opening extract from

So Much to Tell You

written by

John Marsden

published by

Walker Books

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your

I don't know what I am doing here.

Well, I do really. It's because I was getting nowhere at the Hospital. I have been sent here to learn to talk again. Sent here because my mother can't stand my silent presence at home. Sent here because of my face, I suppose. I don't know.

This is my third day at this boarding school, Warrington, but today was the first day of classes. Mr Lindell, our English teacher, gave us these Journals and told us we have to write in them every night, during Homework (except that Homework here is called Prep). We have Prep every weeknight, for two hours a night. For that time we have to sit at our desks and be silent. This would suit me were it true, but of course it isn't ... people whisper, talk, pass messages, exclaim out loud when they make a mistake. They do not whisper or pass messages to me, and the words break over my desk in soft waves, white foam washing around me.

I am in Prep now, writing this at my desk. On my left is a girl called Cathy Preshill. On the right is a girl called Sophie Smith. Cathy seems very thin to me and I wonder if she has anorexia, but she probably doesn't. *I* do though – anorexia of speech.

This Journal is starting to scare me already.

When Mr Lindell gave them out in class I felt the fear and promised myself that I would not write in it, that it would stay a cold and empty book, with no secrets. Now here I am on the first page saying more than I wanted to, more than I should. What if he reads them? He said he wouldn't; that we were free to write almost anything and that he would glance through them once in a while to make sure we were using them, not just filling them with swear-words. If he doesn't keep his promise I am lost.

FEBRUARY 8

Today is Friday, tomorrow is Saturday.

Saturday and Sunday together make up the weekend.

I did not write in this Journal yesterday. Will I get into trouble for that, I wonder?

Yesterday we had tennis practice. It is compulsory to go if tennis is your sport and, as tennis is my sport, I went. But I sat under a tree outside the court and watched. Watched all the tennis players laughing and hitting shots and missing shots. When they miss easy shots they giggle, turn to their partners, go red (the red of giggling more than the red of embarrassment), bend a little at the knees and drop their hands to around the

level of their kneecaps. And they say things, words of little meaning.

A girl called Sarah Venville is a very strong player. She hits the ball hard, to win. Another girl, called Sarah Cassell, is a graceful player. She hits beautiful shots beautifully, picks the ball up, smiles, laughs, talks, bounces the ball, runs, changes ends ... and all of these things she does beautifully. How can that be?

In primary school I played sport a lot and was quite good at it, I guess, although the standard wasn't very high. But I even beat the boys at most things. I was an OK hurdler, but that's another story. Well, it's not really. It's all part of the same story. I remember a teacher, Mrs Buckley, telling me I could make the State Titles if I took it up seriously, although I thought I had already taken it up seriously. That was in sixth grade. I remember my father watching me race on Saturdays. At that stage I was beating the other girls by miles, but he always looked so grim and intense about it that I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing. Then I crashed over a hurdle that had been left too high after a boys' race and broke my ankle. Somehow it was all different after it mended ... I guess I wasn't as confident, and I'd put on too much weight and my father had stopped coming to watch me ... I don't know. It just seemed like everything had changed.

FEBRUARY 11

Today we had classes again.

The weekend is over.

I think I wrote too much in this Journal on Friday. All that stuff about the hurdling, and primary school. And my father has found his way into this Journal already, when I was so determined that I wasn't going to think about him ever again, much less write about him. It seems he's too powerful still, like a radioactive cloud, finding his dark way into everything. I wonder what it's like where he is? Kind of like here, maybe. Having to line up, always being ordered around, no privacy, no freedom, no flares lighting up the future, showing which way the curves bend, and where the exits are. Perhaps he doesn't talk either ... I mean, I suppose he speaks to people and they speak to him, but it might be just empty, just mechanical words.

Anyway...

I'm in Prep again. The others seem to be doing so much work. Cathy, the thin one, seems so intense, her serious face absorbed in her work, or something, never looking up. Sophie is the opposite. She's very funny and lively, can't sit still, always getting in trouble because when the teacher comes round to check us she's either talking or out of her seat or something worse. She's

pretty, chubby but not fat, looks like a boy a bit; she has a round face and short hair and red cheeks and a husky voice which makes her sound older when she talks ... like she's twenty-five and sophisticated and sexy.

I wonder what I'd sound like if I talked again now ... like a plastic bottle burning in a fire, I imagine.

