

This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them. Here is a joke, as an example. It is one of Father's.

His face was drawn but the curtains were real.

I know why this is meant to be funny. I asked. It is because *drawn* has three meanings, and they are **1)** drawn with a pencil, **2)** exhausted, and **3)** pulled across a window, and meaning **1** refers to both the face and the curtains, meaning **2** refers only to the face, and meaning **3** refers only to the curtains.

If I try to say the joke to myself, making the word mean the three different things at the same time, it is like hearing three different pieces of music at the same time which is uncomfortable and confusing and not nice like white noise. It is like three people trying to talk to you at the same time about different things.

And that is why there are no jokes in this book.

The policeman looked at me for a while without speaking. Then he said, 'I am arresting you for assaulting a police officer.'

This made me feel a lot calmer because it is what policemen say on television and in films.

Then he said, 'I strongly advise you to get into the back of the police car because if you try any of that monkey-business again, you little shit, I will seriously lose my rag. Is that understood?'

I walked over to the police car which was parked just outside the gate. He opened the back door and I got inside. He climbed into the driver's seat and made a call on his radio to the policeman who was still inside the house. He said, 'The little bugger just had a pop at me, Kate. Can you hang on with Mrs S while I drop him off at the station? I'll get Tony to swing by and pick you up.'

And she said, 'Sure. I'll catch you later.'

The policeman said, 'Okey-doke,' and we drove off.

The police car smelt of hot plastic and aftershave and takeaway chips.

I watched the sky as we drove towards the town centre. It was a clear night and you could see the Milky Way.

Some people think the Milky Way is a long line of stars, but it isn't. Our galaxy is a huge disc of stars millions of light years across and the solar system is somewhere near the outside edge of the disc.

All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I'm not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are. I'm meant to say that they have learning difficulties or that they have special needs. But this is stupid because everyone has learning difficulties because learning to speak French or understanding Relativity is difficult, and also everyone has special needs, like Father who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him getting fat, or Mrs Peters who wears a beige-coloured hearing aid, or Siobhan who has glasses so thick that they give you a headache if you borrow them, and none of these people are Special Needs, even if they have special needs.

But Siobhan said we have to use those words because people used to call children like the children at school *spaz* and *crip* and *mong* which were nasty words. But that is stupid too because sometimes the children from the school down the road see us in the street when we're getting off the bus and they shout, 'Special Needs! Special Needs!' But I don't take any notice because I don't listen to what other people say and only sticks and stones can break my bones and I have my Swiss Army Knife if they hit me and if I kill them it will be self-defence and I won't go to prison.

I am going to prove that I'm not stupid. Next month I'm going to take my A level in Maths and I'm going to get an A grade. No one has ever taken an A level at our school before and the headmistress, Mrs Gascoyne, didn't want me to take it at first. She said they didn't have the facilities to let us sit A levels. But Father

had an argument with Mrs Gascoyne and he got really cross. Mrs Gascoyne said they didn't want to treat me differently from everyone else in the school because then everyone would want to be treated differently and it would set a precedent. And I could always do my A levels later, at 18.

I was sitting in Mrs Gascoyne's office with Father when she said these things. And Father said, 'Christopher is getting a crap enough deal already, don't you think, without you shitting on him from a great height as well. Jesus, this is the one thing he is really good at.'

Then Mrs Gascoyne said that she and Father should talk about this at some later point on their own. But Father asked her whether she wanted to say things she was embarrassed to say in front of me, and she said no, so he said, 'Say them now, then.'

And she said that if I sat an A level I would have to have a member of staff looking after me on my own in a separate room. And Father said he would pay someone £50 to do it after school and he wasn't going to take no for an answer. And she said she'd go away and think about it. And the next week she rang Father at home and told him that I could take the A level and the Reverend Peters would be what is called the invigilator.

And after I've taken A level Maths I am going to take A level Further Maths and Physics and then I can go to university. There is not a university in our town, which is Swindon, because it is a small place. So we will have to move to another town where there is a university because I don't want to live on my own or in a house with other students. But that will be all right because Father wants

And I asked, 'Why?'

And she said, 'I don't know, Christopher. I don't know because I don't know anything about Mr Shears.'

I said, 'Mr Shears used to be married to Mrs Shears and he left her, like in a divorce. But I don't know if they were actually divorced.'

And Siobhan said, 'Well, Mrs Shears is a friend of yours, isn't she? A friend of you and your father. So perhaps your father doesn't like Mr Shears because he left Mrs Shears. Because he did something bad to someone who is a friend.'

And I said, 'But Father says Mrs Shears isn't a friend of ours any more.'

And Siobhan said, 'I'm sorry Christopher. I wish I could answer all these questions, but I simply don't know.'

Then the bell went for the end of school.

The next day I saw 4 yellow cars in a row on the way to school which made it a **Black Day** so I didn't eat anything at lunch and I sat in the corner of the room all day and read my A level Maths course book. And the next day, too, I saw 4 yellow cars in a row on the way to school which made it another **Black Day** too, so I didn't speak to anyone and for the whole afternoon I sat in the corner of the Library groaning with my head pressed into the join between the two walls and this made me feel calm and safe. But on the third day I kept my eyes closed all the way to school until we got off the bus because after I have had 2 **Black Days** in a row I'm allowed to do that.

