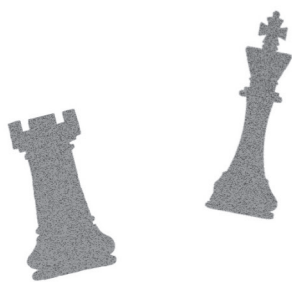


# CHECK MATES



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## *For Dad*

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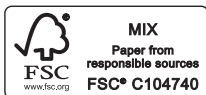
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## The Staring at the Wall Club

I stare at the wall. It's as wide as my cubicle and stretches up to the ceiling. A white blank space full of nothing. Mrs Ewens says it's supposed to help me think about what I've done, the effect it has on the class, the effect it has on me. But staring at the wall doesn't feel like it helps me. It feels like punishment.

All I did was ask Mr Fields if he was wearing a wig.

My class laughed, but he didn't think it was funny. What did him wearing a wig have to do with geography?

'Nothing,' I said.

'Yes, nothing, Felix. So get on with your work.'

But I couldn't concentrate. Jake, my best friend, was sitting next to me laughing and that made me worse.

'Sir, do you like crumpets?' I asked. I don't know why it was crumpets; it could have been anything – last week it was beetles,

orange peel, fishing nets, but this morning it was the word ‘crumpet’ that randomly jumped into my head and out of my mouth.

‘What?’ Mr Fields looked as confused as the kids in my class.

‘Do you like crumpets? I don’t. They’re full of holes like they’ve been eaten by worms.’

That’s when Mr Fields snapped. That’s when he said, ‘Felix, out!’

So that’s how I got to talk to Mrs Ewens.

That’s how I ended up here in the Staring at the Wall Club again.

It’s actually called the Isolation Room, but we call it the Staring at the Wall Club, because that’s what we do – stare at the wall. It’s my second time this week, the ninth time this month. It’s not because I do anything really bad, it’s just that I can’t concentrate or keep still. Apparently it’s called ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which my mum and dad say is a complicated way of saying I’ve got ants in my pants. All I know is that I can’t help it, but it does mean I get sent to stare at the wall a lot. But not as often as James King in Year Nine. He tells me he gets sent here every day. He’s sitting the other side of the partition wall right now, tapping his foot against his chair leg. And there are four other kids here – two boys from Year Eight, two girls from Year Nine. We don’t talk to each other, but sometimes we smile or nod like we’re members of a secret club. But most of the time we sit in our cubicles and stare at the white wall, thinking about the things we’ve done, except all I can think of is going home with Jake to fight the cavalry.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

‘James, I think we’ve had enough of that!’

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

‘James.’ Mrs Ewens looks over the top of her computer. ‘Can you stop it?’

‘But, miss, I’ve been here for ages.’

‘And whose fault is that?’

‘Mine.’ James King sighs.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

I stare at the wall.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

‘Hey, you!’ James King whispers like we’re in prison. I ignore him. He’s always in here because he’s been fighting, or has sworn at a teacher. I’m only in here because of crumpets. I try to concentrate but I can’t stop getting carried away by my imagination or the tiniest thing that grabs my attention, like cars going by outside and a spider crawling down the wall, along the floor. I slide my shoe across the carpet tile. The spider crawls up the toe of my shoe, over my laces.

‘Oi!’

‘What?’ I jump out of my thoughts as James King pokes his head round the edge of the partition. I don’t want to talk to him and get in more trouble, but Jake says the worst thing you can do is ignore James King because he’ll think you’re scared of him.

‘What?’ I whisper back.

‘Did you get sent to Mr Mclugash?’ James King talks like he’s my friend but he never says my name.

‘No,’ I whisper back.

‘I did,’ he boasts. ‘Says he’s going to expel me if I do it again. What did you do?’

‘Nothing much. Just couldn’t sit still.’

He pulls a face like that’s no big deal then says, ‘You’re the kid with the weird granddad, right?’

‘You say this every time we’re in here,’ I sigh.

‘I know I do – that’s because he *is* weird.’

‘You don’t know him.’

‘Don’t have to,’ James King says. ‘But picking you up every day in a pink car is weird.’

‘He’s just my granddad,’ I say.

‘James, move along, away from Felix.’

‘Get him to move.’

‘No,’ says Mrs Ewens. ‘I asked you.’

James King huffs, then picks up his bag and moves.

It’s only a few seconds before he starts tapping again.

I stare at the wall, and try to block him out. Some kids do homework in here, some read books. Jake said he fell asleep once, but I just stare at the wall to make time go quicker, to forget where I am. If I stare long enough, I see colours and shapes and they merge together and it’s like I’m watching a film – my house, Jake’s house, my granddad’s house, around the edge of a grass square. And in the middle of the square is my and Jake’s tree.

