

THE LAST WILD

In a world where animals no longer exist, twelve-year-old Kester Jaynes sometimes feels like he hardly exists either.

Locked away in a home for troubled children, he's told there's something wrong with him. So when he meets a flock of talking pigeons and a bossy cockroach, Kester thinks he's finally gone a bit mad.

But the animals have something to say . . .

The pigeons fly Kester to a wild place where the last creatures in the land have survived. A wise stag needs Kester's help, and together they must embark on a great journey, joined along the way by an over-enthusiastic wolf-cub, a spoilt show cat, a dancing harvest mouse and a determined girl named Polly.

**The animals saved Kester Jaynes.
Can Kester save the animals?**

**'This book is
absolutely brilliant'**
Daisy, age 10

**'I really loved
this book'**
Nathan, age 9

**'So exciting I couldn't
stop reading it!'**
Ewan, age 10

About the author

Piers Torday was born in Northumberland, which is possibly the one part of England where more animals live than people.

After working as a producer and writer in theatre, live comedy and TV, Piers now lives in London – where there are more animals than you might think.

The Last Wild is his first novel.

To find out more about Piers visit
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Visit www.thelastwild.com for
news, competitions and more!



THE LAST WILD

PIERS TORDAY

Quercus

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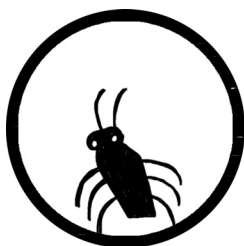
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For my parents

PART 1:
SPECTRUM
HALL



My story begins with me sitting on a bed, looking out of the window.

I know that doesn't sound like much. But let me tell you where the bed is, and what I can see from it. This bed is right in the corner of a room only just big enough for it, and the bed is only just big enough for a kid my age.

(Twelve – just about to be thirteen – and skinny.)

The window is the size of the whole wall, made of special tinted glass that means the room stays the same temperature all the time. The room is locked shut and you need an electronic keycard to open the door. If you could open it, you would be in a long corridor with absolutely *nothing* in it apart from cameras in the ceiling and a fat man in a purple jacket and trousers sitting opposite on a plastic chair. Sleeping, most likely.

This fat man is called a *warden*. And there are lots of them here. But I think he is probably the fattest.

The corridor with the cameras and the fat warden is on the seventh floor of a building which is like a big upside-down boat made of glass and metal. Everywhere you look there are reflections – of you, other faces, the storm clouds. The curved glass walls stretch all the way down to the edge of some very high cliffs – only grass and mud for miles around, with rocks and sea below. The cliffs are in the north of the Island, in the middle of the Quarantine Zone – far away from the city and my home.

The name of this building is Spectrum Hall.

Or in full: Spectrum Hall Academy for Challenging Children.

It's just like a big school mainly. Only the most boring school in the world, that you can never, ever leave.

And as for what I can see out of the window?

I know that what is really there is sea and sky and rocks, but the light in the ceiling bounces off the glass into my eyes. So when I look out into the dark sky all I can actually see is my reflection. That and the hairy grey varmint flapping about in the corner. A 'moth' is what they call this kind – with antennae and spotted grey wings. I shoo him away, only to send him circling round the light above.

I try to ignore the fluttering noise above me and carry on with my practice. 'Bed', 'chair' (one, screwed to the

floor), 'window', 'my watch' – loads of words to practise with. You see, I know what the words mean. I know how to write them. I just can't say them. No more than the moth can.

Not since Mum died.

I look at my watch again. The chunky green digital one she gave me. The last present I ever got from her. My favourite present I ever got from her. Even Dad nicked it once, because he thought it was 'nifty', and I had to hassle him to give it back.

I'm lucky to still have it – we aren't meant to keep anything personal at the Hall, but I kicked and bit so they couldn't take it. I flick the picture on to the screen.

It's a summer afternoon in our garden, behind our house in the city. You can just see the sun shining on the River Ams, gleaming beyond the top of the back wall, and far away on the other side, the skyline of tall glass towers.

Premium.

City of the south, and capital city of the Island. When the rest of the world grew too hot, and cracked open in the sun, everyone came to live on this cold grey rock – the Island – in their hundreds and thousands. If only it was hot *here* sometimes. The weather is never good. But for me this picture has just always been where our home is, where Dad is – and where, one day, I know I'll return.

