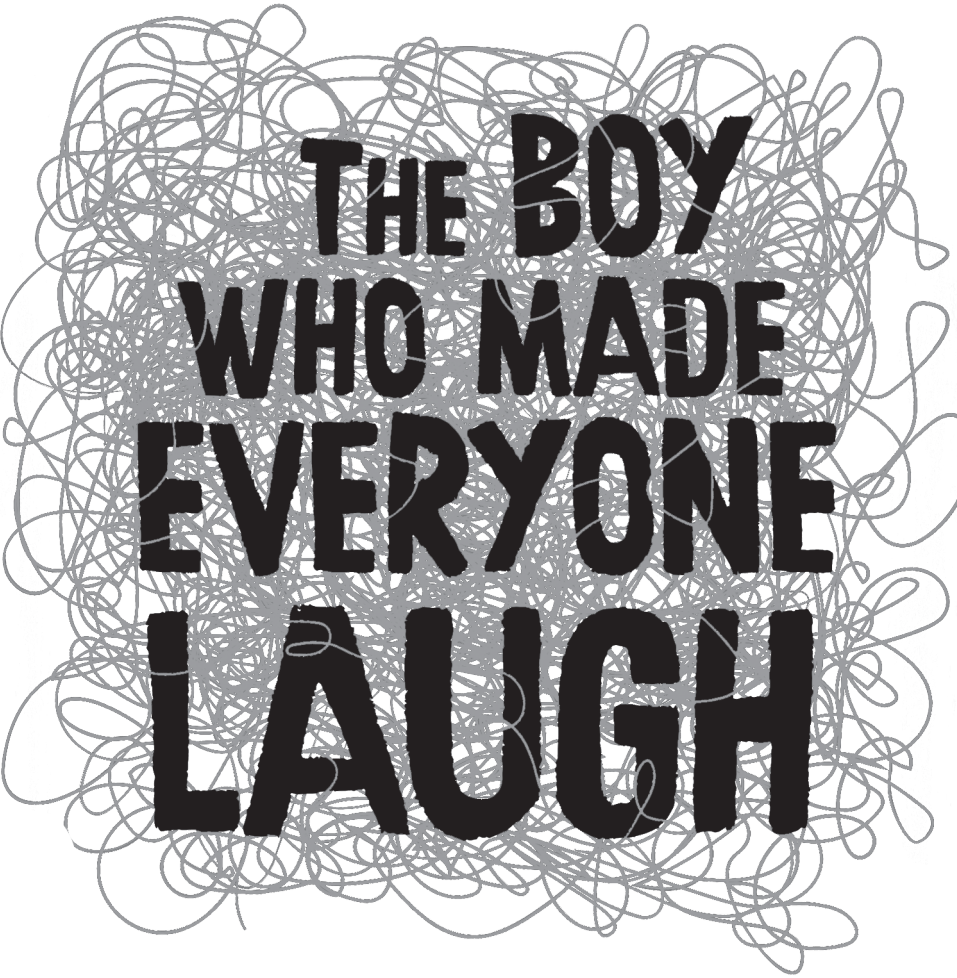


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SCHOLASTIC

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CHAPTER 1

The past, the present and the future walked into a bar.

It was tense.

Everything I say is important. Or at least, that's what my mum tells me. Sometimes she makes me repeat it out loud. It's embarrassing. Saying anything out loud can be embarrassing when you're me.

That's what I'm doing right now. Practising. Over and over, in the mirror. You'll find me here pretty often; it's where I do most of my chatting. Watching my eyes tighten to a close and my jaw tense up.

"M-m-my name is B-B-B-Billy Pliiimpton a-a-a-and I have a stammer. My name is Billy Plimpton and I have a stammer. My naaame is Biiiiillly and I have a s-s-s-s-stammer."

If I *don't* stammer when I'm saying it, I go bright red. Like I'm lying to my own reflection. If I do get stuck then I still go red because stammering at yourself feels stupid. But my speech therapist once told me to practise. So I do. A LOT.

I only say this particular sentence on my own in my bedroom and never to real people. I wish I never had to explain that I've got something wrong with my speech. It helps, though, when new people have already been told. So that they aren't left trying to figure out what's going on with me. Some people take ages. It's hard to watch them trying to control their expression. So much going on in their eyes. Wondering if it's all just a joke. I wish it was.