In the winter we’re soldiers crawling across the grass on our bellies with guns, talking on a two-way radio, and when the coast is clear we fix our bayonets and run through the snow. In the summer we load

cannons and fire them at the horizon where the enemy are camped. Sometimes I get grazed by a bullet; sometimes they hit me full on, right between my ribs. I can still feel the stabbing pain in my heart, and if I lift up my shirt I can run my fingers over the ridge in my skin where the scab fell off.

Me and Jake take everyone on. It doesn't matter who they are or what country they come from, it's any soldier who dares to come near us and threaten our tree. I imagine I'm there now and I can see them advancing through my binoculars. There's a sniper on top of Mrs Flower's roof, sweeping around the square, over the parked cars at the front doors of our houses. He keeps sweeping, sweeping, until he suddenly stops dead in line with our tree. I need to stop him. I need to . . .

I pick up my rifle and rest the butt against my shoulder.

*Snap!*

The sniper locks right onto me and I'm locked onto him. We're two eyes at the opposite ends of a giant telescope.

'Don't shoot!' he whispers.

'Don't shoot!' I whisper back.

*Click.*

He's pulled his trigger.

*Click.*

I've pulled mine.

I duck as a bullet whizzes past my ear.

*Ha. Got you!* The sniper's head explodes like a giant tomato.

'Felix! Felix!' Someone taps me on my shoulder.

I jump and turn around. Mrs Ewens is looking at me weird.



‘Yes, miss . . . I was just . . .’ My brain scrambles back to this world.  
Mrs Ewens taps the table.  
‘Felix,’ she says. ‘Your granddad is here.’



## The Pink Car

James King says a lot of things – some of them are funny, most of them are nasty. Luckily, because he’s two years above me, I don’t get to hear everything he says, but unfortunately for me the things he says about my granddad are true. No, he’s not weird, but he really has got a pink car and he’s just picked me up from school in it. My grandma used to pick me up from primary school, but when she got ill, Granddad took over, and he kept going even after she died. I thought he would stop this year when I got to secondary, but he kept turning up. I told Mum that it was embarrassing, but she said it gives Granddad something to do, a routine and company. I go to his house for tea each evening too, but that’s only temporary while Mum does double shifts at work. I think Granddad does enjoy picking me up, but not when I get sent home early, because he misses his favourite programmes on TV.

‘You must concentrate, Felix!’ he shouts over the crashing of the gears. ‘You can’t be getting sent home from school all the time!’

‘It’s not all the time, Granddad,’ I say. ‘It’s only twice this week.’

‘And that’s twice too many!’ Granddad looks at me sternly. ‘Maybe they should think of tying you to a chair.’

‘Bit drastic, Granddad,’ I say brightly, trying to cheer him up.

Granddad shakes his head slowly then looks ahead at the road.

I hug my bag as he drives on. I do love my granddad loads, but I wish he didn’t have a pink car. People can see it for miles. Even Jake says it looks like an ice-cream van. Granddad doesn’t even like pink. Sometimes I wonder if he bought it because he’s so short-sighted, but I know he got it because it was my grandma’s favourite colour. One day I woke up, looked out of my bedroom window and saw it parked across the square outside their house. Grandma loved it and drove it everywhere – to the shops, to the bowls club, to rumba classes, to the cinema when she took me there for a treat once a month. After she died, Granddad put an advert in the local paper and a for sale sticker in the back window of the car. But nobody telephoned him and the only people who stopped by were those that stopped to let their dogs pee on the wheels. But I don’t think he wanted to sell the car anyway, because after four days he took the sticker down and sold his blue Ford Fiesta instead.

Granddad winces as he pushes the gearstick again.

‘Should have bought an automatic!’ he says. He seems to be getting louder and madder the closer we get to home. I think maybe he’s had a bad day with his diabetes. When his sugar levels go weird it makes him short-tempered, or maybe he really is getting fed up with picking me up early. Maybe he’s getting bored of picking me up full stop. I don’t like it when he looks tired and he looks tired a lot since Grandma

died. I told him once that he didn't have to, that I would walk home with Jake. He said he'd promised, but I'm not sure if he meant he'd promised Grandma or me.

As we drive past the shops I think about what I can do for the rest of the afternoon. I don't like being sent home because it makes the teachers annoyed with me and Mum and Dad mad. But it did get me out of double English and *Romeo and Juliet*! I'll have to catch up, but it's hard when I'm already behind. Last term I tried to catch up in the holidays, but it's like starting a race after the starter gun has gone. All I want to do now is go up the tree and wait for Jake to come home. Or I could just play Angry Birds, but Granddad took my phone off me yesterday evening when he discovered me playing it behind my maths book.

