

# THE MUTE BUTTON



When you stop talking, people start listening . . .

Ellie Irving

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## About the Book

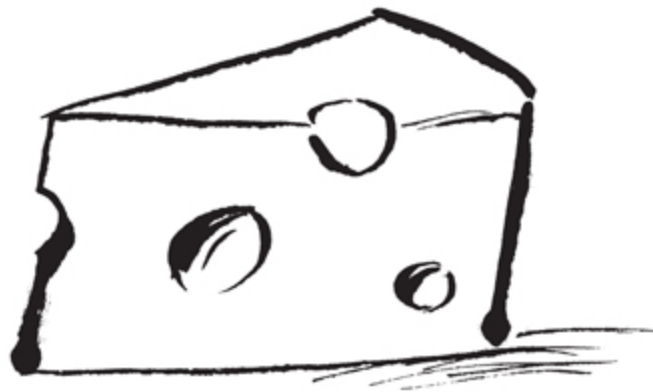
*How do you make yourself heard in the midst of chaos?*

Anthony Button loves his big family, but their noise can drive him crazy. And with the arrival of a brand-new older brother, it's worse than ever!

So Ant starts a silent protest to try and get everyone's attention. But now he's pressed the mute button, will he ever find his voice again?



# THE MUTE BUTTON



Ellie Irving

Cover and interior illustrations  
by Tony Ross

RHCP DIGITAL

For Barnaby Wilson Rutherford, he of few words. Yet.

## PERSONAL DETAILS

NAME: Anthony Button

AGE: 10 years, 2 months and 26 days old.

ADDRESS: 12 Conway Avenue, Furton Yarrow, Wiltshire  
a.k.a. 'Dullsville', a.k.a. 'The Zoo' POSTCODE: SN5

TELEPHONE: There's no point phoning us, 'cos Dad always answers with something stupid like 'Battersea Dogs' Home', or 'This is Bedlam, you don't have to be mad to live here, but it helps, ha ha ha.'

## MEDICAL

ALLERGIES: I'm not allergic to anything. Except my brothers and sisters. Jacob's allergic to dairy, which is ridiculous 'cos he can't have cheese. Imagine that! It's just one of the many things that's wrong with him.

BLOOD GROUP: I do have blood, yes, thank you. It's not currently in a group, though. Not like Robbie.

IN CASE OF ACCIDENT PLEASE NOTIFY: Sherlock Holmes.

Accident, my foot! It'll be one of my family, trying to off me for nicking their socks, or stealing the chocolate from their Advent calendar or accidentally shutting their finger in a door when they were going on at me for being a cheesy weirdo. You mark my words.



THURSDAY 10 JULY

5 p.m.

Today I am feeling like a Stinking Bishop cheese.

Make of that what you will.

If you'd asked me two days ago what it would have taken for me to start talking again, I'd have said:

- Two Xboxes. Of my own. Not to share with Robbie when he wants to play *Call of Duty*, or Susie when she wants to watch *Glee*, or Jacob when he wants to geek out on *Minecraft*.
- A trip to Disneyland. Even though I wouldn't have minded camping in Cornwall.
- A chef of my own, who'd cook me macaroni cheese and cheese on toast and cauliflower cheese and cheesecake and all things cheese all day long.
- A year's supply of Roquefort. It's a cheese.

But now. Well, now I'd talk till I'm blue in the face if it meant my family were here. Which is sort of a flaming miracle, actually, 'cos I've not spoken for fourteen whole days now. FOURTEEN DAYS! That's like an international world global record!

Still. I know they won't show up. Not after what I did.

I'm sitting on a bench on the school stage, with Samir Stamford and his imaginary friend Woody Wattler sitting next to me, looking out into the sea of mums and dads and grannies and aunts and second cousins twice removed, who are all here to see Year 5's Grand Presentation.

And everyone else's family is here, except mine.

All 'cos of this flaming journal.

This flaming journal that Dr Morley gave me, where I have to write down how I feel about stuff, if I won't say it out loud. About what makes me angry; what makes me want to keep on not talking.

Sheesh. Kebab.

I suppose I'd better start at the beginning then.

And I suppose, if I'm being completely honest, it all started when Dad found out he had another son.



WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE

Today I am feeling like a mouldy bit of Stilton.  
You know, the crusty bit round the edge that no one wants.

Seven o'clock and we're in the front room watching *Masterchef*. Well, Mum and Dad and Susie and Robbie and Jacob are watching it. I think it's the most boring show on earth. What's the point of watching someone else cook something for an hour if you don't ever get to eat it?

Mum and Dad are sitting on the sofa and Dad keeps swatting at my head with the remote control 'cos I keep ducking in front of the telly.