FEBRUARY 12

Here is a letter I received in today's mail.

Darling,

Am in a great hurry, so this is just a short note, hoping that you are happy in the new school. J.J. is well and sends his love. We are all very excited about the trip. What would you like us to bring you back? Do you have everything you need for school? I found your flute in the kitchen when I got home, so will send it. Don't give up on your music darling; you were so good at it.

Love,

Mummy

Am I happy in the new school? No, but perhaps it is better than the Hospital in some ways. Not so many weirdos, better food, no more Group

Therapy. In the Hospital I felt exposed, under the white light; here I feel like a black snail, crawling around with my shell on my back, living under it, hiding in it.

There is only one question she really wants answered and that is the question she cannot bring herself to ask: "Have you started talking yet? Or are you still my daughter, the silent freak?" She's probably found out from the Housemistress anyway. I bet she's rung her up to find out if I'm chattering away like a little pet monkey.

I haven't played my flute for nearly a year, since all this started, but she probably hasn't even noticed that. Is music a kind of talking, I wonder?

FEBRUARY 13

Today the English teacher, Mr Lindell, checked our Journals. He did not read them, just had us hold them up so he could make sure we were writing in them. I am writing in mine. I am a good girl. A little suck, yuk yuk.

I will write about my Prep desk. It is very plain, brown, with three shelves facing me, for books. One of the shelves is full of textbooks; another one has some writing-paper and pens; the third one, the bottom one, is empty.

The other desks are full of decorations and other colourful things. Cathy has lots of books of her own (I mean personal books that she reads for her own pleasure) and a cactus plant that she calls Alberich, and a small toy wombat, and a poem pinned up that I think she wrote herself. And a lot of other things. I like the poem very much. Sophie has mainly posters of pop-stars, and pencil-sharpeners and stickers and rubbers, all in different shapes and sizes and colours.

In the dorm I have a little cupboard beside my bed, with shampoo, conditioner, deodorant and tissues on it. I use grey school blankets but most of the other beds are covered by doonas that girls have brought from home, with vivid doona covers. My favourite is Ann Maltin's on the bed opposite me. It looks like a jigsaw of stars: white on a dark background. But it is a jigsaw: none of the stars is complete.

I am always first in bed and I often lie there looking at the fragmented stars, trying to put them together. I suppose Ann must have been watching me doing this. Last night she looked across at me and said: "They do fit together, but it took me years to figure it out."

I was very embarrassed at being noticed like this and I turned away and buried myself in the pillow. She was being kind, I know; she seems like she's always a kind and gentle person from

what I've seen of her so far, but I don't want to be noticed by anyone, for anything.

FEBRUARY 14

Today is Valentine's Day. Most of the girls kind of went mad with it all. Sophie got a card and danced around the dorm at lunchtime, giggling and showing everyone and jumping on all the beds, including mine. I hated her jumping on mine. She can be really over the top sometimes, really hyperactive. Ann got a couple of cards, which didn't surprise me: she's got long hair that's really sandy, like long strands of sand on a beach, and she's pretty and so nice. I think Cathy got a couple too, but she didn't tell anyone. As for me, yes, sure, I got bagfuls, thousands of cards from secret lovers and admirers everywhere... "The girl most likely to", that's me.

FEBRUARY 15

They had trials for the school tennis teams yesterday. I went again – like I said before in here, it's compulsory – but again I just watched from outside the fence. Sarah Venville won all her matches so easily. She's only in third form but I

think she could beat most of the sixth-formers. Sophie's hopeless – she misses everything and just won't take it seriously.

I don't mind going, I guess.

Today Mrs Graham, the Housemistress, spoke to me. She said: "Now, we've given you a good long time to settle in and I expect you to start contributing more. I don't want you to opt out. I know you've had a difficult time in the past twelve months and I'm arranging for you to see Mrs Ransome, the school Counsellor, twice a week. But we've got a good friendly group of girls in third form and I'm sure, if you make the effort, you'll find them very easy to get on with."

That's what she said ... more or less.