Right now though, I'm more interested in the person in the garden.

It's my mum, Laura, before she got sick. She has

long curly hair the colour of shiny new coins, and she's laughing, at something Dad or I have said.

I used to be able to talk normal, you see, like everyone. Mum and I talked a lot. Dad and I talked a bit. Now though, it's like trying to learn the hardest language in the world. I know I can inside; it's just when I try to speak – nothing happens. The more I try, the harder it gets.

They want to make me talk again here – Doctor Fredericks with his tests – but it's not working. People still stare at you funny as you go red in the face, or sometimes they laugh and make up what they think you were going to say.

I'd rather try and talk to a varmint, thanks. There's enough of them – that's for sure. Flapping moths that circle round lights, like the one in my room right now, and spiders lurking in corners, or cockroaches scuttling around by the bins. All the useless insects and pests that the red-eye left behind. We don't even bother with their real names half the time. Varmints is all they are.

And I have practised talking at them, as it happens. Not that you're meant to go near them – even though everyone knows they're the only thing that can't get the virus. So I haven't reported this flapping one in my room. Because I like practising with him there buzzing around. He won't talk back. But at least he doesn't laugh or stare – I can almost pretend he's listening.

I do that a lot.

Right, varmint, I say to myself in my head, *let's see what you think I'm saying this time.*

So I'm just about to have a go at saying 'B-E-D' again – or at least the 'B', or even a noise that sounds like a 'B' – when the speaker hidden in the ceiling splutters into life. You can almost see the spit fly out of the holes. The varmint whirls angrily away; he doesn't like it any more than I do.

'Calling all, ah, students. Your first meal of the day is, ah, served, in the Yard. You have t-t-ten minutes.'

There's a clank as he replaces the microphone in its stand, and a hum as he forgets to turn it off and I hear his heavy breathing for a minute before he remembers and flicks the switch.

Doctor Fredericks, the Governor.

He can give himself as many titles as he likes; he's still just an ugly man in a white coat with a comb-over, whose breath smells of sweets. The day after they brought me here – bundled out of my home in the middle of the night – I gathered with all the new kids in the Yard while he stood behind a lectern reading words off a screen, his jacket flapping in the air-con.

'Good afternoon, ahm, boys and, er, girls. Welcome to S-Spectrum, ah, Hall. You have been sent here because your parents want to, ahm, f-f-forget about you. Your, ah, schools can no longer t-t-tolerate you, so they have asked us to help. Because we are a special institution, dealing with special c-c-cases like yours. And I'll tell you now how

it's going to, ahm, work.' His amplified words bounced off the walls. 'Look behind you at the sea. It is the filthiest and most p-p-polluted sea in the world, we're told.'

He stared down at us through his bottle-top glasses and flicked away a loose strand of greasy hair as we gazed out of the glass walls behind us at the waves chopping and crashing at the cliffs.

But I didn't believe that Dad wanted to forget about me.

Six years later, I still don't.

'There are t-t-two ways, ah, out of here. Through our front gates, as an improved and functioning member of society. Or off these bally c-c-cliffs and into the, ahm, sea. So either learn to, ah, m-m-modify your behaviour, or jolly well learn to, ah, dive!'

I haven't learnt to do either yet.

I pull on my trackies, shove my feet into my trainers and strap on my watch. Then there's a beep, and the light in my door goes red, orange, then green, before sliding open with a hiss. The fat warden is standing there in his crumpled purple jacket and trousers, my door keycard dangling on a strap from around his wrist.

'Come on, Jaynes,' he mutters, scratching his hairy chin. 'I haven't got all day.'

I'm not surprised, with so much sitting on your bum and sleeping to do, I think. That's one of the advantages of not being able to speak – you never get in bother for talking back. I step out into the corridor and wait.

One by one, the other doors along from me beep and slide open. And out come the other inhabitants of Corridor 7, boys and girls my age, all in trackies and trainers like me, their hair unbrushed, their faces blank. We look at each other, and then the warden silently points to the other end of the corridor.

I feel his eyes boring into my back as we walk past him along the passage and into the open lift.

