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Ways to Live Forever

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Scholastic

Extract

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LIST NO. 1 FIVE FACTS ABOUT ME

1. My name is Sam.

2. I am eleven years old.

3. I collect stories and fantastic facts.

4. I have leukaemia.

5. By the time you read this,
I will probably be dead.

A BOOK ABOUT US 7th January

Today was our first day back at school after the Christmas holidays.

We have school three days a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, in the living room. There are only two pupils – me and Felix. Felix doesn't care about learning anything.

"What's the point of being ill if you have to do maths?" he said, the first time he came to school at my house. Mrs Willis, who's our teacher, didn't argue. She doesn't fuss if Felix doesn't do any work. She just lets him sit there, leaning back in his chair and telling me what's wrong with whatever I'm doing.

"That's not how you spell ammonium! We never spelt

ammonium like that at my school!"

"There's a planet called Hercules – isn't there, Mrs Willis?"

"What're you doing *that* for?"

Felix only comes to school to see me and to give his mum a break.

Nowadays, Mrs Willis thinks up ploys to interest him. You know the sort of thing; making volcanoes that really erupt, cooking Roman food, making fire with a magnifying glass.

Only my mum didn't like that one, because we accidentally burnt a hole in the dining table.

Sort of accidentally-on-purpose.

Today, though, Mrs Willis said, "How about you do some writing?" and we both groaned, because we'd been hoping for more fire, or possibly an explosion. Mrs Willis said, "Oh, come on, now. I thought you might like to write something about yourselves. I know you both like reading."

Felix looked up. He was playing with two of my Warhammer orcs, advancing them on each other and going "Grrrrah!" under his breath.

"Only 'cause there's nothing else to do in hospital," he said.

Me and Felix are both experts at being in hospital. That's where we met, last year.

I didn't see what reading had to do with writing about me and I said, "Books are just about kids saving the world or getting beaten up at school. You wouldn't write about us."

"Maybe not you," said Felix. He pressed his hand to his

forehead and flopped back in his chair. "The tragic story of Sam McQueen. A poor, frail child! Struggling bravely through *terrible* suffering and hospitals with no televisions!"

I made vomiting noises. Felix stretched his hand – the one that wasn't pressed to his forehead – out to me.

"Goodbye – goodbye – dear friends—" he said, and collapsed against his chair making choking sounds.

Mrs Willis said, "No dying at the table, Felix." But you could tell she wasn't really angry. She said, "I'd like you both to have a go now, please. Tell me something about yourself. You don't have to write a whole book by lunchtime."

So that's what we're doing. Well, I am. Felix isn't doing it properly. He's written: "My name is Felix Stranger and", and then he stopped. Mrs Willis didn't make him write any more. But I'm on page three already.

School's nearly over now, anyway. It's very quiet. Mrs Willis is pretending to do her marking and really reading *70 Things To Do With Fire* under the table. Felix is leading my orcs in a stealth attack on the pot plant. Columbus, the cat, is watching with yellow eyes.

Next door, in the kitchen, Mum is stirring the soup, which is lunch. Dad is in Middlesbrough, being a solicitor. My sister Ella is at school. Real school. Thomas Street Primary.

Any minute now – there it is! There's the doorbell. Felix's mum is here. School is over.

WHY I LIKE FACTS

I like facts. I like *knowing* things. Grown-ups never understand this. You ask them something like, "Can I have a new bike for Christmas?" and they give you a waffly answer, like, "Why don't you see how you feel nearer Christmas?" Or you might ask your doctor, "How long do I have to stay in hospital?" and he'll say something like, "Let's wait and see how you get on", which is doctor-speak for "I don't know".

I don't have to go into hospital ever again. Dr Bill promised. I have to go to clinic – that's it. If I get really sick, I can stay at home.

That's because I'm going to die.

Probably.

Going to die is the biggest waffly thing of all. No one will tell you anything. You ask them questions and they cough and change the subject.

If I grow up, I'm going to be a scientist. Not the sort that mixes chemicals together, but the sort that investigates UFOs and ghosts and things like that. I'm going to go to haunted houses and do tests and prove whether or not poltergeists and aliens and Loch Ness monsters really exist. I'm very good at finding things out. I'm going to find out the answers to all the questions that nobody answers.

All of them.

ELLA 7th January

My sister Ella went back to school today too. She and Mum had a huge fight this morning about it. She doesn't get why I stay at home all day and she doesn't.

"Sam doesn't go to school!" she said to Mum. "You don't go to work!"

"I have to look after Sam," Mum said.

