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MAX COUNTS TO A MILLION

JEREMY WILLIAMS

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MAX COUNTS TO A MILLION

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For all students and staff at Wenlock Junior School.
We are all Team Wenlock.

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1

When people hear that my name is Max and that I counted to a million, they always say "Maximillian! How appropriate!" I've heard SO MANY adults say that. All of them said it as if they were the first to think of it. But my name isn't Maximillian, or Maximus, or Maxwell, or any other random thing that you could shorten to Max.

It's just Max.

That is what it says on my birth certificate.

I've seen my birth certificate. My mum showed it to me once when she was looking for something. It's an important



piece of paper that the government writes when you're born. It's to say that you officially exist. My name also appears on other things, like the sign on my bedroom door or written on the inside of my coat. Those are not official and have nothing to do with the government.

On my birth certificate it says that my name is Max Cromwell and that I was born in 2011. I was eight years old when I started counting to a million, and nine when I finished, and that's why I got the world record for being the youngest person to do it.

You might have just shouted "spoiler alert!" in your head. But the book is called *Max Counts to a Million*, so it's a bit late for that.

Not many people have counted to a million in real life. I have, and so I can tell you it's not easy. It took me weeks. I'm quite proud of it, though there are bits of my story that I'm not so proud of. I've decided I'm going to put those bits in too, so that it's all true.

All of this happened in 2020. As you probably know, that was a very strange year. It's when the coronavirus came along and everything went very weird. We weren't even allowed to leave our houses, and that's why I started counting. But that's jumping ahead.

Let me start at the beginning.



It was an ordinary day. Let's say it was a Tuesday.

Tuesdays are usually the worst day of the week. That's a fact. I know people say Mondays are the worst, but at least it's the start of a new week. You're fresh out of a weekend and ready to go. Wednesdays are the middle of the week, and on Wednesdays I like to look at the clock at midday and see the week go past halfway. Thursdays are OK because the next day is Friday, and then Friday is Friday. So Tuesday is definitely the most boring and ordinary day.

For that reason, it was a Tuesday.

I was at school – an ordinary school. This



isn't going to be one of those stories set in a boarding school or a wizarding school or anything. It was a normal day, with lessons and lunch and more lessons and the usual stuff. Mum picked me up in the afternoon, and that's when it started to get less ordinary.

She was worried about something. I could tell. She waved to me across the playground and said hello, and asked how my day had gone and gave me a sort of side-hug. But I knew two things straightaway. One: she was worried. Two: she didn't want me to know she was worried.

You might be wondering how I knew this, when I was only eight and not even a detective. There were a few reasons. One was the side-hug. That's not something mums do. Side-hugs are for uncles who don't have children of their own yet and don't know how to hug a person who is smaller than they are. Mums always hug properly, and so I knew something was up.

I also knew something was wrong because when Mum asked what I had for lunch, I said "fish finger pie", and she said, "OK, that's nice." Fish finger pie is not a thing and it must never be allowed to exist. Something was clearly on her mind.

"Have you had a good day, Mum?" I asked, and she made a sort of "hmm" noise that wasn't even an answer. It was as if she hadn't heard me. I decided I'd better hold her hand on the walk home, in case she wandered into a road.

2

My birth certificate lives in a drawer of Very Important Papers in my parents' room. My passport is in there too. I'm not allowed to touch that drawer, but it's good to know it's there. Just in case I have to flee the country in a hurry. Or if I need to quickly check that I exist.

This bit about birth certificates is a good example of a tangent.

That's when you're talking about something, and you accidentally start talking about something else. I showed my mum the first chapter of my story and she said I need to be careful of them.

I'd better get back to the story.

Usually my dad gets home a bit after I've had my dinner. Mum keeps his dinner in the microwave and he heats it up, and we talk while he eats and I load the dishwasher. That's the deal. Mum cooks, and I do the dishwasher. But today Dad was late. I was already in my pyjamas when he came home, and he sat at the table looking very tired.

I noticed that he hadn't finished his food. Dad always finishes his food.

"Max, has anyone at school mentioned the coronavirus?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The coronavirus. Maybe in assembly or something?"