The Yard is full of noise, which gets right inside my head. Most of it from the queue for the servery, a polished counter set into the wall, lined with pots. Metal pots full of pink slop, which some women with grey hair and greyer faces are busy dishing out, all of them wearing purple tunics with a big F stamped on the front.

F for Factorium. The world's biggest food company. More like the only food company now, since the red-eye came and killed all the animals. Every last one, apart from the varmint.

So Facto started making formula for us to eat instead. Which now makes them the only *company*, full stop – they run *everything*. First the government asked them to take care of the red-eye, and then they ended up taking care of the government. They run the country now, from hospitals to schools. Including this one. I don't know why making food or killing animals makes you good at running schools as well, but the first thing you learn in a Facto school is: never argue with Facto.

'What's the flavour, miss?' shouts Wavy J, waving his

plastic bowl in the air, somehow first in the queue already. That's why he's called Wavy – he's always at the front of every line, waving. I don't even know his real name.

Behind him is Big Brenda, a fat girl with hair in bunches who has to sleep on a reinforced bed. She's here because she ate her mum and dad out of house and home – even during the food shortage – and got so big they couldn't look after her any more. That pale-faced kid with bags under his eyes is Tony – who got in trouble for stealing tins of food. And now he's here, quietly nicking some headphones out of the bag belonging to Justine, who is here because she was caught being part of a gang. A gang of thieves who got around everywhere on bikes, who nicked not just tins of food, but anything they could get their hands on. Like music players and headphones. That little kid she's talking to with spiky hair and a devil grin – that's Maze, who has an attention deficiency. The kind of attention deficiency that makes you chase your mum around the kitchen with a knife. And then right at the back, behind them all, is me.

I know their names. I listen to their conversations. I know why they're here.

But I don't know why I am.



'Chicken'n'Chips,' announces the grey lady behind the hatch who looks like a big door on legs, with hairy arms. 'Today's flavour is Chicken *and* chips.' Her name is Denise, which doesn't rhyme with arms, so instead the others have made up a song about her hairy knees, which aren't actually that hairy. It doesn't matter what Denise or any of the women say though – Sausage'n'Mash, Ham'n'Eggs, Pie'n'Peas – everything they serve looks exactly the same: bright pink gloop that spills over the edge of the bowl and only ever tastes of one thing: prawn-cocktail crisps.

'Formul-A', they want us to call it, pronouncing the 'A' like in 'day', but no one does. It's just *formula*. First the animals we eat went, and then the bees went, and then the crops and fruit went. Vegetables were contaminated. So there were rations, the remaining supplies of fresh

food stockpiled in giant deep freezes. Then all that went too. We lived out of tins. Oily, meaty, fishy or veggie mush out of tins. The tins began to run out too. People started eating anything. Even varmints. Rats. Cockroaches.

Then, one day – I was here by now – they just started serving us formula, and that was it – no more normal food. ‘It’s gone,’ Denise had said, ‘and it ain’t coming back. That’s all you need to know.’ Instead we got given a meal replacement that ‘satisfies all your daily nutritional needs’.

If you like prawn-cocktail crisps.

‘Jaynes! Do you want feeding or a crack on that dumb skull of yours?’

Hairy Denise empties a ladle of pink slop into my bowl, and I walk back past the others, already stuffing their faces where they stand. Big Brenda smiles at me as I pass, and so I stop. She’s all right, Bren – perhaps because people laugh at her all the time for being fat, she doesn’t laugh at other people so much.

‘All right, Dumbinga?’ she says, putting away half of her formula dose in a single spoonful. Dumb *and* ginger. I’m a gift for a nickname, I am.

I shrug and stir the formula round in my bowl.

Then there’s a head-full of spiky hair in my face, and Maze is leering up at me.

‘Hello, Dumbinga. What’s the chat?’

I avoid his gaze and look down at the pink gloop.

'Bit quiet, is it?' he says.

'Leave him alone,' says Bren, her mouth full of Chicken'n'Chips.

But he doesn't.

'Nah. He's only pretending. Aren't you, Dumbinga?'

I shake my head, already resigned to what happens next. Maze puts his bowl down and rolls his sleeves up. 'Look, Bren – I'll show you. I bet you if I give Dumbinga a dead arm, he'll scream his little head off. Won't you, Dumbinga?'

