

The Chatterbox

Morgan turned
in her seat.

“Did you
know it’s
impossible
to sneeze with
your eyes open?”

she said to Danny
behind her. “Last night I
kept sneezing, and my eyes shut
every time. Weird. They just shut.”

Danny stared at his worksheet, trying to remember the difference between a synonym and an antonym. “Quiet, Morgan!” he snarled. “Turn around! Stop bugging me!”

Morgan leaned forward and peered over Kate’s shoulder. “Did you know there’s only one spot in the United States where four states touch?” she said. “Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. I checked a map last night. Weird. That’s the only spot where four states come together.”



“Shhhhh,” hissed Kate. “Leave me alone.”

Morgan turned left to tell Gabrielle why stars twinkle at night and planets don’t. Then she turned right to tell Hari about the car painted with zebra stripes that she spotted on the way to school. Each time she received the same shushes and sour looks. She ended up talking to her desktop. “Why doesn’t anyone want to talk to me? No one even likes me.”

In the front of the classroom the tall teacher sat behind his large metal desk. He looked up at the clock above the green blackboard and announced, “Lunchtime, class. Let’s get our lunches and make a straight line at the door.”

Swoosh! The third-graders rushed to the coat closet, grabbed their lunchboxes, and formed a Z-shaped line at the door.

Morgan stood behind Richard. “Did you know there once was a lady who ate chicken at every meal, and she died?” she told him. “That’s the only thing she ever ate, chicken. I guess she didn’t get enough vitamins and minerals and stuff, so she died.”



Morgan turned around and said to George, “Have you noticed that the teacher’s ears turn red whenever he gets mad? Weird. You can always tell when he’s mad because his ears turn red.”

“Motormouth Morgan. Gab, gab, gab. Yakety-



yak-yak. Blah, blah, blah,” her classmates said as they filed from the room. But Morgan didn’t hear them. She was too busy chatting.

The gym at W. T. Melon Elementary School served as the P.E. room, the assembly room, and the room where classes put on plays. Now tables and benches stuck out from the walls and the gym became the lunchroom, complete with flying straw wrappers, popping sandwich bags, and the smell of spaghetti.

Morgan sat at the third-grade table next to Kate and Mimi. “Did you know a hard-boiled egg will explode in a microwave oven?” she said. “Last night I proved it. Pow! The egg blew up all right, and I had to spend my entire TV time scrubbing the inside of our microwave.”

Scooch, scooch, scooch. Kate and Mimi slid down the bench.

Left alone, Morgan looked toward the two girls. “No one wants to talk with me,” she repeated. “No one even likes me.”



Finally Morgan turned her attention to lunch. For the first time she noticed something different about her lunchbox. The red plastic box plastered with stickers was the same one she carried every day to school. But now on the lid, printed in silver glitter, were two words:



MORGAN'S CHATTERBOX

“Weird,” Morgan muttered.

She flipped the latch and opened the lid. Inside, next to a baloney sandwich and a hard-boiled egg, she found a calculator. Underneath was a card that read:

Win! Win! Win!

Play the Chatterbox Game!

Fabulous Prize!

Say under 100 words today, and you're the winner!

For once Morgan was speechless. She inspected the calculator and pushed the ON button. Nothing happened.





“Busted,” she muttered.

As she spoke, however, a **1** appeared on the liquid-crystal display.

“Weird.”

And a **2** appeared.

“Real weird.”

3 ... 4

“It’s counting my words,” she said.

5 ... 6 ... 7 ... 8

“Hello? Hello?”

9 ... 10

Morgan reread the card. Now I know how to play the Chatterbox Game, she said in her head, careful not to speak out loud. This calculator counts my words. Again she checked the card. If I say fewer than one hundred words, I’ll win a prize. Cinch! One hundred words are a lot of words.

“It’s a deal, Chatterbox,” she said to her lunchbox.

11 ... 12 ... 13 ... 14

Morgan slapped her hand over her mouth. Two and a half hours remained before school was out. She wouldn’t waste one more word.

Back in the classroom Morgan placed the calculator in the pencil groove on her desktop. She ran pinched fingers across her lips to show they were zipped shut.

Up front the tall teacher held a twig with a crinkled gray sack attached. “This is a cocoon, class,” he



said. “For science today we’ll talk about the life cycle of the butterfly.”

From the fourth row came a voice. “Caterpillars spin cocoons. I find caterpillars all the time in my backyard. They look like little mustaches crawling on leaves. I once saw a boy eat a caterpillar. Weird.”

Morgan was at it again. She prattled on about caterpillars until the teacher, his ears glowing red, cut her off with a sharp “Thank you, Morgan.”

Morgan’s jaws snapped shut. She stared at the 90 on the calculator display. “Only ten words left,” she said.

91 ... 92 ... 93 ... 94

“Geez,” Morgan muttered.

95

“Hey, that’s not a word.”

100 ... 100 ... 100 ... flashed the screen before going blank.

Morgan frowned. “Oh, well, I lost the Chatterbox Game,” she told herself. “But at least I got to tell the class what I know about caterpillars.”

The next morning the Chatterbox was far from Morgan’s mind as she walked to school. She swung her lunchbox in her hand. At the corner she met Mimi and Kate.

