhetoric and Public Speaking. Do you second this motion, Taylor?”

I knew what he’d said but he was expecting me to act confused. “Sir?”

“*Do you or don’t you wish to be excused from this morning’s reading?*”

I said, “Very much, sir, yes.”

Mr. Kempsey squished his mouth. People always think that not stammering is about jumping in at deep ends, about baptisms of fire. People see stammerers on TV who’re forced, one magic day, to go onto stage in front of a thousand people and lo and behold a perfect voice flows out. *See*. Everyone smiles. *He had it in him all along! All he needed was a friendly push! Now he’s cured*. But that’s such *utter* bollocks. If it ever actually happens it’s just Hangman obeying the First Commandment. Just go back and check up on that “cured” stammerer one week later. You’ll see. The *truth* is, deep ends cause drowning. Baptisms of fire cause third-degree burns. “You can’t turn tail at the prospect of public speaking your whole life through, Taylor.”

Maggot said, *Want to bet?*

“I know, sir. That’s why I’m doing my best to master it. With Mrs. de Roo’s help.”

Mr. Kempsey didn’t give in right away, but I sensed I was in the clear. “Very well. But I had you down as having more pluck than this, Taylor. I can only conclude that I had you down wrongly.”

I watched him go.

If I was the pope I’d’ve made Mrs. de Roo a saint. On the spot.

Mr. Kempsey’s reading from *Plain Prayers for a Complicated World* was about how in life it can rain for forty days and forty nights but God made a promise to humanity that one day a rainbow will appear. (Julia says it’s absurd how in 1982 Bible stories’re still being taught like they’re historical fact.) Then we sang the hymn that goes *All God’s gifts around us are sent from heaven above, so thank the Lord, thank the Lord, for a-a-all his love*. I thought that was that but after Mr. Kempsey’d read the notices and orders from Mr. Nixon, Gary Drake put up his hand. “Excuse me, sir, but I thought it was *Jason Taylor’s* turn to read the assembly today. I was really looking forward to hearing him. Is he going to be doing it next week instead?”

Every neck in our classroom swiveled its head my way.

Sweat sprung out in fifty places, all over me. I just stared at the chalk nebulae on the blackboard.

After a few seconds that felt like a few hours Mr. Kempsey said, “Your spirited defense of established protocol is commendable, Drake, and, no doubt, altruistic. However, I possess reliable intelligence that Taylor’s vocal apparati are in an unseaworthy condition. Thus, your classmate is excused on quasi-medical grounds.”

“So will he be doing it next week instead, sir?”

“The Alphabet marches on regardless of human frailties, Drake. Next week is T-for-Michelle Tirley, and Ours Is Not To Wonder Why.”

“Doesn’t seem very fair, sir, does it?”

What’ve *I* ever done to Gary Drake?

“Life is regularly *unfair*, Drake.” Mr. Kempsey locked the piano. “Despite our best endeavors, and we must face its challenges as they arise. The sooner you learn that”—our teacher shot a stare not at Gary Drake but straight at *me*—“the better.”

Wednesdays kick off with Double Maths with Mr. Inkberrow. Double Maths is just about the worst lesson of the week. Normally I sit next to Alastair Nurton in Maths but this morning Alastair Nurton was sitting next to David Ockeridge. The only free seat was next to Carl Norrest, right in front of Mr. Inkberrow’s desk, so I had to sit there. It was raining so hard the farms and fields outside were dissolving in whites. Mr. Inkberrow frisbeed us back our exercise books from last week and started the lesson by asking a few dead-easy questions to “engage the brain.”

“Taylor!” He’d caught me avoiding his eye.

“Yes sir?”

“In need of a little focusing, *hmm*? If *a* is eleven and *b* is nine and *x* is the product of *a* times *b*, what is the value of *x*?”

The answer’s a piece of piss: it’s ninety-nine.

But “ninety-nine” is a double-*N* word. A double stammer. Hangman wanted revenge for my stay of execution. He’d slid his fingers into my tongue and was clasping my throat and pinching the veins that take oxygen to my brain. When Hangman’s like that I’d look a *total* flid if I tried to spit the word out. “A hundred and one, sir?”

The brighter kids in the class groaned.

Gary Drake did this loud croak. “The boy’s a genius!”

Mr. Inkberrow takes off his glasses, huffs them, and polishes them with the fat end of his tie. “Nine

times eleven equals ‘A hundred and one,’ you say, *hmm?* Let me ask you a follow-up question, Taylor. Why do we bother getting up in the morning? Can you tell me that, *hmm?* Why oh why oh *why* do we flipping *bother?*”