That's the other thing I practise. Jokes. I LOVE jokes. Using words differently. Surprising people with a punchline. Laughing at my own reflection.

"W-w-w-w-what diiid the llama say when he got kiiiiiicked out of th-th-th-the zoo? Alpaca my b-b-b-baaaags!"

How can I be funny if I can't even speak? It's not easy to tell a joke when you can't get the words out. I ruin my own punchlines. It's very annoying. I spend hours watching comedians on YouTube.

How smoothly they speak; how fast. The delighted audience. I try desperately to copy them.

It's not always obvious that I have a stammer. Sometimes it just sounds like a big pause and other times like I'm singing one word for a really long time for no reason whatsoever. Like I'm having a competition with myself to see how long I can draw one word out. This afternoon I got stuck on the words "lemon drizzle" for what seemed like for ever. We were talking about our favourite cakes. The amount of time it took me to say it almost made me go off lemon drizzle cake a bit. Sometimes the words themselves annoy me, when I get stuck badly, like they are doing it on purpose.

My little sister Chloe's friend Aisha was over for tea today. They galloped around the kitchen making *clip-clop* sounds. Chloe's obsessed with ponies. Her room makes me feel sick, there are so many stuffed toy ponies everywhere and horse posters on the walls. I'm a bit scared of horses, but I would never tell her that. So I just don't go in there very often.

Aisha hadn't been to our house before. As we were eating our tea, I was singing my way through a new joke – "Wh-wh-wh-which hand is it better to write wiiiiith?" – when Aisha asked, "Why do you talk like

that?" As blunt as that, looking right at me over her forkful of spaghetti.

So Chloe explained for me: "He gets stuck on his words. He knows what he wants to say but his brain won't let it come out properly. You just have to wait until he's finished."

Aisha thought about it for a while and then sucked up her spaghetti and said, "I like it!" So that was nice. She also laughed at my punchline: "Neither, it's b-b-b-best to write w-with a pen!" which was even nicer.

At least Aisha was honest and just asked me the question. Kids are a bit better than grown-ups when they first meet me. They either ask straight out about my stammer, like Aisha, or just completely ignore it. That's the best, when someone doesn't even seem to notice and just waits till I'm done, they just know that I will get to the end eventually. Mum says a lot of the world's problems are caused by everyone being in such a rush and that I'm doing everyone a favour by forcing them to be a little bit more patient.

It's only when kids know what's going on with me that the problems can start. When they realize they can use it against me or laugh at me. Most of the time I just catch kids pulling funny faces at each other or giggling behind their hands as I am trying

to say something. But just asking a question about it like Aisha did, that's fine. I would rather that than deal with the frowny/smiley face that adults have when I first speak to them. An upturned mouth and a wrinkled forehead. I hate it when people look at me like that. I want to make people smile properly, not in the frowny way. I can see the moment when it clicks. When they get it, that what they are hearing is a speech impediment and not a choice. They almost look relieved, pleased with themselves. Then they get to show off how good they are at dealing with such a thing. There are four main categories of grown-ups:

1. The Encouragers

They have a calm, smiley expression and constantly say things like, "Go on", "Interesting" and, "I understand." Encouragers are OK. Although they can be annoying when they go too far and say things like, "Take a big breath in," and, "Relax." Telling someone to relax when they are clearly struggling is like shouting, "Run faster!" at someone being chased by a tiger. They would if they could.

2. The Mind Readers

This is the most common and a very annoying category in my opinion. A lot of adults do this to kids anyway, even normal kids, but they REALLY do it to me. This is the category who think they know exactly what I'm trying to say and so "helpfully" finish my sentence for me. They usually say something completely wrong. Most of the time I just go along with their version of the conversation, because I can't be bothered trying again. I ended up going to the toilet once, when I didn't even need a wee. The lady at the cinema ticket office obviously thought I was going to ask, "Can you tell me where the toilets are?" when I was actually trying to say, "Can you tell me where the popcorn is?" She took me right to the toilets, even though there was a huge sign and an arrow, so I thought I should go in. I didn't even end up buying any popcorn. I told Mum I had changed my mind when I slid back into my seat and she called me a "strange fish". That's the other thing that happens when you have a stammer. People think you're either thick or strange.

