

A PROBLEM CHEWED

“It was the horrible things,” Frank told Northwick as they sat at the kitchen table surrounded by colouring-in books, crayons and pencils. “That’s when I first knew my eyes were special, but not in a good way. They were what I call ‘bad special’. But I’ve never told anyone else that. Not even mum or dad.”

For a reason Northwick couldn’t understand he suddenly felt much lighter – not an easy thing for a bear with a fondness for cake. “I know what you mean by bad special. It was horrible when people asked me why I looked at their ears when they were talking to me.”

That reminded Frank of similar unhappy experiences. “Until other children asked me why I turned my head to look at things, I didn’t know I was doing it. Some of them even made fun of me. They turned their heads and laughed at me.”

Northwick sighed and absent-mindedly chewed on a red pencil. “And then there were the things in the sky that people pointed at, but I couldn’t see. Like birds and planes and balloons and kites and rainbows. Or worst of all telling me to go and help myself to cake when I couldn’t see where the cake was.”

Horrible hurts

Frank sharpened a yellow pencil. He wasn’t sure whether to be happy or sad. He was happy that the horrible things didn’t only happen to him. But he was sad they happened to Northwick too. Because he knew that the horrible things would upset his friend just like they upset him.

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But Frank thought it helped to share the horrible things. So he told Northwick about the angry supply teacher who shouted at him not to get so close to the page when he was reading and writing. "I didn't know what to say. I wasn't close. I was where I need to be to see."

"And in the playground it's hard to find my friends when everyone is running about," said Frank, looking away before adding quietly: "And I know I'm no good at ball games because of my eyes. But no-one says so. They just don't pick me for their team. Or pick me last. That makes me very ..." his bottom lip quivered as he searched for the right words "... very sort of sad and angry at the same time. If you know what I mean."

Northwick did know what Frank meant. That kind of thing happened to him a lot too. Sometimes he mistook people and called them by the wrong name. And people in shops were forever telling him not to pick things up. But if he didn't pick them up he couldn't see them properly.

Frank said he often wasn't allowed to get close enough to see things either: in school assembly for instance. And other children could find things in the classroom much quicker than he could. And he could never see what was for lunch in the school canteen.

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That reminded Northwick of when they went ten pin bowling on Frank's birthday. "We couldn't see the scoreboard or how many skittles we'd knocked down. Your mum and dad were very good at telling us what was going on. But why aren't things bigger so we can read them too?"

Frank nodded and picked up a green pencil to colour in some cows. He said it was annoying that the world seemed so often to ignore them. "We're always being left out. Sometimes it's like I don't matter. I'm not important. I don't think people realise how much that hurts you and me."

Multi muddles

Northwick ruffled his nose, stroked his chin and chewed the red pencil again. Although red was his favourite colour, the pencil did not taste very nice. Frank wasn't sure whether his friend was thinking hard or was feeling hungry – or possibly both at the same time. He had heard that bears were quite good at doing two things at once. But you never could tell with Northwick.

At last Northwick spoke and Frank realised the bear had been thinking very big thoughts indeed. "Perhaps," said Northwick slowly, "just perhaps, from now on we should tell people when we can't see things. Especially if we feel upset or angry or what's that big word? frusty? crusty?"

Frank searched through the words in his head until he found the one he thought Northwick was looking for: "Do you mean frustrated?"

"Frustrated! Yes, that is precisely the word I want!" exclaimed Northwick. "Anyway, I've been thinking that if we can't see things maybe we should tell people. It seems to me that most people don't know when we can't see things. And that causes all sorts of problems – for them as well as for us."

Frank liked Northwick's idea a lot. He was fed up of how the horrible things made his life miserable and led to all manner of muddles, mistakes and misunderstandings. If simply telling people when he and Northwick couldn't see something helped, then he was all for it.

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Northwick felt pleased with his very good idea too, but warned Frank that it would not fix everything. Like the silly teacher who didn't understand that Frank needed to get close to see small print. And Northwick also pointed out that, "there are times when we don't know we can't see things that are obvious to other people."

Frank held his head in his hands. "This is getting very complicated. Let's stick with your idea of telling people when we know we can't see things and see how that works." He paused and then added: "But right now, all this thinking is making me hungry, so you must be ravenous."

Northwick ruffled his nose, stroked his chin and examined the much chewed red pencil. "Now you come to mention it, this pencil is hardly bear food."