

Facing East

From here on the ground, I am eye-to-eye with a great grandfather snail. I know that snails have been alive since before the dinosaurs all died and so this one must be a million years old. The snail is climbing an ear of corn; I don't know where it is going.

If I roll my head over to one side then I can cover the sun up with the snail's shell and it glows with a gold halo. What will it do when it reaches the top? Will it just come back down the other side or will it fly?

I wonder where the others are? I wonder if any of them are up yet or whether they are still counting? I am going to be last if it kills me. I am not the oldest, but I count slower than they do.

I can already hear it coming through the corn.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

You have to count the years first. You start with the year you were born and then say every year until the year it is now.

1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990.

But you can't get up yet. I know because I started this. It was never supposed to be a game; it was just something I would do every Saturday morning when my parents thought I was out on a bike ride or fishing with friends. Matthew Hardy found me one day and made me tell him why I was hiding in the corn. So now they all play.

Except Matthew.

Matthew doesn't play any more because he is no longer around. I can hear it louder now.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

I think it started over my side.

Once I get to 1990, which it is now, then I have to say all the months until this one.

January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September.

I saw my dad watching TV once and there were people lying in front of diggers and the diggers couldn't move. I think they had to use a huge crane, the biggest one in this country, to move the people so that the diggers could move again. And another time there was a boy, a big boy who lived far away, who stood in the middle of the road and every tank in the army couldn't drive or fire its guns. I don't know how they moved that boy. It must have been five cranes.

But you don't have to count the days in the month; none of us can ever remember what the number is of that. Matthew, when he used to be around, always made us do it, but I don't think anyone did. I just made it up and counted to ten.

I can feel the ground trembling now like a huge, hungry belly.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

But you have to know what day it is. It's usually Saturday anyway.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

Now I can get up and run to the end of the field.

But I won't.

I want to see what the snail will do when it reaches the top of the corn.

I've never seen one fly.

I wonder what Matthew is doing? I wonder whether he can hear it coming from where he is now.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

He used to pick on me a bit sometimes, but only when he was cross because of home. When he wasn't bad, he always made me laugh. If he wasn't the last one up, he'd always find my fishing rod from my bag and try to fish the last ones out.

I wish he hadn't gone away to the city. He said his dad's job had moved to the city, but how can a job move off and leave a person behind? My dad is a postman; if his job moved to another town then all the letters would get put through the wrong doors and he would get into trouble again.

The others must be up by now.

I start to stand up and then realise that today is not Saturday, it's Sunday.

I lie down again.

Should I start from 1983 again or just do the days?

I want to be last up, but I don't want to let it get too close.

The snail has gone. Did I miss it flying off?

I'll start from just the days; no one will know.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

Now I can get up again.

I stand up and turn to see a swirling cloud of corn stalks being grabbed by the frantic monster. I have never stood this close and it is huge. The dust from its whizzing, spinning mouth is stinging my eyes and so I close them, still mesmerised by the sight of it coming burnt onto my eyes in drifting pink.

Chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff chaff.

And then the monster grunts and makes a squeaky noise that hurts my ears.

Then silence.

I open my eyes and blink back a few stray pieces of corn dust wafting about me. The monster has come to a halt and I have stopped it. Just like the people who stop diggers, just like the big boy who stood in the road and made all the tanks not work.

A man has appeared from behind the monster and is shouting, but I am not listening to him. I am staring into the monster's sleeping mouth.

They will need seven cranes to move me.

And when they lift me up, I'll be flying.

I might be able to see Matthew from up in the sky.

I might find that snail.



Facing East is featured in *Interactions*, a beautifully illustrated collection of short stories and poems on sale to highlight and support the work InterAct Reading Service.

The hardback book features a rich array of stories which have been read aloud to many patients in stroke recovery, through InterAct Reading Service. *Interactions* showcases the finest of these stories; alongside specially commissioned works as well as unique stories gifted to the organisation by distinguished writers.

These remarkable and varied pieces have stimulated the minds of thousands of stroke patients across the UK, and encouraged the patients' own creativity, the result of which is also featured in this collection. This special edition enables these wonderful stories to be shared with a wider audience, and gives an insight into the inspiring work of InterAct Reading Service.

The book features work by; Ruth Rendell, Toby Young, Neil Dunn, Seamus Heaney, Alan Ayckbourn, Max Stafford-Clark, Lolita Chakrabarti, Alan McCormick, Christian Cook, Adrian Henri, Emily Pedder, Vicky Paine, Pete Barrett.

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