"You do not," said Ella. "You just do ironing and plant things and talk to Granny."

Which is true.

My mum named me Sam, after Samson in the Bible, and my dad named Ella after his aunt. If they'd talked to each other a bit

more while they were doing it, they might not have ended up with kids called Sam 'n' Ella, but it's too late to change that now. I think Dad thinks it's funny, anyway.

Ella's eight. She has dark hair and bright, greeny-brown eyes, like those healing stones you buy in hippie shops. No one else in my family cares what they look like. Granny goes round in trousers with patches and padded waistcoats with pockets for pencils and seed packets and train tickets. And Mum's clothes are all about a hundred years old. But Ella always fusses about what she wears. She has a big box of nail varnish and all of Mum's make-up because Mum hardly ever wears it.

"Why don't you wear it?" says Ella. "*Why?*"

Ella always asks questions. Granny said she was born asking a question and it hasn't been answered yet.

"Was I?" said Ella, when she heard this. "What was it?"

We all laughed.

"Where am I?" said Mum.

"Who're these funny-looking people?" said Granny.

"What am I *doing* here?" said Dad. "I was supposed to be a princess!"

"Who'd make *you* a princess?" I said.

It's afternoon now and I'm still writing. I bet I could write a book. Easy. I was going to do some more after Felix went, but Maureen from Mum's church came round, so I had to be visited. She only left when Mum went to fetch Ella from school. I was thinking up

"Questions Nobody Answers" at the dining table when they came back. Ella ran straight over to me.

"What are you doing?"

"School stuff," I said. I curled my arm around the page. Ella came right up behind me and peered over my shoulder.

"*Ella.* I'm busy," I said. It was the wrong thing to say. She tugged on my arm.

"Let me *see*!"

"*Mum!*" I wailed. "Ella won't let me work!"

"Sam won't let me *see*!"

Mum was on the phone. She came through with it pressed against her chest.

"Kids! Behave! Ella, leave your brother alone."

I pulled a face at Ella. She flung herself on to the sofa.

"It's not fair! You always let him win!"

Ella and Mum *always* fight. And Ella always says it's not fair. I bet that's the only reason I win, because I don't throw baby tantrums like she does.

Mum put down the phone and went over to Ella. Ella shouted, "Go away!" and ran upstairs. Mum gave this big sigh. She came over to me. I closed my pad so she wouldn't see the writing.

"Secret, is it?" she said.

"It's for school." I held my pen over the closed pad. Mum sighed. She kissed the top of my head and went upstairs after Ella.

I waited until I was quite sure she was gone, then I picked up my pen and started writing again.

QUESTIONS NOBODY ANSWERS NO. 1

How do you know that you've died?

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT YOU'VE DIED?

9th January

Today we had school again. I told Mrs Willis I was going to write a book.

"It's about me," I said. "But also it's a scientific inquiry. I've done loads." And I showed her my first "Question Nobody Answers".

"Very commendable," she said. "How exactly are you going to find the answers to these things?"

"I'm going to look them up on the Internet," I said.

You can find out anything on the Internet.

Mrs Willis let me and Felix look up how you know that you've

died today. We had to bring Dad's laptop down from the study, because Felix has a wheelchair at the moment. When I first met him he was only in it some of the time, but he's almost always in it now. He can walk really. He just likes having people wait on him.

We started with www.ask.com and ended up with this website on near-death experiences. A near-death experience is when someone almost dies but changes their mind at the last minute and comes back. The website said this happens to five per cent of adult Americans.

"So they *say*," said Felix.

All sorts of things happened to these people, according to the website. They went down dark tunnels. They saw bright lights and angels. Sometimes they floated over their body and saw their doctors talking about them or giving them electric shocks. It was exactly the sort of science I want to do. I thought it was brilliant. Felix didn't.

"It's not real," he said. "How can everyone see angels? What about serial killers?"

Mrs Willis made us write out all of the evidence for and against, like a proper scientific study. It was yet another ploy to make Felix do something, but it worked. He wrote eight whole sentences "Against".

Near-Death Experiences – Against
by Felix Stranger

Near-death experiences aren't actual death experiences because people don't actually die. They're just people's brains going funny because they haven't had enough oxygen or are on weird drugs. If they're real, then why do different things happen to different people? And why do only good things happen? Why don't people get devils or something? Also, it's the sort of thing people make up to get attention. Like crop circles. Everyone thought they were made by spaceships, but actually it was just farmers with lawnmowers trying to be famous.

He was the cynical public. I was the groundbreaking scientist, so I did "For".