“Did you know there are no words that rhyme with orange?” she told them. “Porange? Gorange? Morange? Nope. There’s not one word that rhymes with orange.”

The crossing guard held up her stop sign. The



moment she stepped into the yellow crosswalk, Mimi and Kate hurried across the street.

Morgan crossed alone. “No one wants to talk with me,” she said again. “Why doesn’t anyone like me?”

As she continued on to school, Morgan thought about the things she would tell her classmates that morning. She was crossing the playground when something peculiar happened. Her lunchbox began to vibrate, sending shivers up her arm. She held the box to her ear. From inside came a buzz, the sound of a hundred people chattering at once.

Morgan turned the lunchbox around. More silver words appeared on the lid:

MORGAN’S CHATTERBOX II

“Maybe, just maybe, there’ll be another game today!” she said to herself.

She opened the lid. This time, a digital watch with a blank face lay next to her baloney sandwich. Another card read:

Win! Win!

Play the Chatterbox Game Again!

Say under 100 words, and win a prize!

“Testing,” Morgan said to the watch. When a **!** appeared on the screen, she twisted her fingers on her lips to lock them shut. Not another word would come out of her mouth for the rest of the day.



That morning Morgan had no trouble keeping quiet.

“Would you like to clean the chalk erasers, Morgan?” the tall teacher asked after taking attendance.

Morgan nodded.

“How much is eighteen divided by six?” Danny asked during math.

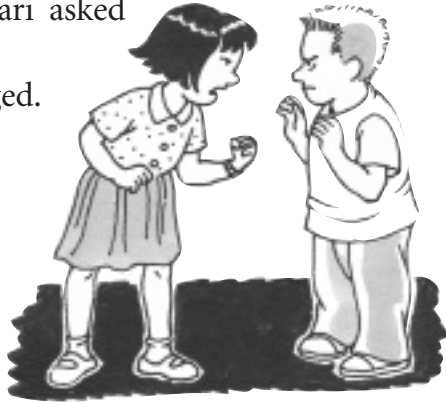
Morgan held up three fingers.

“What’s the homework assignment for tonight?” Hari asked before recess.

And Morgan shrugged.

On the playground, however, Richard dumped sand down Morgan’s back.

“You creep! Pick on someone your own size,” she shouted. “Oh, I for got, you’re so fat, no one else is your size.” That used twenty words, but she felt much better after saying them.



At lunchtime the watch showed **34**. Even when Mimi and Kate sat by her, Morgan kept quiet and listened.

“I’ll win the Chatterbox Game today for sure,” she told herself back in the classroom. “Mum’s the word.”

The tall teacher held up a jar. “This afternoon, class, we’ll examine pillbugs,” he said. “Does anyone know why we call these pillbugs?”

Morgan wriggled in her seat. Oh, how she wanted to answer! She was a pillbug expert. She could speak for an hour about pillbugs. She bit her tongue. She pounded her desktop with her fist. Finally her mouth burst open.

“Because they roll into a little pill if you touch them!” she blurted out.

Numbers blinked on the watch.

“Some people call them roly-polies,” Morgan jab-



bered on. “I find roly-polies under rocks all the time. I have roly-poly races, and I

once made a roly-poly village. I kept the village in a box under my bed, but my cat tipped it over, and my mom had a fit.”

The watch flashed 100 ... 100 ... 100.

Morgan sighed. “This Chatterbox Game is harder to win than I thought.”

The next morning it happened again. As Morgan walked across the playground, her lunchbox quivered in her hand. The babbling of voices came from within, and more silver words appeared on the lid:

MORGAN’S CHATTERBOX III

This time she found a hand-held video game lying next to her baloney sandwich. Another card read:



Last chance!
You can be a winner!
Remember, under 100 words!
A spectacular prize awaits you!

Today that Chatterbox wouldn't hear a peep out of her, Morgan decided. The cat would get her tongue, and she'd be as quiet as a mouse. With her lips squeezed tight, she marched up the school steps.

That morning Mimi asked Morgan if she could borrow a pencil.

"Sure," Morgan replied, and a **1** appeared on the video game screen.

Later Danny said to Morgan, "I found this cool set of teeth on my grandpa's nightstand. So I brought it in for Show and Tell."

"Weird," Morgan said, and the screen showed **2**.

At lunch Mimi demonstrated to Morgan how to make milk come out of her nose, and Kate told her about the time she ate poison ivy. "Yuck! Cool! Really?" was all Morgan said.

At one o'clock the video game screen read only **7**. "Today the Chatterbox Game prize is mine," she said to herself.

At the front of the room the tall teacher held up a shoebox. "In here are tiny silkworms," he said. "For the next two weeks we'll feed them mulberry leaves and watch them grow."

Throughout the lesson Morgan listened. To her surprise, she even learned something new about

silkworms. When the bell rang at the end of the day she checked the game screen. It flashed:

WINNER! WINNER! WINNER!

“I did it!” Morgan said aloud. But she didn’t search for the prize. Somehow she already knew what it was. When she fetched her lunchbox from the coat closet, she noticed that the silver glitter had vanished. Inside, she found only her half-eaten baloney sandwich.

“Morgan, come walk home with us,” Mimi called to her.

“If you step on a sidewalk crack you must kiss the cement,” said Kate.

Morgan nodded. She closed her lunchbox and followed the girls out the door.