No, I won't.

A) Because I can't, and –

B) I'm not in the mood for this today.

So holding my bowl close to my chest, like a shield, I press past him and the others.

I hear Maze spit with disgust on the ground behind me and laugh, and even though it's the worst thing to do, it's impossible not to – I turn back round. They're all just staring at me.

'Freak,' says Maze. And flashes his little devil grin.

I have to remember that I gave up trying to be like the talkers a long time ago. So, shaking my head, trying to pretend like it doesn't matter, playing the big man – I turn back and take the bowl to go and sit in My Corner.

My Corner isn't really *my* corner, of course. It's just a part of the Yard, underneath one of the metal walkways between classrooms, where there's more metal and concrete than glass, where they pile up the empty formula

kegs from the kitchen, next to a drain. A quiet and dark place, somewhere good to go if you don't want to be bothered by spiky-haired idiots. I put the bowl of fluorescent pink down on the ground and turn one of the kegs over.

'Factorium is a Selwyn Stone Enterprise', it has engraved on the bottom. Whatever. No one's ever seen Selwyn Stone for real. He probably doesn't even exist. It's hard to see people when they're always behind a smoked-glass car window or disappearing into a skyscraper surrounded by crowds of photographers and bodyguards. The head of Facto, the man who invented formula. The head of the whole Island now, the man who made up all the new rules. Don't touch this, don't eat that, don't live here – well, right now, I don't care for his stupid rules. And to prove it, I sit right down on top of his stupid name, pick up my bowl and wait.

You see, I'm not going to eat it myself.

Well, maybe a bit – but it is properly foul. I'm going to give it to someone else. Someone who should be here right about . . . now.

And sure enough, there on the edge of the shadows by the drain, I can just see two antennae poking out, curling and tasting the air. Two orangey-red antennae belonging to an insect about the length of my thumb. An insect with a flat head, lots of bristly legs, and – silently chewing at the front – a pair of jaws.

Another varmint. A cockroach.

The antennae sniff the air, and, checking that no one else is around, he carefully scuttles out into the open, revealing the two large white stripes across his back.

I give him a smile. Not that he can smile back, he's a cockroach. But he likes to come and nibble at spoonfuls of my formula, so I let him. And he's OK to hang out with. He doesn't thump your leg and say, 'How about if I give you a dead leg instead? Will you scream *then?*' (No.) He doesn't grab both your arms behind your back, while his mate tries to tickle you to death, saying, 'What, you can't even laugh either?' (Again, no.) And he certainly never, ever jeers or points when you do try, as hard as you can, to say a word.

He just sort of *listens*.

I scoop a bit of formula in my spoon, and, checking no one is watching, lay it down on the ground by my feet. He scurries over and starts to lap it up.

No one knows why the cockroaches didn't catch the red-eye. Dad used to say he wasn't surprised they survived – apparently even if you dropped a nuclear bomb on everything, they would be the only ones left.

(That's what happens when you have a scientist for a Dad. You don't need school or exams when his lab is in the basement and he lets you watch him work, muttering to himself as he does. Your head is full of useless facts from the get-go.)

The red-eye wasn't a nuclear bomb though, it was a disease. A disease worse than a nuclear bomb, if you

ask me. 'Like . . . animal flu,' Dad said. A flu that turned animal bodies and brains to mush and, just before they died, made their eyes burn bright red like they were on fire inside.

Dad thought it had started in a cattle farm, but no one really knew where it had come from. And before anyone could find out, the virus had spread everywhere. Not just to the animals we eat, but to nearly every living creature – wild animals, pets, animals in zoos – right around the world it went – till the jungles were full of bodies, birds fell out of the air and fish floated in silvery slicks on top of the sea.

It killed all the animals in the world.

All, that is, apart from the useless ones. The ones we couldn't eat, the ones that didn't pollinate crops or eat pests. Just the pests themselves – the varmints. Like this smelly cockroach slurping at my spoon of formula. Even though they can't get the virus, you're still not meant to touch them. Because humans can get the virus. That's why Facto declared the whole countryside a quarantine zone and forced everyone to move to the cities, where they can keep them safe – and why we live here under an upside-down glass boat. Just in case, Selwyn Stone says.