Near-Death Experiences – For
by Sam McQueen

Near-death experiences have been happening since Plato, who lived thousands of years ago. We know because he wrote about them. In a near-death experience, the person actually dies. And then comes back. So obviously what happens to them is real. Also, they see real things. For example, one woman was floating on the ceiling and she heard

her doctors saying all this stuff which she found out later that they'd actually said. Only she couldn't have known about it because she was dead at the time. And bad things do happen to people sometimes. One guy had elves poking him with pitchforks.

Mrs Willis said we clearly had very scientific minds and she was sorry she'd ever doubted us. Felix and I spent the rest of the lesson planning our perfect near-death experience. We got a bit stuck because we both wanted to go to Heaven, but only if we got the elves with pitchforks as well.

LIST NO. 2 FIVE FACTS ABOUT HOW I LOOK

1. I have hair. It all fell out last year because of the drugs I was on, but it's grown back now. It's light brown.

2. I have blue eyes.

3. I have quite a lot of bruises. It's not my fault. It's just what you get when you have leukaemia.

4. I am small for eleven and sort of pale.

5. I have a birthmark shaped like a four-leafed clover on my knee. But it doesn't grant wishes.

MUM AND DAD

10th January

My mum used to work for this charity that does things with kids with learning disabilities. She stopped when I got ill the second time. Now she stays at home and takes me to clinic and looks after everyone who comes to visit. She gets Sundays off to go to church and sing in the choir. Ella goes sometimes too, but only because everyone fusses over her. I used to as well but I don't now, because I hate people fussing over me. Dad never does.

Dad is very clever. He knows a lot of things, but I could never ask him any of my questions. He doesn't talk about me being ill. I've never tried to talk to him about it, but Granny has and some of my aunties. He just says, "We're not going to talk about this,"

and walks out of the room.

I have a lot of aunties and uncles. Mum has one brother, but Dad has one brother and four sisters. Mum says that's why he's so quiet and likes having time to read the newspaper in peace, because he never got any space when he was a kid. I think that's rubbish, because my aunts and uncle never got any space either and they're always talking and laughing.

Dad's just quiet, like me. He's shy. When it's just our family, he's not quiet. He talks and tells jokes and stories. He knows a lot of stories. He just doesn't like it when there're loads of people in the house, like now when they keep coming to visit us. He reads his newspaper and doesn't talk, or if it's people he really doesn't like, he goes and reads in the study.

I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I wish I could go and hide sometimes too.

Granny gets angry with Dad sometimes, because she says he makes Mum do everything. But Dad does do things. He earns money. And he *does* help. Like one time when I was in hospital, Mum got home and there were four different types of soup on the doorstep. Dad and Ella heated them all up and brought them back to hospital and gave a cup to all the people waiting in casualty.

Everyone thought they were mad. But it got rid of the soup.

LIST NO.3 THINGS THAT I WANT TO DO

1. Be a famous scientist. Find things out and write books about them.

2. Break a world record. Not an athletic one, obviously. A silly one.

3. Watch all the horror films I'm not allowed to watch. 15-certificates. Or 18s.

4. Go up down-escalators and down up-escalators.

5. See a ghost

6. Be a teenager. Do teenage things like drink and smoke and have girlfriends.

7. Ride in an airship

8. Go up in a spaceship and see the Earth from space.

THE OCCASIONAL WARDROBE
NIGHTCLUB 13th January

It was Mrs Willis who told me about things to do. She said we should make a list.

"Things I want to do. Or just things I want. Preferably achievable but not necessarily."

There are lots of things I want to do. I liked writing them down. Mrs Willis liked it too. She wrote:

1. Go to the Grand Canyon.
2. Clean out the attic.
3. Get the use of a proper laboratory.
4. Learn how to make meringues.

5. Train the dog.

"Train the dog!" said Felix. "What sort of a wish is that?"

"You haven't met the dog," said Mrs Willis.

Felix's list was very short. It said:

1. Be rich and famous.
2. Nuke all doctors.
3. See Green Day in concert.

"You've already seen Green Day in concert," I pointed out. "You went with your brother."

Felix bent over his list again. "There," he said. "Happy?"

It now said:

3. See Green Day in concert AGAIN.

It was a good lesson. We spent the rest of it drawing pictures of people nuking Green Day from airships, with borders of beer-drinking ghosts going up escalators.

After Mrs Willis had gone, Felix and I stayed at the table. I started laying out my Warhammer army, in the hope that he might give me a game. Felix bent over my list with his hat pulled down over his eyes. He wears hats a lot because the drugs they gave him last year made his hair fall out. They made mine fall out too, but it's grown back now.