3. The Jokers

The most upsetting category. The grown-ups who don't know what to do and so choose to mimic me "as a joke". Believe me, this happens more than you would think. The other day I went to the shop and had to ask an old man in a brown cap to reach the chocolate milkshake for me. He responded by saying, "Y-y-y-y-y-yes, of course, I can!" and then laughed at how funny he thought he was. I'm not sure why any grown-up would do this. It's almost too confusing to be upsetting. I still felt bad, though.

4. The Waiters

The best category and the one, which you should try and be a part of, should you meet a stammerer. These are the rare people who don't mind waiting and will stay there for as long as it takes for me to spit out whatever piece of information I'm stuck on. Usually a new joke. You could be waiting a long time until I get to the end of a new one-liner. That's kind of how it works. The more I want to say something, the less my voice allows me to say it. It's like a sick joke in itself.

Obviously some Waiters are not so good. You wouldn't believe how obvious it is when someone's waiting but they don't really want to be. That's tough. I want to say to them, "Don't worry. Just go and do whatever it is that you would rather be doing. This is no fun for either of us." But I don't, as that would take even longer than whatever it is I'm stuck on.

As I turn back towards the mirror for another attempt, "My name is B-B-B-B…" Mum pops her head round the door.

"Who you talking to, Billy?" she asks.

"N-N-No one," I say, pointing to my reflection.

"Gosh, if only that mirror could talk. It must have heard all sorts from you!"

"Wh-wh-what's said to the m-m-mirror, stays in th-the m-mirror, all right?" I say in my best gangster voice. Mum's a pretty good Waiter. I suppose she has had plenty of practice.

"Well, you and your mirror can carry on chatting for ten minutes, then it's bed OK? It's a big day tomorrow, you need your sleep." She winks at me and her head disappears from the doorway.If only I could be normal then starting Bannerdale High School would be easy. I'm going to try everything I can think of to get rid of this stammer, and become just

like everyone else. Maybe even better than everyone else. Imagine that, I could be the most popular boy in school.

"You know that Billy Plimpton, he's the best and he's SO funny."

"Yes, everyone wants to be friends with Billy Plimpton. I think he's going to be famous."

"Tell us another joke, Billy, go on!"

Everyone will crowd around me at lunchtime, desperately wanting to be my friend, eagerly listening to my jokes . . . if I can get rid of my stammer. I don't want to think what it will be like at Bannerdale if I can't.

I've made a list of everything I'm going to try to say like a normal eleven-year-old. I love writing lists. I write them for everything. I have a really cool notebook in the shape of a rocket, which is the perfect shape. I pin them up on the cork board in my bedroom, ticking off things as I go, or adding new things when I think of them. It's jam-packed. I think I will need a new pin board soon. Maybe I should ask for one for my birthday. Here are some of my favourite lists:

TOP TEN JOKES

This one is always changing. Number one at the moment is:

1. Why did the kid cross the playground? To get to the other slide.

THINGS THAT MAKE CHLOE CRY

This one sounds like a mean list but it's not meant to be. Chloe just cries at the most stupid things. So one day when I was bored I wrote a list. It makes me laugh so much reading it. Here are the current top three:

1. Being blamed for a fart she didn't do.
2. Telling her that unicorns aren't real.
3. Touching one of her teddies with my bare foot.

Here is my latest and most important list:

WAYS TO GET RID OF MY STAMMER

1. Practise in the mirror

My speech therapist's top tip, I like her a lot, but it hasn't worked yet. I have been going to speech therapy once a month since I was seven. My stammer started when I was five. Mum thinks it was after I nearly drowned in a swimming pool. I'm not sure if I can actually remember being under the water or if I have just imagined a memory. Like when you remember something from a photo rather than from real life, or when you have just heard a story so many times you think you were there when you weren't. My feet feeling for the bottom of the pool and not finding it. Panic. Legs kicking around me and the muffled sounds of people above. I'm still not a huge fan of swimming.

Mum thinks I started stammering the next day. That's what she said to Sue. Apparently my great grandad had a stammer too. Sue said sometimes it does seem to run in families. So that's what Mum always blames, a swimming pool and a great grandad I never met. I'm not so sure about the drowning thing. I've seen video clips of me from way before

that happened. Holding the rings for when Mum and Dad got married when I was three. Wearing a little waistcoat. There's one from when I was about four where I'm telling a knock-knock joke! Dad says I loved jokes even before I understood them. In the film I say, "Knock knock," and then you can hear Dad from behind the camera saying, "Who's there?" Then I say "P-Poo" and start laughing like a total weirdo. I don't even answer when Dad says, "Poo who?" I'm rolling around on the floor thinking that the joke is finished, even though it makes no sense. Dad says that just saying the word "poo" used to send me into hysterics. That must have been really annoying for everyone, I'm glad I have grown up a bit, and my jokes have definitely got better, even though I don't tell them to many people. I certainly wouldn't let Dad film me telling my jokes now, no way.

