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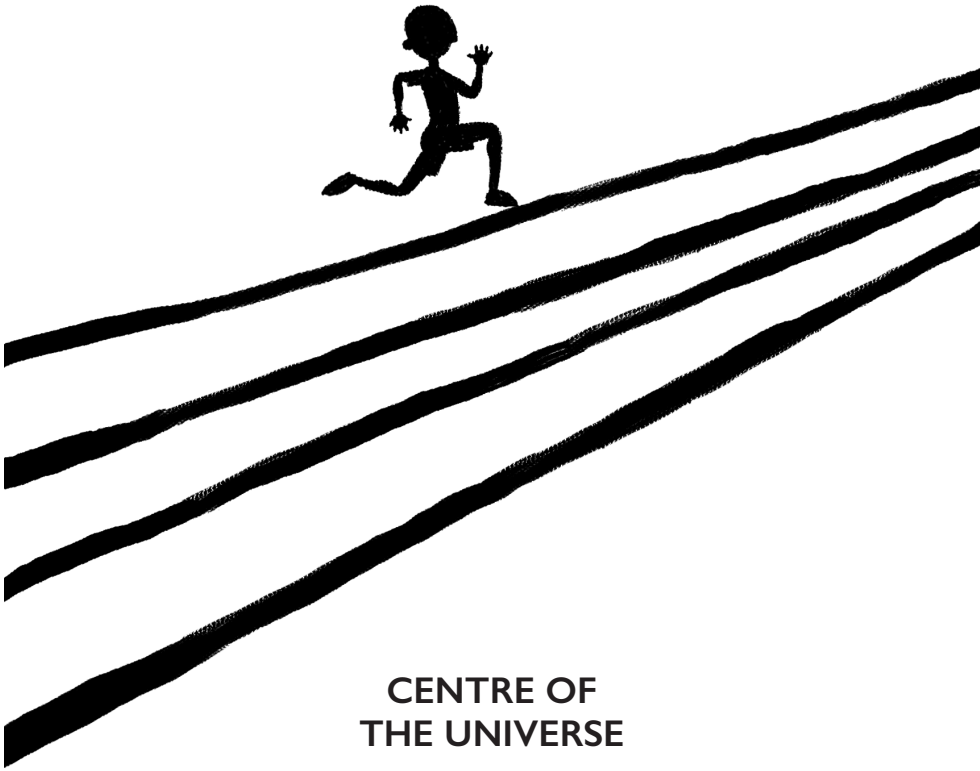
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CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE

The most amazing thing I ever saw was Usain Bolt winning the 100 metres at the London Olympics. I was there with my mum, dad and grandad and we were high up in the stadium and I was seven years old and I felt like I was at the centre of the universe. And when he broke the Olympic record I thought the noise would lift the stadium up off the ground and catapult it right out into space. Because nothing about that moment felt ordinary.

And one of the most unforgettable things about it –

and not the best – was when people ran to the front and pushed forward for autographs, there was Amit from my class. He just popped up on the big screen. He was enormous. His head was the height of the high jump. He was trying to squeeze through to the barrier and he was just desperate to touch Usain Bolt or get his autograph on his ticket. And he did. He pushed right to the front.

I felt sort of annoyed. I hadn't even known he was there. I tried not to let it bother me but it did. And it's sort of bugged me ever since. I just had to not look too hard when Amit got right up close to Usain Bolt, and when he got his autograph I thought I'd be sick. I'm not kidding. I nearly threw up. I was thinking maybe I should run down to the front too and try to catch him when he did his lap of honour. He had the Jamaican flag round his shoulders and he didn't look in any hurry to get out of the stadium. But then I thought no, I might be too late. And it would be so embarrassing if I got caught on TV as the boy who tried to run down and couldn't get through. So I just sat there and Amit looked right into the camera and he was beaming from ear to ear like he'd just won the golden ticket in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

I would have done anything for that autograph and I still would, to tell you the truth, even though I'm eleven

years old now. I tried to concentrate on what I already had, which I guess was something more spiritual. I felt like I had a connection with Usain Bolt and having Amit there sort of spoilt it. I think Usain Bolt probably felt more spiritual too. He was probably quite annoyed with all these people trying to get close to him, though he seemed to be quite enjoying it. He's good with the crowd.

