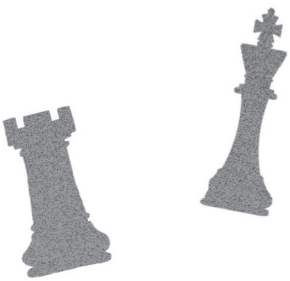
CHECK MATES



STEWART FOSTER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

For Dad

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
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222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

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Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-7223-6
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-7224-3

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Typeset in Times by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY





1

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.’

2

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.