I thought about it. I might have heard that word in assembly that day. Did Ms Ryba, the deputy head, mention it? She stood up to make an announcement, and that might have been a word that she said. I didn't really hear

her, because I was looking around to see who was behind me and kicking me in the back. It was Miles. Then I was whispering at him to stop. Then I was trying to wipe the dusty marks off my blazer. By the time I had finished, Ms Ryba was sitting down again.

"No?" said Dad, while I was still thinking about it. "Let me know if it comes up at school, OK? And remember to wash your hands before you eat anything."

Adults ask if you know about all kinds of things, like cuboids, the equator, or Shakespeare, and they're always telling you to wash your hands. So Dad's questions didn't seem all that strange right then. I was going to ask him what it was all about, but Mum was calling me to brush my teeth.

• • ★ • •

My dad is a doctor. He works at the hospital. A lot of doctors focus on one part of the body, and he focuses on people's ears, noses and

throats. There's a fancy name for that kind of doctor, but I can't remember it and I definitely can't spell it.

If you've got a problem with your ears, nose or throat, my dad is the person to see. For example, sometimes children stick things up their noses, like peas or Lego.

Do not do this. It's a very bad idea.

This is not what noses are for.

Still, it happens, usually to very small children. And when it does, my dad is the one who has to get out a tiny torch and shine it up their nostril.

Or maybe you've gone swimming and got water in your ear. Sometimes it gets stuck, and then you can't hear properly. Dad's got another little torch that can look right down inside your ear and he'll sort you out.

Those are easy things for an expert. If Dad is late home from work, it means that something more serious is going on. But I didn't get to find out about it because it was already bedtime.

At least, my parents didn't plan for me to find out about it.

When I was in bed, my parents went back downstairs. I was all set to go to sleep, and then I remembered that I had left my emergency glass of water in the bathroom. I got up quietly to go and get it. As I tiptoed past the top of the stairs, I heard Mum and Dad talking.

Grown-ups always do their most serious talking when their children have just gone to bed. It's like they've been waiting all day to tell each other really important adult things. I've practised my spying skills to listen to them a few times. I hoped I would hear something juicy, like what they're planning to get me for my birthday, but it's always really boring. Stuff about bills, or filling in a form. I don't know what it is exactly, but there's this thing called insurance that seems to make Dad angry.

Since they'd both been a bit weird that day, I paused to listen.

"So it's happening then, is it?" Mum was saying.

"It's happening," said Dad. He was pacing up and down in the kitchen. "No confirmed cases locally yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"But that's not your department," said Mum.

"It's everyone's department if it goes the way it has elsewhere. It's all hands on deck."

"In the wards?"

"I'm afraid so."

They were complaining about Dad's work by the sound of it. Grumbling about their jobs was a regular subject in those after-bedtime chats, so I went and got my water from the bathroom. On the way back, I heard something else.

"What about the schools?" Mum asked. "How long can they stay open?"

Obviously that caught my attention. I stopped and sat down on the top step, sipping my water.

"Ireland have already called it. France. Spain.

It's not long until the holidays. I think the government are hoping to hold on until then and see how it goes."

Talking about the government was another popular topic for this time of day, but this was different. Were they seriously talking about closing schools? This should have been happier news, except that Mum and Dad were obviously worried. Scared, even. I didn't like that. What was going on? Should I be worried?

I listened a few minutes longer. None of it made much sense, and I couldn't hear everything as they rattled about in the kitchen. But then I did catch one more bit.

"What do we tell Max?" said Dad.

"Nothing. There's no need to worry him just yet."

So, yes. Apparently I should be worried.

3

On Wednesdays I have football before school. This is one of the reasons I like Wednesdays, as well as watching the clock go past halfway at lunchtime. Unfortunately, it means getting me to school at seven forty-five, which is basically the world's earliest time. So there's a lot of whining involved.

"Haven't you finished your breakfast yet? Why haven't you got your shoes on?"

Dad looks down and realises he is leaving the house in his slippers.

"Look, you've got toast crumbs all over yourself. And are you sure you're

going to be warm enough in that? You should put something long-sleeved on."

Dad brushes the crumbs off his T-shirt, puts his hoody on and we finally get on our way.

Honestly, leaving the house is such a battle sometimes.



This particular day was a good one, because I scored a hat-trick in football. Miles was in goal as well – the boy who was kicking me in assembly. When I scored, he was the one who had to pick the ball out of the net. Ha.