Anyway, Amit got the autograph and I didn't and he took it to school at the start of Year 3 and did a talk about how Usain Bolt gave him a special look when he signed his ticket. It was sickening. But that's Amit for you. He's better looking and cleverer than everyone else and he always gets what he wants. I expect every school's got a kid like that.

And on the whole I've managed to turn that moment around in my head and make myself feel badly about Amit getting the autograph. I think, *Why couldn't he just stay in his seat and enjoy the moment? What was the matter with him?* It's funny how you can change the way you feel if you put your mind to it.

And the thing about that race is it really was special for me because the Olympic Stadium is just a few streets from our house. We saw them build it. Honestly. We're that close. And another reason it was special is Usain Bolt won in 9.63 seconds and Grandad lived at number

9 and we live down the road at number 63. I sometimes think if Grandad lived at number 8 Usain Bolt might have run 100 metres in 8.63 seconds and if Grandad had lived at number 7 and Usain Bolt had won the race in 7.63 seconds, the world would have physically exploded because it would have been a miracle. I know that might sound stupid but it's just a feeling I've got.

But usually when I think of Usain Bolt winning the 100 metres I think of Mum shouting at the top of her voice and Dad with his eyes shut and his hands over his ears and Grandad squeezing my hand and saying, "Can you believe it, AJ?" and me just knowing I would remember that moment for the rest of my life.

Buzzing

I'm going to tell you what makes me different straight away. If I don't, it sort of buzzes around at the back of my brain like a fly stuck in a room. And it bugs me. You know that thing where they bang against the window and you just have to let them out because they're stopping you thinking about anything else? Well, that's how it feels. So what I do is either I open the window and let the fly buzz out into the world or I decide to never, ever let the fly out and eventually it stops buzzing. It depends

who I'm talking to.

The thing that makes me different from other eleven-year-old boys, apart from my fantastic running ability, is my parents have learning difficulties. It's no big deal for me. Really it isn't. I don't look after them. We look after each other.

My mum makes the best cakes ever. She's the kindest person in the world too. Honestly, you'd know if you met her. She might not be clever in the way of making sense of lots of things very quickly but she's clever in the way of understanding bigger things better than most people. She doesn't waste years of her life sending messages or texting. She doesn't do any of that. She won't even answer the phone. She talks to people if they're with her but apart from that she's not bothered. And she doesn't spend loads of time worrying either. She worries about something and then she stops worrying and then she's happy.

And when I worry I'm awake all night and in the morning my head hurts and my stomach aches and I can't concentrate at school. And I'm supposed to be clever. Not brilliant but sort of OK. But when Mum gets up she's smiling. Even though there's lots to worry about, she's smiling. So who's cleverer?

My dad's more like me in the way of worrying. He

can't just stop. If he's worried, he walks up and down the garden, even if it's the middle of the night. He just walks up and down, up and down, between the vegetables.

My dad practically lives in the garden. If you came to our house you might not see him unless you look out of the kitchen window, and then you might just see the top of his hat poking out from behind the beans. He grows potatoes, onions, beans, pumpkins, spinach and garlic. And if that makes you think we've got a big garden, we haven't. It's seven steps from our kitchen door to our back fence. I'm not kidding. One more step and you'd knock yourself out. Dad just grows everything really close together. Grandad taught him that.

My mum has four rules for life. My dad has one.

My mum's are:
Be kind to people
Do your best
Check everything's switched off
Remember to look at the sky

My dad's rule is:
Love Alice (that's my mum)

As for any other rules he follows hers. She's the most

important person in the world to him. They are like two halves of a whole. They fit perfectly. They're just not so good at the complicated stuff, like sorting out forms or if the washing machine needs fixing. My grandad did all that. That's my mum's dad.