I think I can already hear the stammer on the video. It just got worse when I was five. Sue thinks that it may have "got stronger" when Chloe started speaking. (She always says the word "stronger" instead of "worse". I think it's so that I don't see my stammer as a negative, even though it totally is. Strong sounds nicer than worse.) When there was more chance of me being interrupted. That makes

more sense than the drowning, if you ask me. I think Mum doesn't want me to blame Chloe. It's easier to blame a swimming pool, or some great grandad. It went away for a long time when I was six but then it came back again. That's when we started seeing Sue. I've been talking to myself in the mirror for about two years, so you would think if that was going to help it would have by now. Maybe it *is* helping and if I stopped having these lovely chats with myself I would get even worse! I'm not going to risk finding out.

2. Read a book called *Life Without Stammering* by Sophie Bell

Mum took me to buy some stationery and books I need for school and I secretly bought it with my book token while she was in the toilet. I don't want Mum knowing how much I need to get rid of my stammer, she will just worry and want to "talk it through" over and over. It was the only book on stammering that I could find in the whole shop. I tried to act relaxed when she came out of the loo, but my face went all tight and I bumped into a display on our way out. I knocked over a huge cardboard mouse and loads of books. Mum called me

"a clumsy creature" and we had to stack all the books back up. I'm going to start reading it tomorrow.

3. **Drink a herbal tea that I read about on the internet called Matricaria recutita.**

(Try saying that with a stammer. I have – it didn't go well.) I read about it in a blog by a stammerer called John. He says it calms an "over-stimulated brain". Maybe that's what I have. I'll drink it every day for a month. First I have to find a shop that actually sells it. I've been into both Tesco *and* ASDA and they don't. I have been saving my pocket money.

4. **Pray to the Gods of Speech that my speech therapist Sue will find a magic cure.**

This one is pretty unrealistic, as that's not what speech therapists do. They can't fix a stammer but they can help make it a bit easier. They give you things to practise and ways to breathe and they ask you about all of the things that you find tricky, not just with speech but with everything. Sue is really cheerful

and kind, she has frizzy hair with grey bits near her head and she always wears necklaces that look like big colourful sweets. We haven't made much progress on the stammer so far, even though I have been going for years. Maybe as well as praying I should do my homework from Sue. Last time she gave me a booklet to read with loads of characters in it. They are meant to remind me how to talk in ways that can help my stammer. The Smoothies, they are called. There is a different one for each different technique:

- Slover is like a worm and is to remind you to go slow. Not a very imaginative name, I know!
- Big Softie (another genius name!) is to tell you to create soft sounds. A soft sound is when you try not to say a strong consonant sound at the start of a word. A bit like you are too bored or tired to say it properly. Try this – say "ball" without the B sound, but so it still sounds like you are saying ball. Weird, isn't it?
- Slick Slide blends into your words with a big "erm" at the start. So if you always get stuck on words that start with an S you

> could add an erm before it. Like ermsnake instead of snake. Sue says that no one even notices if you do this but it feels really obvious to me. Why is "erm-snake" better than "s-s-s-snake"? I just want to be able to say "snake" like everyone else.

In the booklet there are pictures of them all. Big Softie's like a huge snowball with a blue scarf around him. Slick Slide is meant to be a "cool dude". Who says the word "dude"? Cringe. Sometimes I think adults who come up with these things just need a kid editor to check they are not saying something stupid, like "cool dude". I think the Smoothies are all a little bit babyish, to be honest, but Sue loves them. I wonder if she will still be talking about them when I'm twelve. I hope not. I don't want to be at secondary school and still be thinking about Slover and Big Softie.

Tomorrow I have to somehow make it through my first day at Bannerdale. If only there was a way to avoid speaking. Maybe I can communicate entirely through mime, like Charlie Chaplin. I'm sure that would go down well with a bunch of angry teenagers. Miming, "Please don't hurt me. I'm small and weak," as they stove my head in.