A hat-trick is a strange name for scoring three goals. I asked Mr Collins the PE teacher why it's called that. He said that the first person to get a hat-trick was in cricket, when a bowler got three wickets in three balls. His friends celebrated by buying him a new top hat. I asked Mr Collins if he could get me a top hat for scoring three goals, but he said no.

If we still gave people top hats for scoring

hat-tricks, I would have three top hats right now. That would be kind of pointless, since nobody wears top hats any more. And I don't have three heads.

It would be useful if I was learning to be a magician though. I could learn hat tricks with my hat-trick hats.

This is definitely a tangent.



At school that day, I made sure to listen out for the corona thing that Dad had asked about. I was also watching the teachers. Were they being weird too?

I mean, more weird than usual. There are a couple of teachers who are always weird. Like Miss Jenkins, one of the other teachers in Year Four, who tucks the end of one of her trouser legs into her sock. Why?

It wasn't that kind of odd that I was looking out for though. It was the shifty behaviour, the whispers. The way the grown-ups were worried

and pretending they weren't.

Sure enough, I saw it for myself pretty quickly. I volunteered to take the register down to the office. The office ladies were all talking when I came in, and as soon as I knocked on the door they stopped and looked at me. They're usually friendly and quite used to people coming and going. They were obviously talking about something the children weren't supposed to hear.

Probably the corona thing.

"Mustn't worry the children," they were probably thinking. I wanted to tell them how pointless this was. What's more worrying: knowing about something serious, or knowing that there's something serious going on that nobody is talking about? At least if you know what it is, then you can decide for yourself whether it's scary or not.

Anyway, I don't think I need to be protected from serious things. I'm not little any more. I

watch the news with my dad sometimes. I know that bad things happen in the world. I'm not scared. I'm not going to freak out.

Unless the country is being invaded by giant spiders. Then I certainly will FREAK OUT.

But that's not what's happening. I know we're not being invaded by giant spiders, because they don't exist except in Australia.

And there's no way my parents would have been talking calmly about it last night, either. If giant spiders were on the way, Mum would be cramming everything she owns into a suitcase. She'd be grabbing our passports from the drawer of Very Important Papers and screaming about moving to Canada. Dad would be in the kitchen, working out how to make a spider-catching device out of the wheelie bin.

I wondered if any of the other children knew what was going on. At playtime I asked Felix. Felix is a good friend, and not just because he has an X in his name and he is part of Team X.

"Do you know what's going on with everyone at the moment?" I asked him while we were taking turns trying to stand on a tennis ball. "All the grown-ups and the corona thing?"

"Oh, the coronavirus," said Felix. "Yeah, it sounds pretty bad. My mum said that it's a new kind of virus."

"So it makes you sick?"

"It's like a cold but times a thousand. It gives you a really bad cough. And I heard it makes you lose your taste – like everything just tastes of nothing."

"That's weird," I said.

"Yeah, well, tons of people have got it."

This didn't sound good.

"Have people at school got it?"

"No, but they might have to close the school. Mum says it's very infectious, which means it's super easy to catch. So if one person in a class gets it, then everyone else might get it too."

I took my turn on the tennis ball, which must

have been left behind from PE.