My grandad lived down the road but he died two months ago. Just before school broke up for summer. And I know it really wasn't my fault, but sometimes I think maybe he died because of me. And that makes me feel so bad. Because I was the last one to see him alive.

100 metres is 100 metres

My grandad was always running. Even when he was old he never really stopped. When I was eight I said can I come too and he said yes. He was pretty pleased I think. And those times running with him were some of the happiest times of my life. I'm not kidding.

We've got this little park round the corner and we went round it one day and measured the path like a running track. Grandad had a little pot of red paint and a tiny paintbrush and he just knelt down and made a dot every hundred metres in exactly the right place. He didn't even pretend not to do it. He just painted a dot and nobody seemed to notice.

We worked out it's 100 metres from the flower bed to the dog-poo bin, 100 metres from the dog-poo bin to halfway down the bench, 100 metres from halfway down the bench to the broken tree, and 100 metres from the broken tree to the shelter with the graffiti. We went round the path twice and marked out 1,000 metres, all in exactly the right place. I'd tell you more about it but it's probably best if you come yourself, if you want to see. Because it sounds quite boring and it really isn't boring at all.

And the best thing about our track is Grandad said it's exactly the same as the Olympic track because 100 metres is 100 metres wherever it is.

Anyway, last time I saw Grandad he just ran from the dog-poo bin to the bench and then he said, "I'm going to have to go home, AJ. I'm not feeling too good."

I said, "Please, Grandad, just a bit more. You can sit on the bench."

But he shook his head.

"No, AJ. Got to go."

And then he smiled. "See if you can beat your record," he said.

And as he walked away he didn't even look back. He just walked down the shortcut through the bushes and he was gone. I was quite disappointed to be honest but

I jogged round the park a few times and then I ran 400 metres in about 60 seconds. It was my fastest time ever. I couldn't wait to tell him, I knew he'd be really impressed.

But when I got to his house he wouldn't answer the door. My aunt Josephine and my cousin Aisha were round, so Mum and Josephine went to Grandad's with the spare keys and I stayed at home and looked after Aisha (the best kid in the world by the way). And they found Grandad dead. He'd just sat down on his chair and he was dead. And although the doctor said he had a weak heart and he was lucky to live so long it doesn't feel lucky at all.

One funny thing though. Mum and Josephine said he was smiling when they found him. They even said it at the funeral. I don't know what they meant exactly. I didn't see him myself. But I think about it sometimes. I think about all sorts of things in fact. Sometimes I think, *What if he'd sat on the bench and waited for me?* He might have died there and that would have been worse. I'd have come running round the bend and he could have been dead on the bench. And he would not have liked that. It might have been on the news. It would have been terrible in lots of ways. Social services might have come round.

Josephine said the way Grandad died was the best

way. She said if only everyone could go like that, like dying in your chair is a dream come true. It's the sort of depressing thing grown-ups say. It made me feel awful because Grandad wasn't depressed at all. I don't think he wanted to die in his chair. Not then anyway. He was only seventy-two. Maybe if he was a hundred he wouldn't have minded.

Anyway, in case you don't know what it's like to lose someone you love I'll tell you. You can't even understand how your heart keeps beating or why people are acting like it's an ordinary day when actually it feels like the end of the world. And you can't imagine how you're going to be able to keep putting one foot in front of the other for the rest of your whole long life. You can't even imagine it.

Mum was so sad she didn't speak for days. Dad doesn't talk much anyway, so that didn't change, but his face looked like all the bones had fallen out and his head was collapsing on to his shoulders. And when I saw them like that I realised Grandad was right at the centre of our family and now there's a huge space where he used to be. And that's when I decided I'm going to fill that space and sort everything out just like he did.

And I'm going to keep putting one foot in front of the other too, even though it's hard, and I'm going to do it

fast. Because I'm a runner like my grandad and one day I'm going to run on a track in a stadium. Maybe even the Olympic Stadium. That would be amazing.