

THE MIDNIGHT SWITCH



For Finn, Pip, Joseph, Zuzu, Gigi, Pax, Matthias,
Ignatius and those that are to come

First published in the UK in 2023 by Usborne Publishing Limited, Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. [usborne.com](https://www.usborne.com)

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited, Prüfeninger Str. 20,
93049 Regensburg, Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

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Cover and inside illustrations by Laura Borio © Usborne Publishing, 2023.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781474970655 05603/1 JFMAMJJA OND/23

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.



THE MIDNIGHT SWITCH

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Chapter 1

THE YELLOW EYES



Midnight, that was when the unusually large bird had come to visit. It hardly seemed to move as it perched on his bedroom windowsill. And the only sound came from the tip of its beak as it pressed expectantly against the glass.

Watching him.

“Fancy a walnut?”

Lewis blinked, the car flooding back into view around him.

They were whizzing along the highway as dark peaks jutting out of tufted slopes flashed past. Woolham was now long behind them.

“Lewis?” Dad’s hand was reaching into the back seat, rustling a small Tupperware container filled with walnuts.

“Er, no, thanks,” Lewis croaked, shrugging his shoulders a little as he dislodged the memory of the strange bird.

“You sure?” Dad said, with another tempting rustle. “Lots of omega-3.”

“Okay.” Lewis took a walnut and checked the notifications on his phone.

As they were leaving he’d taken a selfie with Mum’s favourite cactus – that was still strapped for safekeeping into the seat belt beside him – and sent it to his chess-club group chat, WoollyChessChamps:

Travel buddies 🌵 Loooong drive ahead. Any of u gonna come visit?

He looked at the selfie again.

How was it that of the two of them the cactus looked like the one that had done its hair that morning?

Lewis’s hair was short and sandy with a longer bit at the front that had an agenda of its own.

He tried to flatten it a little with his palm as he locked his phone screen.

No one had replied yet in the group chat. Not even his best friend, Zia.

“I listened to a podcast that said walnuts are the *top* nut for brain health,” Dad said.

“*You’re* a top nut for brain health,” Mum chuckled, as she tapped out an email on her phone. “Gah. Shoot! I just

made myself type ‘top nut’ instead of ‘dental probe’.”

“Brain a bit foggy, June?” Dad grinned. “How about a nice walnut?”

Recently, Dad HAS been a top nut for brain health, Lewis thought, shifting his knees beneath the textbook spread across his lap.

Normally Dad would listen to podcasts about cricket and the top ten things all millionaires do. But for the past two months it was nothing but “hot study tips” and “best bites to beat a blurry brain”.

As if walnuts are going to make a difference. Lewis sighed, his stomach going all lumpy at the thought of his scholarship interview tomorrow.

Elksbridge Collegiate School. Or the way Dad always said it: THE Elksbridge Collegiate School.

Lewis hadn’t even got in yet: there was still the interview plus an exam in a few days’ time. But for some reason Dad seemed to think it was a sensible idea that they move nice and close to the school anyway.

Away from Woolham.

Away from chess club.

Right across England to Barrow in the Snoring Broads.

The memory that arriving “home” tonight would mean arriving somewhere he’d never been before made a drifty feeling come across him. As if he were a helium balloon someone had lost above a school fair.

Lewis was not a big fan of sudden changes.

What about friends, for instance? Finding kids who liked the same stuff as you would take ages, and in Barrow

he wasn't going to know a single person.

But in his mind's eye as the bird watched him again, Lewis remembered there was *one* thing he was happy to be leaving behind in Woolham.

He pushed his fingers into the gap between the seats of the car and squeezed the fake leather.

Lewis really wasn't that interested in birds. If anything, he found the way they flapped around the bins at the park kind of stressful. But for the past six nights, at just after midnight, it had seemed birds, or rather one unusually large bird in particular, had been interested in him.

The first time it had tapped on his window he'd tried not think about it and just recited Gramps's chess puzzle over and over to make himself fall asleep. The second time he'd brushed it off as a coincidence and watched a video on his phone about robots.

But on the third night, as nothing moved out in the street, Lewis had felt the sudden urge to open one of his eyes just a scratch.

There it was again. Silhouetted against the curtains in the orange street light.

When it happened for a fourth time and then a *fifth*, Lewis had used Mum's packing tape to seal the curtains to the windowsill. That way he couldn't see out, and nothing outside could see in.