I don't care. I lean over, put my hand out and let the varmint crawl into my hand.

He's a big guy. Perhaps the biggest I've ever seen. Other kids here would freak out, but not me. And I look around at the damp empty patch of shade I'm sitting in, at

the gang on the other side of the Yard laughing and joking over their food, and I think perhaps freak is a good choice of word by Maze.

Because he's right. That's what I am. I didn't choose it, I didn't ask for it, but that's what I've become – a genuine freak, mute and only varmint for friends.

There's a blast of cold from the air-con, and I shiver, feeling all of a sudden very alone. The most alone I've felt for a long time. Like I'm not even really here in the Yard any more, like I'm just sort of floating about in space, cast adrift in the sky above. It's weird, but I kind of enjoy feeling sad sometimes. I deliberately think of all the sad things that have happened – the animals going, then Mum, and being taken away from Dad, dumped and forgotten about in here. Like it's all been done on purpose just to make my life as rubbish as it could ever be, and there's a kind of warm feeling rising up inside my chest, filling up behind my eyes, because I hate it, I hate everything, including myself for feeling like this, and I think I'm going to cry, when –

I hear it. A noise.

Strong, loud and clear, the strangest noise I've ever heard: faint and crackly, like an old-fashioned radio in a film. A noise that slowly, definitely, turns into a word.

Help!

That's it – nothing else. It comes again.

Help!

There's no one else here. The wardens are inside,

probably dozing. Back over by the servery, Big Brenda seems to have Tony in a headlock and is trying to steal his bowl of formula, but they're miles away. And then the voice speaks again, with more words, so faint I can only just make them out.

Kester! Help!

Whoever is speaking has a very deep voice – it's not a kid's voice at all, or even a man's – it rasps and echoes, like a rock rattling down a metal pipe.

Please. You must help.

Almost not human.

Then slowly, with a knot in my stomach, I realize whose voice it is. The only possible answer, however impossible it seems. Looking straight at me, his little varmint antennae waving –

The cockroach.

No – I must be making this up. We're not in a cartoon. The cockroach hasn't got massive eyes, or a hat, and he isn't singing a song. I definitely don't think he's going to grant me a wish. He's just an insect sitting in my hand.

And yet I can hear him. He's trying to speak to me.

The cockroach flicks his antennae impatiently – before we are both plunged into shadow. The shadow of a warden looming above us, a heavy hand on my collar, hauling me to my feet, as the varmint tumbles to the ground and scurries back to the drain. He pauses on the edge, looks at me one last time and then dives down inside the hole without another word.

What was I thinking? Cockroaches can't talk. I can't talk. Nothing has changed.

Which is when the warden says the words no kid at Spectrum Hall ever wants to hear: 'The Doctor will see you now.'



There are some places you aren't ever allowed into without being asked first.

The Doctor's rooms are different to the rest of the Hall. They don't have glass walls to look at the sea through. They're underground, and you have to enter a special code in the lift to get there. The lift opens on to a long white corridor, like in a hospital. There are rooms off either side, and the whole place stinks of toilet cleaner.

This room is clean and bare, almost empty apart from a plastic chair in front of a desk, and a sink in the corner. On the wall behind the desk there is a picture of Selwyn Stone.

A picture I've found myself staring at many times before. He has such a strange face. Something weird about it that I can't explain – like he doesn't look quite

real. Apart from his eyes, which stare straight through you, seeing everything.

I look away.

The thing you notice most about the rooms, once the lift has beeped shut again, and the wardens have turned the lights off behind them, is that there's almost no noise. There are no screams and shouts from the Yard, just every now and then the *squeak squeak* of rubber shoes along the corridor outside.

I know it's only me down here, sat on a plastic chair facing an empty desk, but you hear things in the quiet, you see. The sound of something shifting its weight on the ceiling above, or a gust of air that could so easily be a breath. Then, out of the corner of your eye, a shadow seems to bend and slide along the floor – a shadow with eight legs. Another varmint.

A black spider tapping about.

I hate spiders. How it got in here, the most sterilized part of the whole Hall, I don't know. I just sit still, count to ten and hope it doesn't come near me. When I get out, I'll tell Dad about the Doctor's rooms. How they leave you there, all on your own in the dark, for hours, just to wind you up. You can't admit you're afraid of the dark here because that makes you a wuss, but I am. If Dad knew, he'd never allow it, I know he wouldn't.