Let me explain about my family, in the form of a list. Mum's always making lists for stuff, writing on whatever she can get her hands on and leaving it lying around the house. Made for an interesting Christmas last year, when we all knew what we were getting 'cos she'd written her shopping list on a toilet roll in the loo.



1. Dad is called Phil. He is forty-two. He is tall and thin and doesn't like us to go on about his nose. He's a graphic designer. He likes Swindon Town FC and red wine and he says things like 'Incidentally,' and 'Can anyone remember what I came upstairs for?'
2. Mum's real name is Clare. She has short blonde hair. She didn't have any brothers or sisters growing up. She is studying to be an accountant, but that just means she'll sit at the kitchen table for an hour with her calculator and then call Jacob for help, 'cos he's a member of Mensa.
3. Robbie is fifteen and reckons he's the next will.i.am. He's sat on the other sofa by the window now, strumming his guitar. Though to be honest, the only song he knows is 'Hall of Fame' by The Script. And I don't know why he has to play it in here. Mum and Dad converted the garage into his bedroom so he and his mates can play their music and Mrs Taylor next door can't say, 'I'm going to report you to the council for noise pollution,' again. Robbie had a growth spurt last year so he's all lanky now, and he's always bumping into things, but that's 'cos Mum says he needs to cut his fringe.
4. Susie's an actress. You can tell 'cos she's sitting on the sofa next to Robbie pretending Gregg Wallace has just told her she's made the final. She gets all the best parts in her school plays, even though she's only Year 7. Susie's the only one in our family who's got red hair - everyone else is brown, like me, Dad and Robbie, or blond like Lucy, Jacob and Mum. Though to be fair, Dad's not got much hair left. Dad always laughs because the only other person we know with red hair is the milkman and he says, 'You know what they say about that.' (I don't, but I'm sure he'll tell me one day.)

5. Jacob's sitting on the carpet at the foot of the sofa, absorbed in a puzzle, like always. He's seven and brilliant at maths, but I've already gone over that. He has blue eyes which you can only just see behind his glasses, and he's properly scrawny and is lactose intolerant. And he plays the clarinet. So all in all he's an ideal candidate for 'Geek of the Year'. We have to share a room because we only live in a three-bedroom house (and a converted garage).
6. Then there's Badger, curled up in his basket in the corner of the room. He's our cat. He's a tabby and looks nothing like a badger 'cos he's white and brown all over, but Dad said it would be 'ironic'. *Moronic*, more like. Badger is six years old, which is forty-two in cat years, which is exactly the same age as ancient old Dad. But we're not sure if Badger's gonna make it to his next birthday, 'cos he's a bit suicidal. He sits out in the road, and doesn't budge when cars or buses or motorbikes zoom past.

I have a BIG family.

A big family who all want to watch *Masterchef*.

'Oh my God, this means everything to me,' I say, standing in front of the telly and copying what the contestants are doing. 'I knew I could make a soufflé, but this really takes the biscuit!'

Dad waves the remote control at me again. 'Sit down, Ant.'

I let out a puff of air and head into the kitchen, where I clatter around in the cupboard, pulling out a saucepan and a colander. I'll make my own *Masterchef* dish, I think, 'cos at least then I'd get to eat it. I fill the saucepan with water and place it on the hob, then reach into the cutlery drawer and pull out the box of matches. I strike one and watch as the flames dance down the match. I let it burn, almost

down to my fingers. 'Argh!' I give a little yelp 'cos it's so hot and throw the match onto the counter top.

Where it lands on a tea towel.

I watch with a mixture of horror and fascination as the match burns a hole in the corner of the tea towel, wisps of smoke rising from the counter.

At that moment, Dad strides in. 'What do you think you're doing?' He bustles to the sink and throws the smouldering tea towel in it. 'You could have set off the—'

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP . . .

'Who set off the fire alarm?' Mum's at the door, grabbing Susie's school jumper from the back of a kitchen chair and swatting at the ceiling. 'For heaven's sake, Anthony, you'll wake—'

'WAAAAAAAAAAH WAAAAAAAAAAH!'

A shrill, piercing scream rings out from upstairs. Lucy. Lucy is two and likes cuddles and watching *Peppa Pig* on TV. She always has food around her mouth. At this moment in time, she's in bed, asleep.

Least she was.

'That's all I need.' Mum shoves the jumper at Dad and heads upstairs to soothe her. 'Thanks, Ant.'

Like I said, I have a big family. A big, crazy, mad - and always mad at *me* - family.

It does my head in, truth be told.



## Thursday 26 June

Today I am feeling like Feta. It's all Greek to me.

Mr Reeve's word of the day: 'Exasperated.'

