

WORDS FROM THE WISE

Northwick didn't know what the fuss was about. He had nystagmus. His eyes wobbled. He didn't see so well. That's what he told people if they asked (and sometimes if they didn't). If they wanted to know more than that he'd pass them on to Frank's parents.

"So," said Northwick, fixing Grandpa with a wobbly stare, "why don't you like telling other people that Frank and I have bad eyes and can't see very well?"

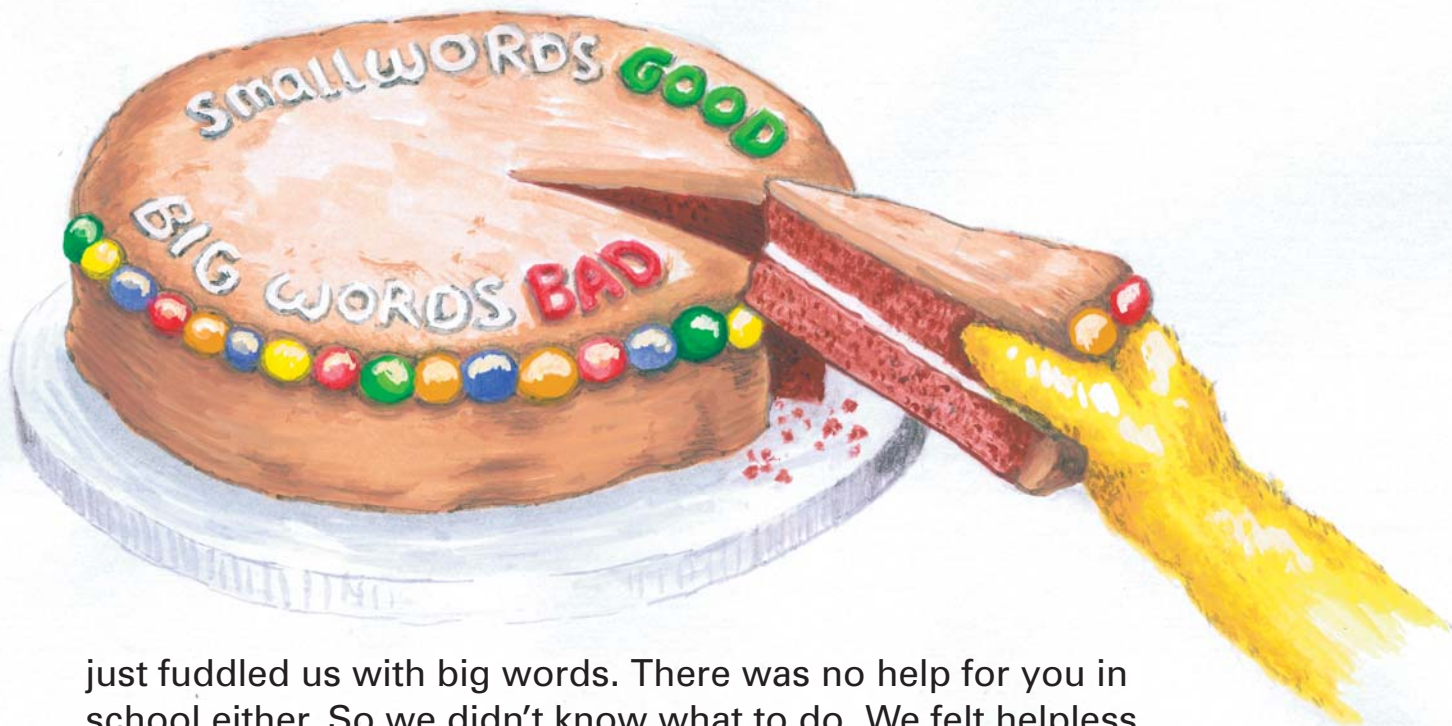
"Uuuuuhhhhhh," said Grandpa, not knowing where to look. It was one of the longest uuuuuhhhhhhs Northwick and Frank had ever heard. Grandpa gulped and followed his first uuuuuhhhhhh with what was probably an even longer "uuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhhhhh".

Fortunately for Grandpa, Uncle Chris came to the rescue. "Last century, when Grandpa grew up, things were different. People didn't like talking about stuff like this. He never told anyone I had nystagmus if he could avoid it. He was embarrassed that I wouldn't be able to drive. And back then he didn't understand why glasses didn't fix it."

Grandpa spluttered, but didn't say anything, so with a little chuckle Uncle Chris continued: "Don't worry, Gramps. It wasn't your fault. That's the way things were then. Some people are still like that today. At least you'll talk to us about nystagmus now and you know why glasses don't fix it."

Fuddlesticks

Grandpa fiddled nervously with the tassels on his armchair. "You're right it was different – and very difficult – in those days. I don't think doctors had any idea how nystagmus affected you. But they didn't tell us that. They



just fuddled us with big words. There was no help for you in school either. So we didn't know what to do. We felt helpless ourselves."

Frank had been listening intently to this conversation. It was hard to imagine a time when there was no help in school, let alone when people didn't talk about nystagmus. Uncle Chris and his parents had always been willing to tell him and Northwick what they knew about nystagmus.

If there were things his parents didn't know they would ask Amy the orthoptist on one of their regular visits to the eye hospital. Ben, the high street optometrist, was very helpful at explaining nystagmus too. And then of course Ms Bree, Frank's support teacher, was there in school.

Ms Bree had helped Frank talk about his wobbly eyes to his classmates. That had been really good. Frank hadn't realised how many questions his friends had about his eyes: Why did they wobble? Was there a cure? Did it hurt? Did he see the world moving? Did it help when he turned his head? What could they do to help?

Some questions Frank had answered with ease. Ms Bree stepped in to help with others. Sometimes she said there no simple answers. But his classmates said Frank's talk was fascinating and they were so glad he'd explained nystagmus to them. His best friends said they would now be able to help him even more.

Talking helps

"I'm glad we don't live in the olden days Grandpa. It sounds horrible then," said Frank, coming back to the present. Then he added: "It's not always easy for me talking about nystagmus either. But I know that if I do, it's usually better for me. Ms Bree told me that most of the problems she sees with nystagmus are to do with people not talking about it."

Grandpa smiled. "Ms Bree sounds very wise. I wish she'd been around when Uncle Chris was your age. I'm sure she'd have been a big help. But from now on I will do my best to follow your advice. I especially like the way Northwick explains nystagmus as bad eyes and not seeing very well. Nice and simple. No big words needed."

Northwick looked very pleased with himself. Puffing out his waistcoat covered chest, the bear said: "I would like to make one other very good suggestion today. After all this talking, I think it's probably time for cake!"