It was raining that night, raining a lot, hitting the windows in noisy splats. It wasn't properly dark, because of the moon. I was

woken up by a strange sound from downstairs. I still remember how the toys on my shelf looked cross, with the shadows of the raindrops flicking across them, as I turned on the light to make the darkness go away.

For a moment everything in my room – the clothes in a mess on the floor, the toys on the shelf – they all looked normal and happy.

But then I heard the door downstairs ripping open.

I got out of bed to go and get Dad. The landing was pitch black, and I couldn't find the light switch. The door ripped again, and I wanted to cry out for him, but I couldn't. I knew I'd have to go into his room to wake him up by shaking his shoulder.

Perhaps he just left the door open, I thought, and started to go down the stairs extra quietly so as not to disturb him.

I got halfway down when I heard a whispering noise that came in with a wind, blowing across my face and making my cheeks cold.

The door was definitely open. At the bottom of the stairs I tiptoed across to shut it.

I turned around, and started to go back.

There was a squeak on the floor behind me. I looked back, and the door had come open again. This time there was a man standing there in the doorway. I couldn't see his face because of the darkness.

I felt more frightened than I'd ever felt in my whole life.

'Kester Jaynes?' he said quietly.

I nodded, not knowing what else to do.

'You're coming with me.'

*

A noise in my head snaps me back to the present. Not the metallic rasping I heard in the Yard, more a high-pitched whistle, like a boiling kettle. A whistle that seems to contain words at the same time.

There is no one else down here.

I shake my head, as if the noise was a buzzing fly, but it doesn't go away. And I force myself to look at the spider, sitting calmly on the floor, every one of its eight eyes watching me. The whistling gets louder and louder in my head, as if the kettle is about to explode, until the ear-piercing shriek begins to slowly form into a word.

A word, floating and twisting inside my mind.

Listen.

So I do, but all I can hear is the *slap slap* of sandals coming down the corridor, and the door sliding open, while the spider scuttles back into the shadows and squeezes through a super-thin crack into the wall. I think I am beginning to go mad. They said this would happen if I didn't talk to anyone, that I would start making stuff up.

Imaginary friends.

Doctor Fredericks turns on an overhead lamp, shining it right in my face. I squirm away from the blinding light towards the floor, trying not to look at his chipped toenails. He doesn't say anything like 'Hello' or 'How are you today?' He's called a doctor but he isn't the kind of doctor who makes you stick your tongue out and puts

a cold stethoscope on your chest. He does wear a white coat, it's true, but that's the only thing doctorish about him.

I catch a whiff of blackcurrant. The pockets of the Doctor's white coat are full of blackcurrant cough sweets, and there's always one in his mouth. He turns on the tap in the corner and begins to scrub his hands.

'Name?' he says, his mouth full of lozenge.

He knows I can't speak. *He knows.*

'Name?' he says again.

I just look blankly at him. Doctor Fredericks sighs.

'Jaynes, Kester. You, ahm, were seen handling a, ah, varmint in the Yard.'

He's drying his hands on a sheet of paper towel. I know what's coming, but I don't care. The cockroach doesn't have a virus. The cockroach is my friend. It tried to speak to me.

I think.

'Did you, or did you not, ahm, handle a restricted insect, young man?'

I stare straight ahead. A bristly hand knocks me round the back of the neck. I continue to stare straight ahead, trying not to wince.

The Doctor sighs and sits down behind his desk, like he's still waiting for me to say something. After what feels like forever, he gives a long drawn-out breath and begins to pick at his nails, still not looking at me. His voice is softer this time, trying to sound casual.

'Do you know why you're here, Kester? Haven't you ever wondered?'

I can't help but smile and shake my head. I'm not going to show him that I care. The less you give away in here, the better. He waves his hand crossly at the world above our heads.

'Do you think all of this is a joke? The Q-q-quarantine Zone, the glass roofs? Do you think Mr Stone –' he turns and glances at the picture of his boss on the wall behind him – 'is having a, ah, jolly g-g-good laugh?'