But it wasn't the end of the book because five days later I saw 5 red cars in a row which made it a **Super Good Day** and I knew that something special was going to happen. Nothing special happened at school so I knew something special was going to happen after school. And when I got home I went down to the shop at the end of our road to buy some liquorice laces and a Milky Bar with my pocket money.

And when I had bought my liquorice laces and a Milky Bar I turned round and saw Mrs Alexander, the old lady from number 39, who was in the shop as well. She wasn't wearing jeans now. She was wearing a dress like a normal old lady. And she smelt of cooking.

She said, 'What happened to you the other day?'

I asked, 'Which day?'

And she said, 'I came out again and you'd gone. I had to eat all the biscuits myself.'

I said, 'I went away.'

And she said, 'I gathered that.'

I said, 'I thought you might ring the police.'

And she said, 'Why on earth would I do that?'

And I said, 'Because I was poking my nose into other people's business and Father said I shouldn't investigate who killed Wellington. And a policeman gave me a caution and if I get into trouble again it will be a lot worse because of the caution.'

Then the Indian lady behind the counter said to Mrs

Alexander, 'Can I help you?' and Mrs Alexander said she'd like a pint of milk and a packet of Jaffa Cakes and I went out of the shop.

When I was outside the shop I saw that Mrs Alexander's Dachshund was sitting on the pavement. It was wearing a little coat made out of Tartan material which is Scottish and check. She had tied its lead to the drainpipe next to the door. I like dogs, so I bent down and I said hello to her dog and it licked my hand. Its tongue was rough and wet and it liked the smell on my trousers and started sniffing them.

Then Mrs Alexander came outside and said, 'His name is Ivor.' I didn't say anything.

And Mrs Alexander said, 'You're very shy, aren't you, Christopher?'

And I said, 'I'm not allowed to talk to you.'

And she said, 'Don't worry. I'm not going to tell the police and I'm not going to tell your father because there's nothing wrong with having a chat. Having a chat is just being friendly, isn't it?'

I said, 'I can't do chatting.'

Then she said, 'Do you like computers?'

And I said, 'Yes. I like computers. I have a computer at home in my bedroom.'

And she said, 'I know. I can see you sitting at your computer in your bedroom sometimes when I look across the street.'

Then she untied Ivor's lead from the drainpipe.

I wasn't going to say anything because I didn't want to get into trouble.

Then I thought that this was a **Super Good Day** and some-

thing special hadn't happened yet so it was possible that talking to Mrs Alexander was the special thing that was going to happen. And I thought that she might tell me something about Wellington or about Mr Shears without me asking her, so that wouldn't be breaking my promise.

So I said, 'And I like maths and looking after Toby. And also I like outer space and I like being on my own.'

And she said, 'I bet you're very good at maths, aren't you?'

And I said, 'I am. I'm going to do my A level Maths next month. And I'm going to get an A grade.'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Really? A level Maths?'

I replied, 'Yes. I don't tell lies.'

And she said, 'I apologise. I didn't mean to suggest that you were lying. I just wondered if I heard you correctly. I'm a little deaf sometimes.'

And I said, 'I remember. You told me.' And then I said, 'I'm the first person to do an A level from my school because it's a special school.'

And she said, 'Well, I am very impressed. And I hope you do get an A.'

And I said, 'I will.'

Then she said, 'And the other thing I know about you is that your favourite colour is not yellow.'

And I said, 'No. And it's not brown either. My favourite colour is red. And metal colour.'

Then Ivor did a poo and Mrs Alexander picked it up with her hand inside a little plastic bag and then she turned the plastic bag

inside out and tied a knot in the top so that the poo was all sealed up and she didn't touch the poo with her hands.

And then I did some reasoning. I reasoned that father had only made me do a promise about five things which were

1. Not to mention Mr Shears' name in our house.
2. Not to go asking Mrs Shears about who killed that bloody dog.
3. Not to go asking anyone about who killed that bloody dog.
4. Not to go trespassing in other people's gardens.
5. To stop this ridiculous bloody detective game.

And asking about Mr Shears wasn't any of these things. And if you are a detective you have to *Take Risks* and this was a **Super Good Day** which meant it was a good day for *Taking Risks*, so I said, 'Do you know Mr Shears?' which was like chatting.

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Not really, no. I mean, I knew him well enough to say hello and talk to a little in the street, but I didn't know much about him. I think he worked in a bank. The National Westminster. In town.'

And I said, 'Father says that he is an evil man. Do you know why he said that? Is Mr Shears an evil man?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Why are you asking me about Mr Shears, Christopher?'

I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be investigating Wellington's murder and that was the reason I was asking about Mr Shears.

But Mrs Alexander said, 'Is this about Wellington?'

And I nodded because that didn't count as being a detective.