But, like clockwork, only moments after midnight he'd heard a faint:

tchk,

tchk,

tchk!

Even in the stuffiness of the car, Lewis felt the skin around his ribs quiver as he remembered it tapping against the glass.

Its beak was too pale to be a crow's. He could tell it wasn't a raven because he'd seen loads of them up close on their school trip to the Tower of London. And there was nothing in the copy of *Flycatchers and Coal Tits: A Fascinating Exploration of English Passerines*, which he'd found underneath their coffee table.

But it wasn't the dark oily feathers, armour-like claws or even its size that made the bird seem so unusual.

It was the *eyes*.

Dad flicked on the wipers, as a sudden flurry of rain scattering across the windscreen made the towering crags passing the car look wild and hairy.

"Shall we play a game?" Mum asked brightly, twisting round in her seat. "Twenty Questions? Or how about a good old-fashioned round of I spy?"

But before he could reply, Lewis caught Dad's eye in the rear-view mirror.

"Do I detect some *revision* going on back there?" Dad asked, giving him a look that was halfway between surprised and impressed.

A guilty pang tucked into Lewis's stomach.

"Er, physics," he murmured, gripping the pages as his eyes darted to the textbook.

Dad nodded slowly. "Okay. Do you think maybe you should be focusing on biology? That's where you got let down a bi—"

"George," Mum said in a low voice. "Just...let him be, okay? It's moving day."

His biology results weren't his best, but they hadn't let him down...had they?

Dad hunched his shoulders slightly, as if he'd been told off. And in the silence an unwelcome thought that Lewis was far too familiar with burrowed like a woodworm through his head.

What happens if I don't get in?

He didn't care about it for himself. He couldn't give a hoot about going to a posh school. It was Dad he was worried about.

What would he say? Would he be all quiet and disappointed again?

Lewis hated when Dad was quiet. Because, even though for the past two months Dad hadn't stopped rabbiting on about "study planners" and how "avocados could help you focus", Lewis knew that Dad talking made him feel loads better than Dad saying nothing at all – which had been the case a lot since Gramps had died, six months ago.

"Dad?" Lewis asked.

"Yuh-huh?"

"There's..." Lewis began, trying to sound casual.

"There's loads of houses that you can sell in Barrow, aren't there?"

Mum gave Dad a very hurried glance.

"Oh. Yeah," Dad said with a dismissive little laugh. "Buckets of them!"

"Hey, and don't you worry about me either." Mum twisted round again. "Dentists always land on their feet, because there's always someone in every town on the planet that doesn't brush their teeth!"

Lewis forced a smile. Mum was always so jolly, with her crinkly eyes and short pixieish hair.

"And there's a school?" Lewis asked quietly as his fingers played with the lock on his door.

"A school?" Dad frowned a little. "You mean... Elksbridge?"

"No, I mean a normal school. Like, in the town."

"There is," Dad said slowly. "But it's just the local school where me and your aunty went when we grew up in Barrow. Why?"

Lewis stared out of the window again.

"I *could* always just go there, couldn't I?" he asked quietly.

In the front, Dad adjusted the little pine-shaped air freshener.

"If for some reason Elksbridge doesn't work out," Lewis added quickly.

"Hey," Dad said softly and Lewis's eyes flitted to the rear-view mirror once more. "You're *going* to get that scholarship."

Lewis pushed up against the headrest and let out a slow breath as his cheeks flushed.

"And if you don't," Mum added, "then I'll just think that Elksbridge is a ridiculous school, that they're nitwits for not seeing how brilliant you are – and that you're better off without them *anyway*."

"Oh, June, please," Dad sighed as if this were a disgraceful thing to say.

"If it's so great, why didn't you go to Elksbridge when you grew up in Barrow, Dad?" Lewis asked.

"Gramps worked as a cleaner at Marlow Hall, and he couldn't afford the school," Dad said, waving his hand dismissively.

"*We* could never afford this school," Mum reminded them.

"Then, why didn't you apply for a scholarship too, Dad?" Lewis asked.

"You remember how Gramps used to try giving the staff at his retirement home twenty pence every time they brought him tea? Gramps never accepted *anything* for free."

Lewis caught Dad's eyes again in the mirror.

"Hey. You've got this, Lewis."

The car felt suddenly hot.

Dad seemed so confident. As if victory was inevitable. Like he did before one of his cricket matches.