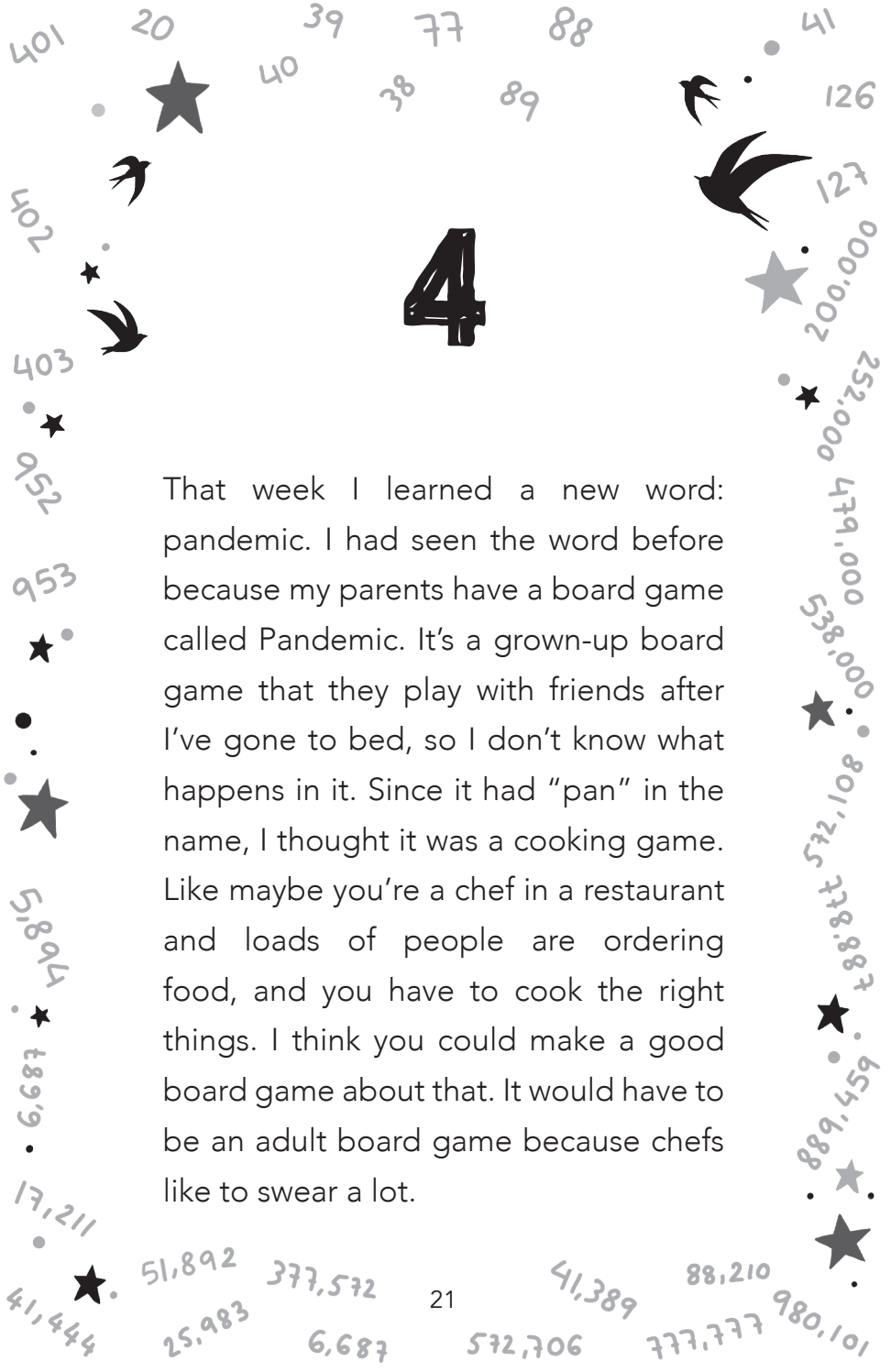
I tried to remember. There had been some stuff on the news about a virus. The other day they had shown pictures from a hospital that was too full of sick people. I didn't know where it was, and I didn't really understand it because I was trying to fix my Lego space shuttle at the time. I had accidentally thrown it across the room during blast-off.

I know it sounds like I'm really bad at paying attention. School assembly and the news had both mentioned coronavirus and I still hadn't heard it properly. But I've already told you that Miles was kicking me in assembly. And I was dealing with quite a serious crash when the news was on. Some of the pieces of the shuttle had flown all the way behind the sofa. The pilot was lucky to survive.

I made a note to talk to Dad more about it when I got home. Felix was about to say something else, but we were rudely interrupted by Mrs

Malik rushing towards us across the playground.

"Are you standing on that ball?" she demanded, arms flapping in alarm. "Don't stand on balls. You'll break your neck."



4

That week I learned a new word: pandemic. I had seen the word before because my parents have a board game called Pandemic. It's a grown-up board game that they play with friends after I've gone to bed, so I don't know what happens in it. Since it had "pan" in the name, I thought it was a cooking game. Like maybe you're a chef in a restaurant and loads of people are ordering food, and you have to cook the right things. I think you could make a good board game about that. It would have to be an adult board game because chefs like to swear a lot.