Mrs Alexander didn't say anything. She walked to the little red box on a pole next to the gate to the park and she put Ivor's poo into the box, which was a brown thing inside a red thing which made my head feel funny so I didn't look. Then she walked back to me.

She sucked in a big breath and said, 'Perhaps it would be best not to talk about these things, Christopher.'

And I asked, 'Why not?'

And she said, 'Because.' Then she stopped and decided to start saying a different sentence. 'Because maybe your father is right and you shouldn't go around asking questions about this.'

And I asked, 'Why?'

And she said, 'Because obviously he is going to find it quite upsetting.'

And I said, 'Why is he going to find it upsetting?'

Then she sucked in another big breath and said, 'Because . . . because I think you know why your father doesn't like Mr Shears very much.'

Then I asked, 'Did Mr Shears kill Mother?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Kill her?'

And I said, 'Yes. Did he kill Mother?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'No. No. Of course he didn't kill your mother.'

And I said, 'But did he give her stress so that she died of a heart attack?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'I honestly don't know what you're talking about, Christopher.'

And I said, 'Or did he hurt her so that she had to go into hospital?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Did she have to go into hospital?'

And I said, 'Yes. And it wasn't very serious at first, but she had a heart attack when she was in hospital.'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Oh my goodness.'

I said, 'And she died.'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Oh my goodness,' again, and then she said, 'Oh Christopher, I am so, so sorry. I never realised.'

Then I asked her, 'Why did you say, "I think you know why your father doesn't like Mr Shears very much"?''

Mrs Alexander put her hand over her mouth and said, 'Oh dear, dear, dear.' But she didn't answer my question.

So I asked her the same question again, because in a murder mystery novel when someone doesn't want to answer a question it is because they are trying to keep a secret or trying to stop someone getting into trouble, which means that the answers to those questions are the most important answers of all, and that is why the detective has to put that person under pressure.

But Mrs Alexander still didn't answer. Instead she asked me a question. She said, 'So you don't know?'

And I said, 'Don't know what?'

She replied, 'Christopher, look, I probably shouldn't be telling you this.' Then she said, 'Perhaps we should take a little walk in the

park together. This is not the place to be talking about this kind of thing.'

I was nervous. I did not know Mrs Alexander. I knew that she was an old lady and that she liked dogs. But she was a stranger. And I never go into the park on my own because it is dangerous and people inject drugs behind the public toilets in the corner. I wanted to go home and go up to my room and feed Toby and practise some maths.

But I was excited, too. Because I thought she might tell me a secret. And the secret might be about who killed Wellington. Or about Mr Shears. And if she did that I might have more evidence against him, or be able to *Exclude Him From My Investigations*.

So because it was a **Super Good Day** I decided to walk into the park with Mrs Alexander even though it scared me.

When we were inside the park Mrs Alexander stopped walking and said, 'I am going to say something to you and you must promise not to tell your father that I told you this.'

I asked, 'Why?'

And she said, 'I shouldn't have said what I said. And if I don't explain, you'll carry on wondering what I meant. And you might ask your father. And I don't want you to do that because I don't want you to upset him. So I'm going to explain why I said what I said. But before I do that you have to promise not to tell anyone I said this to you.'

I asked, 'Why?'

And she said, 'Christopher, please, just trust me.'

And I said, 'I promise.' Because if Mrs Alexander told me who

killed Wellington, or she told me that Mr Shears had really killed Mother, I could still go to the police and tell them because you are allowed to break a promise if someone has committed a crime and you know about it.

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Your mother, before she died, was very good friends with Mr Shears.'

And I said, 'I know.'

And she said, 'No, Christopher. I'm not sure that you do. I mean that they were very good friends. Very, very good friends.'

I thought about this for a while and said, 'Do you mean that they were doing sex?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Yes, Christopher. That is what I mean.'

Then she didn't say anything for about 30 seconds.

Then she said, 'I'm sorry, Christopher. I really didn't mean to say anything that was going to upset you. But I wanted to explain. Why I said what I said. You see, I thought you knew. That's why your father thinks that Mr Shears is an evil man. And that will be why he doesn't want you going around talking to people about Mr Shears. Because that will bring back bad memories.'

And I said, 'Was that why Mr Shears left Mrs Shears, because he was doing sex with someone else when he was married to Mrs Shears?'

And Mrs Alexander said, 'Yes, I expect so.'

Then she said, 'I'm sorry, Christopher. I really am.'

And I said, 'I think I should go now.'

And she said, 'Are you OK, Christopher?'

And I said, 'I'm scared of being in the park with you because you're a stranger.'

And she said, 'I'm not a stranger, Christopher, I'm a friend.'

And I said, 'I'm going to go home now.'

And she said, 'If you want to talk about this you can come and see me any time you want. You only have to knock on my door.'

And I said, 'OK.'

And she said, 'Christopher?'

And I said, 'What?'

And she said, 'You won't tell your father about this conversation, will you?'

And I said, 'No. I promised.'

And she said, 'You go on home. And remember what I said. Any time.'

Then I went home.