He leans forward suddenly. Now he's looking at me. I catch a glimpse of bloodshot eyes behind the thick glasses.

'Does it never, ah, occur to you, that you might be here for your own g-g-good? That we might actually be, ah, trying to, dash it to blazes, p-p-protect you?'

I shrug and stare through him as blankly as I can. The Doctor leans back in his chair and glances up at the ceiling again.

'There's still so much we don't know about the, ah, virus. Where it came from, how it spread so jolly quickly. All we do know is that it mutates. Without any sign, or any, ah, warning. From animal to animal.' He fixes me with his bleary gaze. 'To humans. To varmints one day, our best scientists are sure of it. It's not a question of if, but w-w-when. Do you understand me, boy?'

I shrug. I've heard the lecture many times before.

'So, I'm going to ask you one more time. Why were

you handling a, ahm, v-v-varmint in the Yard? Is there anything you would like to t-t-tell me?’

He waits.

I try to speak. To tell him something, just any word – not what actually happened in the Yard – just a simple word, to keep him happy.

I do. I try so hard.

But no word comes.

My body sinks into the chair with the effort.

‘Well?’

He waits.

‘Nothing? Ah well. What a shame. What a d-d-dashed pity.’

He stands and begins to pace up and down the room.

‘So, young, ah, Jaynes – the son of the great Professor Jaynes.’

Here it comes.

‘Do you think that makes you different? Do you think that makes you better than anyone else, eh?’ He leans into my face, and his whiskers brush my cheek. ‘Do you think it makes you s-special?’

I look down at his big white toes in their sandals and think, You’re pretty special yourself, Doctor, but he grabs my chin and twists it back up so I have to stare at him.

‘Your, ah, dear f-f-father also thinks he’s better, you see, than the rest of us.’ He laughs, although it sounds more like hiccups. ‘Us, ah, less honourable scientists,’ he continues through the hiccupy laughs, ‘doomed to spend

our jolly old days working with wretched specimens such as yourself.'

I don't know why he keeps calling Dad an 'honourable scientist'. He was just doing his job, as a vet. A very good vet, mind, perhaps the best in the country, Mum said. He had 'the magic touch', that's what they called it – 'No animal too small, no disease too big,' he always said. Animals in farms, animals from the house next door, animals on the other side of the world. Until the virus came.

'And all I am trying to, ah, jolly well do is keep my little d-d-delinquent, ah, charges safe and, ahm, sound.' He gives me a big smile, and it looks like his fraggly yellow teeth are running a competition to see which one can fall out of his mouth first. 'Which is why I have no choice, I'm afraid.'

I look at the shut door. At the picture of scowling Selwyn Stone. None of them offers any advice or any help as the Doctor gives me my sentence.

'You touched a restricted insect. You know the rules.'

He presses a button under the desk, and the door slides open to reveal two wardens in the corridor, waiting for me.

'Take him, ah, back to his room,' says Doctor Fredericks with a wave of his hand. 'Q-q-quarantined for seven days. Total isolation.'



The wardens haul me back to my room and lock the door behind them as if nothing had happened.

Seven days. Stuck in here. Because I thought an insect was talking to me.

Sat up against the wall, clutching my pillow to my chest, I try to focus on the world beyond the window. A solid black sky, but no rain.

I try to think of happy things – like being back at home. I'm helping Mum unpack the shopping. I've said something to make her laugh. Then Dad comes in holding his favourite mug, full of tea, and joins in. And we're laughing and cooking dinner and we're happy. Everything's normal again.

I don't know how long I stay like that, curled up on my bed, clutching my pillow. At supper time they shove a

bowl of Eggs'n'Ham formula through a hatch in the door, but I don't feel hungry.

Sleeping, staring, untouched formula bowls piling up on the floor – that is how my life is until seven grey skies have been and gone since I was taken to the Doctor's rooms.

That evening, I have the strangest dream.

I'm dreaming that I'm asleep in my room at home, when there's a faint noise at the window.

A tap tap tapping.

I try to ignore it, and roll over. But the noise just keeps on getting louder and louder.

My head is pulsing – half dreaming, half awake, I toss and turn, feeling my pillows, the cold wall behind, confused as to whether I'm at home or in the Hall. The *tap tapping* grows louder and louder, like a drill inside my brain.