I glance across at him. We're now past the chip shop and his grumpiness is making me nervous. It gets even worse when we're stuck in traffic at the lights. I wish the school hadn't bothered him. If only I'd sat still and not said anything about a wig.

'Granddad,' I say cautiously. 'Have I made you miss the snooker on TV?'

He stares at the lights.

'Granddad.' I lean forward to get his attention. 'I'm sorry I made you miss the snooker.'

'What's that?' Granddad blinks like I've just woken him up.

'I said, I'm sorry if you missed the snooker.'

'Ha!' He shakes his head. 'I am not caring about snoooka! I just care about the things going on in there!' He takes his hand off the steering wheel and raps his knuckles on my head. 'Now, let's get back to base.'

He knocks my head again. Grandma used to tell him not to do it. He'd tell her he was only messing. He is, but he doesn't know how much it hurts.

I rub the spot as tears well in my eyes.

I love my granddad and I think he loves me, but sometimes it's hard to tell.



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## Teatime in Germany

It's not just my granddad's car that is pink; lots of other things in his house are pink too. All the walls are pink, and the bathroom carpet is as bright as a flamingo. The cake mixer is light pink, so is the toilet roll and so is the flowery duvet on their bed. Mum says it's like Grandma has gone but there are still pieces of her everywhere; even her pink raincoat hangs on the coat hook next to Granddad's hat. The only room that isn't pink is the sitting room, where the curtains are always pulled over, making it as dark as a cinema. Mum is always asking Granddad to open them – wouldn't he be happier if he let the light in? But Granddad just barks that he prefers them closed. So that's where me and Granddad sit and eat our tea every evening, in the dark, while he watches the German news on TV.

'Do you want more bread?' he asks.

'No thank you,' I reply.

'But I am thinking you must eat something.'

‘I’m full up, Granddad,’ I say.

‘Just another sausage.’

I sigh as Granddad slides another sausage onto my plate. Grandma used to bake fruit cake and cook shepherd’s pie and fry the best chips ever. Now all Granddad seems to eat is tinned sausages and tinned beans and packets of ham and bread from Lidl and Tesco.

I don’t like sausages, but luckily Samson, Granddad’s ginger cat, loves them. I squeak him over, listen for the clink of Granddad washing the plates in the sink, then I break the sausage into three pieces and feed it to Samson, who gobbles it up.

‘Have you homework?’

I jump as Granddad walks back in.

‘Yes, Granddad,’ I say, trying not to look guilty.

‘Then I am thinking you should get on with it.’ He nods at my bag beside me on the table.

I sigh. I wish I’d tried harder and stayed at school. All my work would be done and I could be watching TV or talking to Mum and Dad – if they were in. They’ve been working stacks since Dad’s plumbing business went bust last year. Mum says we need the money, and I know we do, but I’d like to see them too.

I slide the bag towards me and get my books out.

‘Did you want more light?’ asks Granddad.

‘No, I’m okay,’ I lie.

It doesn’t matter if the room was lit by football lights, I still won’t be able to concentrate long enough to read what’s on the page. Mum and Dad are right when they say I’ve got ants in my pants. I’ve always been that way, but since last year it’s like I’ve got a colony

of them crawling all over my body and niggling at my brain. I must concentrate, but the harder I try, the worse it gets. At primary school I used to get extra help from Mrs Lowes – she helped everyone in my class, so nobody really noticed. But at secondary school it's different; I didn't get help at all in the first term. After Christmas, Mrs Hudson, the support assistant, thought it would be a good idea to sit with me in maths and English, but it felt like everyone was staring at me, which made concentrating even harder. I told her I didn't need her help. All I wanted to do was get rid of her, because having her sitting beside me was more embarrassing than going to town with your mum. So now I just have 'catch-up' lessons instead.

I open my maths book as Granddad sits in his chair and flicks through the TV channels – Das Erste, Bayerischer Rundfunk, ZDFneo, RTL. There are pictures of floods in Bremen, people marching down the street in Munich, and bolts of lightning flashing across the sky and hitting the TV tower in Hamburg. Then the picture switches to a reporter talking outside the parliament building in Berlin. I see it every day of the week because Granddad has a satellite dish that beams all the German TV channels into his sitting room. He can get English channels too, but mostly he just watches the German news. He says it's one way he keeps in touch with Germany. The only other way is when he goes to meet his friends at the German Friendship Group every Tuesday. He took me once when I was little and I thought it was scary because it was full of strangers talking in a language I didn't understand. Grandma said I came home crying, but I don't remember that bit.

Back on the TV, the picture changes back to the floods with people being rescued from their houses by firemen in yellow dinghies. Then



the picture flicks to people gathered in a hall with blankets around their shoulders. It's like . . . It's like Noah and . . .

'How big was the ark, Granddad?'