At school, I sit on Saturn table with Michael Hadley and Stacy Flack and Murphy. Murphy's my best friend, and he's properly funny. Think of the funniest person you know, then double it. Quadruple it. Times it by seventeen gazillion. He's going to be Michael McIntyre one day, mark my words.

While Mr Reeve's at the front of the class, trying to talk to us about equivalent fractions, Murphy reaches into his pocket and shows me a long piece of grass. 'It's a reed,' he whispers, and places his reed on the palm of one of his hands, clasps his hands closed like he's praying and brings them to his lips. 'Watch.'

Murphy waits for Mr Reeve to turn his back to the class. Eventually, Mr Reeve heads over to his desk in the corner of the room to pick up a marker pen, and at that moment Murphy blows loudly into his hands.

'Pffffffffft!'

A noise squeaks out – a half squelch, half farting sound. Me and Michael Hadley giggle. ‘That’s properly ace,’ I whisper.

As Mr Reeve heads back to the white board, Murphy blows into his hands again. ‘Pffft.’ Mr Reeve looks round, but we all stare back at him with our best innocent looks.

‘Let me try!’ I put the reed in my hands and wait for the right moment. Mr Reeve’s writing some boring old maths thing on the board, but then he takes a few steps back to look at his work. That’s my chance!

‘Pffft,’ I blow into my hands.

‘Pffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffft!’

The whole class hears it. Every table starts whispering to each other.

‘That was a good one!’ Murphy giggles.

I’m on a bit of a roll now, so I start blowing even harder. ‘Pffft!’

The whole class laughs at that, and I can’t stop grinning ‘cos it’s so funny and it’s me who’s made everyone laugh. Me! ‘Pffft!’ I time it so that whenever Mr Reeve moves his feet, it properly sounds like his shoes are squelching.

‘Pffft!’

But Mr Reeve happens to turn round at that very moment.

‘Anthony Button!’ he says, glaring at me. ‘Am I going to have to separate you and Mister Murphy? Again?’

He nods to Mrs Wintour, the teaching assistant, who gets up from Mercury table and moves me over to join her.

‘You’d have thought a bit of your brother’s mathematical genius would have rubbed off on you,’ Mrs Wintour huffs, but I don’t say anything at that. So for the rest of our numeracy lesson I have to sit with boring old Jemima and Alexandra and all they do is talk about horses. Blah!

School gets better at ten past three, because that’s when it finishes.

Murphy, Michael Hadley and me head over to the back of the field to play football while we wait for our mums, and Michael has to go in goal, 'cos he's not very good. Not like me. I'm quite brilliant at football, if I say so myself. Not Messi, or anything, but take today—

Mum's turned up and she's shouting at me that we're going to be late if I don't come THIS VERY SECOND, but this really mint thing happens where I ignore her and keep nudging the ball forward and I chip the ball in right over Michael's head.

'GOAL!!!!!!' Murphy shouts. 'GO ON, MY SON!' He slaps me on the shoulder and I can't stop beaming.

'Anthony!' Mum calls across the field. 'Get a move on! We can't be late for Ben.'

I let out a puff of air.

Ben. I forgot about Ben.

Ben's nineteen. He's not really my brother, or anything – he's just this guy Dad found out was his son a few weeks ago. But tonight's the night the rest of us are meeting him for the first time. We're going to Pizza Express, because Mum's got a voucher, and I already know I'm having the Padana pizza, which is Mozzarella *and* goat's cheese. It's dairy good. (That's a little cheese joke.) And it's pretty much the only good thing about all of this, if I'm honest.





Thursday 26 June

6.13 p.m.

Dad's super-stressed. He's wearing a tie, which he doesn't even have to do for work and so far he's said, 'Do I look all right?' to Mum exactly nine times. Mum didn't bother replying after four.

When we get to the restaurant and Dad says, 'Reservation for Button,' the waiter takes one look at us and says, 'We're gonna need a bigger table,' which is what most people say when they see us coming, because we're a bit like a circus troupe or a small army. The waiter gets a high chair and colouring book for Lucy, but she starts eating the purple crayon while we're all eating the breadsticks.

Dad checks his watch a million times, and slicks down his hair and bites his nails. Our table is all the way at the back of the restaurant, so every now and then Dad keeps standing up because he thinks he's seen Ben.

'That's a middle-aged woman,' Mum says the first time Dad stands up.

‘That’s an old man,’ Robbie says when Dad stands up the second time, knocking into the table and rattling all the cutlery.

‘That’s a pot plant,’ I say the third time, because this is getting ridiculous.

Mum leans over Lucy and gives Dad’s shoulder a squeeze. ‘He’ll be here soon enough, love,’ she says, but I can tell she’s just as nervous as Dad is.