Then, with a jolt, I wake up. I'm definitely in my room at Spectrum Hall.

And I'm freezing.

I'm freezing, because the window wall has a jagged hole smashed right through it, and in the moonlight I can see shards of broken glass all over the floor. Carefully I climb out of bed, trying not to step on the jagged edges, when some feathers hit me on the head.

Dark and wet feathers, flapping round the room.

I raise my arm over my eyes, and another thing hits me from the opposite direction. Flying in through the

window, flying at me from all sides, is a flock of birds. They flap their wings manically, showering me with freezing water. In the half-light I catch a glimpse of their huge eyes and purple-grey chests.

Pigeons. My room is full of flying varmints.

I grab my chair, ready to bat the birds back out again, back to wherever they came from, when they start to speak – all of them talking together in a deep voice, more like singing than talking. Like a choir, direct in my head – just like the crackle from the cockroach in the Yard, or the whistle from the spider in the Doctor’s room, only this time there’s hundreds of voices speaking at once.

And I really can hear what they’re saying.

Kester Jaynes, we have been sent to find you.

But it’s a talking choir without perfect timing. Because as most of them finish, I notice a higher-pitched voice join in late, making even less sense than the others –

Yes, Kester Jaynes, you have been sent to find us.

All their heads turn to look at me: what looks like at least a hundred pairs of eyes and beaks swivelling in my direction as if they’re synchronized. A hundred pigeons at least – in my room.

Kester – we know you can hear us.

It’s true. I can. But I don’t understand how or why.

You can talk to us. Let your mind go free. Let us in, Kester. Let us hear your thoughts.

I don’t want to let anything into my head. The pigeons flutter about in the pale blue light. It looks like most of

them are dark grey, with white speckles. But there's one white bird with pink feet and orange eyes. Ninety-nine dark grey pigeons and a single white one, the one with the high-pitched voice. The one who can't say words properly. Like me.

Kester Jaynes, the time has come, say the ninety-nine grey pigeons.

Kester Jaynes, have you got the time? adds the one white pigeon.

You have a special gift. Only you can save us.

Yes. We've saved a special gift, only for you.

I think spending so long on my own has sent me crazy. And then, without thinking, words start to form in my head.

Yes, *words* – actual words.

After six whole years, six years since I spoke a single one. And now, as if that had been yesterday, as if we were still in the hospital, as if Mum was still lying there, they come again: words.

The last words I ever spoke were to Mum. The night that she—

She was lying there, sort of looking at me, more looking past me, holding my hand so lightly, like just to keep hers on top of mine was an effort, her breathing rickety, her skin yellow – so all I said was –

'Will you come back?'

She shook her head ever so slightly from side to side, gave

what was maybe a smile and then said – in fact whispered – so soft, so I had to lean in, smelling her breath, sweet and stale – ‘Tell Dad.’ Another pause, a big breath. ‘Tell Dad he has to tell you.’

But she never said what.

The pigeons peck in –

Kester! Kester! You must save us!

Mum disappears, and instead there are just words – forming, circling in my mind, pulses of sound trying to connect.

There’s a silence. While I think, and try to speak.

Yes, Kester, save yourself from us! squeaks the white pigeon.

The other grey pigeons shake their heads and peck at the white one so much he falls off the end of my bed with a squawk.

But it helps. I realize I can speak. Like in my head before, to the moth in my room, to the cockroach in the Yard – only it’s different this time. Because I know they’re listening, and understanding. So I say the first new words of my new talking.

Get out of my face, birds!

(No one said the words had to be polite.)

The pigeons cock their heads. Like they don’t care what I say or think. The white one picks himself up off the floor with a shake of his head and hops back on to the end of my bed, scratching furiously at his wingpit with

his beak. Ignoring him, the grey ones fill my head with their sing-song, wailing like ghosts.

They are coming, Kester Jaynes, they are coming. They are coming for you! Prepare yourself!

I want to clap my hands and clear the craziness from my head. But I don't have to. My brain crackles once more and my eyes grow heavy, as my thoughts slide back down into the darkness. The last thing I hear is the squeak of the white pigeon.

Coming? I thought we were going? Oh –
And then flapping, and then – nothing.