Felix's hasn't. He was wearing his fedora today, which is sort of like a squashed bowler hat. It made him look like a scruffy James Bond.

"Are you going to actually do these?" he said.

"I dunno," I said. I was more interested in laying out my scenery. "Probably not. Why?"

"Well, we could. Couldn't we?" He looked across at me, daring me to argue. I sifted through my box of pieces, trying to find another archer.

"They aren't things to do really," I explained. "They're more like . . . wishes. Not real things."

Felix leaned forward. He likes an argument. "So?" he said. "Mrs Willis is going to make meringues, isn't she? So why can't we watch horror films? Mickey's got loads at home."

He shoved the list across the table towards me. I looked at it.

"We could do two of them," I said. I knelt on the seat of my chair and leaned across the table to show him. "Look. We could watch horror films and go up down-escalators. Maybe. We couldn't do the others."

"We could do a world record."

"You don't just *do* world records."

I went and fetched my *Guinness Book of Records* to show him. I love world records. I love how certain they are. The quickest anyone has ever jumped up the steps of the CN tower on a pogo stick *is* fifty-seven minutes and fifty-one seconds.* The longest

*Ashrita Furman, on 23rd July 1999. Ashrita Furman has broken over sixty world records, including the record for the person to break the most world records.

word in English with each letter in it at least twice *is* "unprosperousness". There it is, a true fact, written down in this book, and if you can beat it you just send a letter to the record people and they check it and then you go in the book as a true fact too. Plus, you get to be famous.

Felix took the book from me and started flicking through it, looking for an easy one.

"Most worms eaten in thirty seconds! Do that one!"

I remembered that record. I peered over his shoulder. "That guy ate two hundred worms. I'm not eating *two hundred* worms!"

"Two hundred and one," said Felix. I ignored him. He flicked over the pages. "Smallest nightclub in the world: $2.4 \times 2.4 \times 1.2$ metres. That's not a proper record! How old is this book?"

"I got it for Christmas."

Felix shook his head. "Anyone can build a nightclub. What d'you need – music?"

"And strobe lights . . . and a smoke machine. . ." I read.

Felix waved his hand dismissively. "You don't need all that. Let's just put a CD player in your wardrobe."

"That's not a record!"

"Why not?"

"Lots of reasons!" I never win arguments with Felix. "Clubs are open to the public."

"So are we. We're just a bit rubbish at advertising." He grinned. "Go on – fetch a CD player. Don't you want the record?"

I pulled a face at him. But I went and got the CD player from

the kitchen anyway. When I got back, Felix was in my room, peering into my wardrobe. My room used to be the garage, so it's on the ground floor. It's pretty big. It's got chunky blue furniture that all matches and lots of posters: a Spiderman one, one of the solar system, one of *Lord of the Rings* and one of a wolf that my uncle got me from Canada.

"Is there a plug?" said Felix, as I came in. He'd got my Maglite torch and was shining it into the wardrobe.

"It's got batteries." I dumped the CD player in the wardrobe and turned it on. "Don't Stop Me Now" started playing. Felix groaned. I laughed.

"No wonder we don't have any customers!"

"Who cares?" said Felix. "Look. We've got music. We've got lighting." He turned on the torch and swirled it vaguely into the wardrobe. "Hey – we've even got a moving dance floor." He spotlighted my old skateboard, propped up against the back of the wardrobe. "World record. What more do you want?"

I laughed. Felix always makes me laugh. "Look," he said, "if you still think it doesn't count, we'll start our own record. Smallest occasional wardrobe nightclub. I bet no one's broken that one."

"Only because no one would! Who'd set a record like that?"

"Who'd pogo stick up the CN building?" said Felix. He was laughing too. "Who cares if it's stupid? It's still a record, isn't it?"

"It really isn't. A record is more impressive than that!"

Felix looked up at me. You could see he was plotting something.

"Not a problem," he said.

These are the new (unofficial) records Felix and I set before Felix's mum came.

1. Sam McQueen and Felix Stranger: smallest occasional wardrobe nightclub: The Coathanger Club.
2. Felix Stranger: most cornflakes eaten in fifteen seconds: five handfuls.
3. Sam McQueen: shortest time to hop up a flight of stairs (holding on to the banister): forty-three seconds.
4. Felix Stranger: most times to recite the alphabet all the way through, without mistakes, in thirty seconds: nine.
5. Banned (Mum): shortest time to hop up a flight of stairs (not holding on to the banister).