'What?' Granddad turns round.

'Noah's ark, Granddad,' I say. 'Was it as big as an ocean liner? Or bigger . . . like an aircraft carrier?'

Granddad shakes his head. 'Felix,' he says. 'Sometimes you are really confusing me.'

'I know, Granddad, but just say how big you think it might have been. Would have to be massive to get two of every animal on.'

'Felix, I am watching the news. This is serious – people are in trouble.'

'I know, I'm only asking.'

Granddad turns back to the TV. I think of asking him again, but he seems very worried about what is happening in Germany. I'd like to chat to him about it, but he hardly ever talks to me about his country. I think that's a bit strange. I don't know where he lived or worked. I don't even know the city where he was born. The only time he talks about growing up is when he tells me how he met Grandma at a dance at Böhlers Balhaus, a famous dance hall in Berlin. Then his eyes light up like a disco ball. He says he noticed her because she was wearing a pink flowery dress, but most of all he remembers she was sitting on her own reading *The Little Prince* in the corner of the room. There is nothing before. My dad says that's just Granddad being Granddad and no one can change him, but I find it weird that Granddad's life only seemed to start when he was eighteen.

I rest my head on my hand and look around the room. It's so dark and quiet that all I can hear is the sound of my breath and the ticking of the clocks. There are clocks everywhere. There's a big wooden one on the mantelpiece, and another on the sideboard, and another on the shelf by the door, and there's a giant grandfather clock with a pendulum, which *knock-knock-knocks* in the hall. It's another hour until Jake is back. Maybe I could just go home and watch *The Amazing Spider-Man*, or play Fortnite on my PS4. No. I have to try. I need to work or otherwise he'll tell Mum and Dad when they get back. They'll get annoyed, but they'll be even madder once they find out I've been sent home early again. Mum said I was running out of chances – and that was two weeks ago.

Granddad turns the TV off and picks up his giant chess book. It's the thickest book I've ever seen, even thicker than the Bible, and Granddad seems to read a page of it every day.

I shuffle along the table so I can catch the tiny bit of sunlight shining through a gap in the curtains. My maths book is full of my scrawly blue ink, and in the margins Mr Andrews's scrawly red. Every page seems to have more of his ink than mine. I blow out my cheeks. In the corner of my eye I see Granddad peering at me over the top of his book.

'You okay?' Like he's telling me I am, not asking me a question.

'Yes, Granddad,' I nod.

He looks back at his book. He doesn't understand how I feel, like everyone else.

I open my exercise book to page sixty-three.

*Simultaneous equations.*

*Complicated equations.*

*Too-hard-for-me-to-do equations.*

*The Amazing Spider-Man?*

*Fortnite?*

*Angry Birds on my phone?*

I shake them all out of my head. I have to concentrate, all my teachers say it. I must concentrate. I must sit still. But I can't. Last week in cookery, Mrs Lennon said I'm so easily distracted I'd follow a bee out of the window.

I push the maths books aside and switch to history.

*Question 1: Imagine you are a suffragette. Write an account of what it would be like if people did not have the right to vote. What would it feel like not to be heard or have a voice? What actions would you take so that people took notice of your opinion?*

*I wonder what's for tea?*

*Oh. I already had it.*

*Imagine you are a suffragette . . .*

Granddad turns the TV up louder.

It's still raining in Germany. The floods are getting worse.

*Imagine you are a suffragette . . .*

I hear a faint tinkle of a bell and look up. Samson slinks through the hall.

'Would you like me to feed Samson, Granddad?' I say this like it's the most exciting thing I could do.

'No.' Granddad shakes his head. 'I think you should work.'

I sigh. It never used to be boring like this when Grandma was alive. I glance at the picture of her smiling face on the mantelpiece

and imagine her voice when she used to sing along to the radio in the kitchen in the mornings and her hugging me every time I walked through the door, even if I'd only gone to the shops for bread. I'd go to give her the change and she'd press the coins into my palm, telling me to save them for a rainy day or spend it on sweets, spend it on one of those computer game things, spend it on anything you like. But since she's been gone it's like it's raining all the time, like the closed curtains have drained all the colour and her laughter from the house. All that's left is her pink car, German TV and the *tick-tick-ticking* clocks. She didn't look like my grandma when she was ill, not even in her pink dressing gown. But she still smelled of roses and told me stories about when I was born, when I was growing up, how she and Grandma used to dress me in a furry zip-up suit that made me look like a seal and then take me for a walk in the park.

Granddad doesn't talk about things like that. All he does is talk about the news or the weather, or spend his time cutting the garden hedge or mending the hinges on doors.

*Imagine you are a suffragette . . .*

*Imagine . . .*

*Imagine . . .*

Imagine the person you loved loads isn't around any more.