I don't think I've had a good long time to settle in at all. I mean, I've only just started here. Am I supposed to be grateful that they've taken me, the nutcase, the psycho with the deformed face? They already sponsor a student in the Philippines: some little girl with a lung disease or something. So am I their local project, their domestic act of charity? Mrs Graham walks around looking so perfect, with hair like a puffed-up dried flower arrangement. I don't think she's a very patient kind of woman. And another thing, if the third-formers are so friendly, I haven't noticed it. I admit some of them tried a bit, in the first few days, but I gave my famous

impression of a cockroach and that put them off without much trouble. Yet I can see that some of them are nice, even some of the ones in my dorm.

I wonder if any of them pray? Anyone in this dorm, I mean.

FEBRUARY 17

Sophie got angry at me today. She yelled at me quite a lot and shook me by the shoulders. It was because I had not done my job properly in the dorm (we all have jobs: mine was to sweep the staircase) and because of that we failed Inspection, and because of that she could not go out on leave till after lunch. She was so angry.

I left the dorm. I heard Cathy say to her: "You know we're not supposed to yell at her." Sophie said something about vegies, vegetables.

I went to the chapel, where we'd had a service only about two hours before. I'd found the service pretty boring but I still went there anyway, and sat there for a long time. It was very quiet, very old. I was inside the stone, where it was cool and peaceful.

I don't know what I thought about, sitting there. Well, I do really, but it's hard to write such stupid stuff down.

I could feel the water inside the stone; hear it,

even. Centuries ago – I remember reading this somewhere – churches used to be safe places where you could hide, and even if the soldiers knew you were there, they had to leave you alone. Something like that anyway. Nowadays it's all changed and there's nowhere safe, except a gaol, and that's the most dangerous place of all. Sitting in the chapel, I remembered the times we had been to church when I was little. Not too many times – Christmas, mostly, and even then my father didn't come very often – but once an old lady took me, and after the service she showed me the stained-glass windows, telling me about each one. Sometimes I think about that and wonder if she was my other grandmother, but I doubt it because my mother says I'd have been too young to remember my other grandparents.

But I remember this lady. She seemed kind.

In this chapel there are six large stained-glass windows and four small ones. My favourite is one of Christ with this girl who's meant to be dead and he's bringing her back to life. Wish someone'd do that to me. The window's got a little plaque under it: "Sacred to the memory of Sally Aydon, who died after a fall from her horse, January 14, 1937, aged 14. Safe in the arms of Jesus."

That's the real reason I like the window. Not

because I'm religious, 'cos I'm not. But because of this girl, for whom I feel so sad. I thought about her a lot as I sat there in the slow, still chapel. What did her parents do, as the years passed, I wondered? Did they remember her? Did they still mourn? Were they sad for ever? Or did it all pass away after a while? I wondered what they did to the horse, too. Could they bear to look at it again?

Anyway, after some time (a few hours I guess) I left the chapel and headed on back to the noise and washing-machine turmoil of it all. When I got back to the dorm a girl called Kate Mandeville was the only one there and she went into a whole big routine: "Oh, where have you been? Everyone's out looking for you! You missed lunch, you know, but we covered for you, but we were going to have to tell Mrs Graham if you weren't back in another half-hour or so. We thought you were upset about Sophie going off her brain like that. We didn't want her to get in trouble ... or you. Anyway, I'd better go and tell them you're back..."

So now it's night-time, and I've been sitting at my desk quite a while, writing this. The others are ignoring me a bit – well, they do anyway – but they seem a bit hostile now (or is that my imagination?). There's no Prep tonight, being Sunday, but a few others are at their desks too,

catching up on work. I'm going to bed.

FEBRUARY 18

When I read back over the entries in this Journal I get an impression of detached confidence. Yet it is not like that at all. Who, upon reading these words, could picture me, slinking along walls, huddled in corners, shrinking from contact, the third-form mute, the freak of Warrington? It is not a pretty picture. So the words lie as they always do.

FEBRUARY 19

I make people uncomfortable. The kind ones get angry because their kindness doesn't work. The unkind ones get angry because they think I am attacking them.

FEBRUARY 20

I had my first appointment with the Counsellor today. It was forty minutes. She said not to worry about talking or not talking; I could just sit there and use the time any way I wanted. She said that

the sessions with her could be just a break from the pressures of school, if that's what I needed most. I don't know what I need. I hoped, after what she said, that it would be peaceful, like being in the chapel, but it wasn't. I kept wondering how much Dr Harvey, from the Hospital, had told her about me.