Lewis wanted to ask Dad more questions about Barrow, about the people there and what his school friends were like growing up. But he knew that, just like everything else

for the past few months, Dad would somehow manage to steer the conversation back to Elksbridge.

Lewis opened a new browser tab on his phone and typed: *barrow snoring broads*

He tapped on the first result, a website called Visit the Snoring Broads.

Barrow – he tapped on the menu.

Photos of windmills, a strange fountain, wooden fishing boats and glittering rivers glimpsed past as Lewis scrolled. The pictures made it look kind of pretty. But maybe it was just in the same way Dad managed to make some of the terrible houses he sold look ten times better in pictures than they did in real life.

Lewis went on scrolling.

Thatched rooftops

Lakes

Marshy swamps

Waterbirds

Until from beneath his fingertips there was an unmistakable flicker of yellow.

The air seemed to thin.

A pair of familiar yellow eyes were peering out from the bottom of his screen.

Lewis's neck gave an alarmed prickle.

The bird, he thought to himself. *That's the bird*.

He dragged his thumb cautiously upwards and his feathery visitor from all those nights before came slowly into view.

His finger found the caption:

The East Snoring Rook.

An unusual residential subspecies of rook in the passerine or perching order of birds. Unlike its cousin, the considerably more common European Rook, the East Snoring Rook bears distinctive yellow eyes and lives only in the forested network of navigable marshes and rivers known as the Snoring Broads. In fireside tales, the East Snoring Rook is often depicted as the servant of the infamous Bogwitch of Barrow: Gretel Murk. Like other corvids they are highly intelligent creatures, are deeply fond of collecting shiny objects and have even recently been shown to have the ability to count.

Lewis's hand fell to his lap in disbelief. How was it possible? A bird that lived all those hundreds of miles away in the precise spot their new house was, landing on his very windowsill in Woolham?

In the front, Dad craned his neck. "I think this is it!"

Lewis scrunched up his sleeve and wiped the fog from his window. Peering through the rain, he could see a flattened landscape.

It was as if a great hot iron had once been taken to the rocks and trees leaving nothing but wild, marshy wetlands scattered with splotchy gaggles of forest. Reedy, twisting rivers and wooded lakes flashed past, as towering windmills stood guard over vast stretches of rust-coloured rushes.

"Yep – we're here," Dad sang out. "The Snoring Broads!"

Lewis's seat belt tightened as he wrapped his fingers over the headrests, leaning forward to get a better view as the car began to slow.

A thick rope was strung across the road, hooked from one post to another:

SEVENMILL BRIDGE CLOSED
Please seek alternative route
or call the number below...

Beyond the rope a raised wooden drawbridge suspended by rusted chains swayed in the wind.

"So, what happens now?" Mum asked distantly.

Lewis's eyes dropped back down to his phone.

Although not proven, some ornithology experts believe there is evidence to suggest that East Snoring Rooks may be prone to sensing changes in the weather, which would explain the proverb commonly recited among Barrow townsfolk: When rooks fly high, clear glass sky. When rooks fly low, strange winds blow.

Lewis's neck prickled again as those eyes, like two luminous egg yolks, watched him from the edge of his phone screen.

It's a coincidence, he tried to tell himself. It's probably not even the same bird.

But as he peered out of the window, Lewis spotted a mossy sign on the roadside:

WELCOME TO BARROW
Home of the East Snoring Rook
Population: 1,363

The rain danced in harrying drifts across their car, and Lewis knew: it wasn't a coincidence. Here in Barrow it seemed there was an even greater chance that the rook would visit again.

As if it knew I was coming here, Lewis Buckley thought, his shoulder blades twitching as he remembered the bird's beak tapping against the glass. *As if there's something it wants*.



Chapter 2
THE NEW OLD HOUSE

The minute the email had come through from admissions@elksbridgecollegiateschool announcing that, at the last minute, they had decided to award one additional place this year – and that he, Lewis Buckley, had been invited to a scholarship interview followed by an entrance exam – Dad had made a decision.

This was it. Yep. Absolutely. The sign they'd been waiting for. They were *finally* going to move back to his home town of Barrow. Just like they'd always wanted.

Why they couldn't have waited to see if he actually *won* the scholarship before moving all the way to Barrow, Lewis didn't know. But since Gramps had passed away, he tried to keep most of his thoughts to himself. After all, it had been the very same day they found out about his