Ten minutes later, we’re still waiting. Jacob’s taken out a Sudoku book and he’s quietly working away on ‘Extremely Challenging’, which is like ‘a Walk in the Park’ for him. Robbie’s drumming some beat on the table with his hands and Susie’s chair-dancing next to him. I’m pulling faces at Lucy, trying to make her giggle, when I get a genius idea to *properly* amuse her, and to make Dad laugh. I take two breadsticks and I shove them under my top lip.

‘I’m a walrus!’ I snarl, making out the breadsticks are like fangs, and I look around the table and everyone laughs along with me.

‘God, you’re such a geek,’ Robbie mutters under his breath, and he shifts his chair to make it look like he’s got nothing to do with this crazy bunch. The corners of Dad’s mouth twitch.

‘And I’m so hungry, I’m going to eat you up!’ I say, and I pounce on Lucy and pretend to nibble on her neck. Lucy screams with laughter and Mum shushes us, but she doesn’t mind too much. Then Lucy grabs one of the breadsticks and snaps it off. ‘Owwwww!’ I pretend to writhe around in agony. ‘That’s my tooth!’

Susie clutches her mouth and contorts her face in pain. ‘You do it more like *this*, actually,’ she says, screwing up her eyes, and it properly looks like someone’s punched her in the jaw.

‘Keep it down,’ Dad says, though he’s still looking across the restaurant and doesn’t really pay too much attention.

Lucy makes a grab for the other breadstick and I jolt back so she can't have it. But just as I'm jolting back, my arm knocks into the water jug, and before I can do anything it goes flying across the table and water spills everywhere . . .

Right over this tall man, who's standing at the edge of our table. The water splashes his trousers, runs all down his legs, and soaks the top of his belt. No one says anything for a moment. Then the tall man clears his throat.

'Um, Dad?' he says. It takes a second to work out what's going on, because this man's saying 'Um, Dad?' to *my dad*.

Dad leaps up from the table. 'Ben!' He sort of shakes himself and then opens his arms and leans in. At the same time, Ben holds out his hand and they have this awkward, half-hug, half-handshake moment.

'Nice to see you again,' he says to Dad.

Dad shakes his head at Ben's trousers. 'I'm so sorry,' he says, and he looks at me like he's going to *slaughter* me.

Ben runs his hand through his hair and wipes his big conk of a nose. 'That's all right,' he laughs. 'I *like* looking like I've wet myself.' He shrugs his suit jacket off and places it on the back of the chair and then sits down at the table, right next to me. 'Reminds me of being seven years old, all over again.' And he flashes this big grin at all of us.

Jacob looks over at him shyly and smiles. He's found a friend there, I think, because every now and then Jacob still wets the bed. It's one of the many downsides of sharing a room. Mum's made me promise not to tell *anyone*.

Dad laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard and we all look at him like he's had a frontal lobotomy. He picks up a handful of napkins from the table and thrusts them at Ben. 'Did you find it all right?' Dad asks, straightening his tie.

Ben nods and wipes the water off his trousers. I look down and notice that he's got a posh shiny silver watch on

his wrist. 'I only work over at Hunter and Sons, so it's not a million miles away,' he says.

Well, this is a barrel of laughs.

'Technically, nowhere on Earth is a million miles away,' Jacob says softly, still working on his Sudoku. 'Did you know the furthest point from the Earth's centre is Chimborazo, in Ecuador?'

Ben grins again. 'No, I didn't know that.'

Susie flips her hair back dramatically. 'No one does. He's a member of Mensa.'

Dad reaches over and ruffles Jacob's hair. 'This is Jacob,' he says to Ben by way of introduction. 'Or, as we like to call him, Einstein.'

'Or "Know-It-All", or "Stop-Banging-On",' Robbie mutters under his breath, but we all catch him.

'Yes, thank you, Robbie,' Mum pipes up. She turns to Ben and reaches out her hand. 'Clare. You'll have to excuse us, we're all a bit flustered.'

'We're *always* a bit flustered,' Susie retorts, 'but that's life, I suppose. "Like madness is the glory of this life, as this pomp shows to a little oil and root." William Shakespeare.'

Dad's practically glowing with pride. 'Susie's always the star of the show,' he says, pouring Ben a glass of wine and helping himself to a second. 'Gets all the best parts in the school plays.'

Susie waves her hand at Dad like she's dead embarrassed but I can tell she's loving it.

'And Robbie's a regular Jimi Hendrix,' Dad carries on, beaming at Robbie.

'Oh, yeah?' Ben says, looking impressed. 'What sort of bands do you like?'

Robbie shrugs and pushes his fringe out of his eyes.

Ben reaches into his suit jacket and takes out an iPod. 'You heard of The Maccabees?' He leans across the table to give Robbie the iPod but Lucy gets there first.