Tonight Sophie used me as a ventriloquist's doll. She came up behind me as I sat at my desk waiting for Prep to start. She put her hands up the back of my jumper and moved me around as though I were a puppet, speaking for me in a funny voice. Most of the girls laughed, some more than others. Finally a girl called Lisa Morris told her to stop. I have not mentioned her before, yet in some ways she is the most interesting girl in the dorm, along with Cathy. She is tall and blonde, very Nordic looking, very beautiful, with a slight mark on one cheek (from a skiing accident, I heard her tell someone). I notice that mark every time I look at her. I think she is not a very happy person, yet no one else is aware of that, because she hides it behind a strong personality.

After Prep I saw a note on the floor under Ann's desk. Someone had written it to her, I suppose. It said: "What Sophie did was really off." Ann had written "I AGREE" in big letters. There was a lot more, lots of alternating comments, but I moved away because I didn't want to be seen

reading their notes. They're always writing to each other during Prep.

Maybe Sophie is still angry because of last Sunday. Even though I was in the wrong then for not doing my job properly, somehow, because I went "missing" for all that time after she yelled at me, it put her in the wrong with the other girls. It's not really fair, but that seems to be the way it has worked out. Also, I think, from something I heard, that Sophie went out on leave after lunch, like she'd arranged, leaving the others wandering around the school looking for me. It's funny how Sophie's so noisy and I'm completely silent, yet I still can win arguments with her, without really doing anything, and even if I'm not in the right.

I'm sitting in bed writing this now, waiting for lights out. A few minutes ago Ann came across to the foot of my bed and said: "Gee, you really take that Journal seriously. What do you write in it all the time?" I just went red, stopped writing and shrank away, until she went back over to her bed. It's not that I want to be so cold and unfriendly ... I just don't know what to say to people, and I can't speak anyway: my throat locks up and my tongue gets all swollen. I don't want them to take any interest in my writing though: I'm scared that someone might try to read it someday. Anyway, there are other girls who take them more seriously than I do ... Ann writes in hers all the time too,

and so does Cathy, and there's a girl called Tracey who has turned hers into a work of art, with wonderful drawings and decorations and beautiful lettering. Sophie's is good too – she sticks all kinds of funny pictures in it, and lots of objects, like movie tickets and M & M's and some really way-out things, like a stone that she says she chucked at Mrs Graham's car the other day, and an empty toothpaste tube. Mine is pretty dull by comparison. Well, really dull, actually.

FEBRUARY 21

For English Prep tonight we had to write a poem starting with the line:

In the silence of the night
I...

I wrote:

In the silence of the night
I slept.

Poems are dangerous.
Cathy wrote:

In the silence of the night

I walked across a plain
Of falling flowering snow
And gentle dancing rain.

There was more, but that was all that I saw. I like her poems. I don't like mine and I don't like the thought of handing it in tomorrow. I won't get in trouble, because they all treat me as "special" and they don't know whether I should be working or not and they're scared to get mad at me, but it seems rude to write a "non-poem" like mine when I actually like English and I like the teacher. To hand it in seems to be saying the opposite.

I remember in fifth grade I had a teacher called Mrs Buchanan. She was a friend of my mother's. One day we had to do what she called "creative writing" and I wrote a whole lot of stuff about a fight that my father and mother had had at home the night before. I was pretty upset about it, I guess, because I remember crying a bit as I wrote it, in the back corner of the room. Anyway, I must have said something too abusive in it (I think I called my mother a selfish bitch) 'cos Mrs Buchanan went off her brain at me and when my mother picked me up that afternoon she gave her my book to read. It was pretty bad. My mother just froze. It was about a week before she would even speak to me again. That was good, in a way,

but I was glad when it ended. I don't think she ever told my father though ... I should at least be grateful for that, I guess.

FEBRUARY 22

Had a letter today:

Darling,

I rang Mrs Graham last night. She said that you had settled in well but you weren't making much effort to involve yourself in the life of the House. Darling, I do think that's such a pity. Warrington has given you such a good chance and there are so many opportunities for you at a school like that. I do wish you'd try a few things. Mrs Graham says the third-form girls are a particularly nice group this year, and you mustn't cut yourself off from them. I hope we get a more positive report from her next time we ring.

We leave on Monday for New York, so must make this quick and then get on with the packing. We'll be back late March, but you know to contact Grandma if you need anything. We'll send you lots of postcards and bring you back lots of lovely presents.

All my love,

Mummy