

## Chapter 1. #Awkward Silence

I was first diagnosed as Officially Weird two years ago, when I was nine years old. But actually, I had been Unofficially Weird for a long time before that. My parents must have suspected it too, because we were all in Dr Langley's surgery and everyone was staring at me. Dr Langley said, "I would just like you to say your name," which I thought was extremely weird considering she had been our family doctor since like for ever, and if she didn't know my name by now then who did she think it was showing up to my appointments?

So Dr Langley was staring at me and my parents were staring at me too and even though I can speak, something always happens to the words in my head in Certain Situations Like This One, which is sometimes they Disappear Completely.

Or too many words come into my head at once and they get into a Massive Muddle so I can't say any of them.

Or sometimes I know exactly what I want to say, but the words get stuck somewhere and I can't get them out.

And when it's Really Bad, it feels like my lips have actually been superglued together.

So when these things happen (and they happen a lot) I can't speak. Not even one word.

And that's what happened in the doctor's with everybody staring at me, but also it happens when I'm around people I don't know (and a lot of the people I do know) even if they aren't all staring at me. And up until this appointment with Dr Langley, my parents thought I was just Painfully Shy and would grow out of it. In fact, that's what everyone thought.

(Apart from me.)

Because I had known for a long time – pretty much my whole life actually – that if I can only speak normally to about four people in the whole entire world, that's not being *Painfully Shy*, that's being Something Else.

So there I was, nine years old, feeling like I must be from another planet or something because I wanted to tell Dr Langley everything, but I couldn't say even one word. And everything I wanted to tell her got stuck inside my head. Like how I'd never spoken normally in front of anyone apart from my parents and my little brother and our next-door neighbour Mrs Quinney.

And how much I hated school because I couldn't speak to anyone, apart from sometimes very quietly to the teaching assistant Mrs Palmer (but only if no one else was there). And how my teacher Mrs Long used to roll her eyes whenever I couldn't get my words out. And how she would put a big list of questions on the board and go round the class one by one, and before she even said my name a massive ball of panic would rise up from my tummy to my throat to inside my head.

How she would point at me and say, "What's the answer to number three, please?" And even though I knew the answer, I could never say it because it was like someone had taken a pair of scissors from the wooden block on the window sill and chopped my voice out. So I would sit there, petrified, looking at the floor, with Mrs Long repeating my name and clicking her fingers saying, "I *know* you know the answer! Just say it!"

And I wished there was some way for me to disappear like Alice down the rabbit hole. But classrooms don't have rabbit holes, so I had to sit there with the ball of panic inside my head, wondering why I can't be like everybody else and Just Say It.

Whenever my parents went into school, all my teachers would say the

exact same thing: “I’m afraid she is just so *Painfully Shy!*” But then Mrs Long retired and we got Miss Castillo. On her first day she took the register, and when she called my name Phillip Day shouted out, “She doesn’t speak, Miss,” like it was The Most Normal Weird Thing in our class ever. Only clearly Miss Castillo didn’t think so, because she called my parents in for a special meeting. And after that they took me to see Dr Langley.

So that’s why I was sitting in her room not able to say anything, not even an easy thing like my own name. (Which is Rosalind, by the way, but obviously everyone already knew that.) And my little brother, Seb, kept wandering around pulling his pants down and up (which I thought was a much weirder thing to do in front of people than not speak). But Mum said nothing about that and said, “Why is she so shy, doctor? Why won’t she speak to people?”

And everyone stared at me again, puzzled, like they were sharing the room with some kind of alien species. I just went bright red and stared at my shoes. (I do this a lot.)

So it was me who got the “I’m afraid there is Definitely Something Wrong With Her” diagnosis, and my little brother who got the *I’m Brave!* sticker. It turns out that if you can’t even say your own name in front of Dr Langley then you haven’t been brave enough to get a sticker, but repeatedly flashing your six-year-old bare bum at everyone seems to nail it. If Dr Langley had *I’m Weird!* stickers, she would probably have given me one of those. But considering I already felt like I’d been wearing one my whole life, I didn’t exactly need it.

She didn’t say what was wrong with me, only that it wasn’t Painful Shyness and if I was going to grow out of it I would have done it already. A bit like Seb always talking about dinosaurs and poo (which he’s never grown out of actually, but Dad said that’s more of a personality issue). My weirdness is more serious, apparently.

So we left Dr Langley's room that day in a Totally Awkward Silence, and maybe all a bit disappointed that she didn't have some kind of special medicine to make my voice appear whenever I wanted it to. But Dad held my hand, and I carried on staring at my shoes the whole way out.

In the car on the way home Seb was going on about the biggest-ever dinosaur fossil that had just been discovered in Argentina. It had a special name but I can't remember what it was. I was too busy worrying about other words I'd heard for the first time that morning that I didn't understand, like *disorder* and *hyper-sensitivity* and *psychologist* and *anxiety*. They flickered in my head as trees and houses and pavements scrolled past the window, and big raindrops ran down distorting everything. And I wondered, if I'm not Just Painfully Shy, or Totally Weird, or An Actual Alien –

What am I?