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Wishful Thinking

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Chapter 1

WHAT KEVIN RUTLEY WANTS:

1. Nintendo Wii
2. To be cool
3. Emma Greening to notice me
4. A dog
5. Mum and Dad to get back together
6. Better skin
7. To be good at sports
8. That gooey thing on my toe to go
9. World peace and all that
10. Not to be covered in sick

Kevin handed the list to Nan and she read it through, nodding, smiling, laughing, sighing and then nodding again. She glanced up halfway through, pointed at his bottle of Coke and ordered: 'Drink!' before dropping her eyes back to the list. He slurped at the straw. She

was right, he thought, slurping a little more up through the straw. It *was* making him feel better, although the wafts of slightly warm vomit coming up from his jumper didn't help much.

The list had worked quite well too. Written on a paper napkin, it was a way of getting his mind off the car sickness as they'd waited for the Coke, a pot of tea, and two Bakewell tarts to arrive at their table in the little watermill tea room.

'You'll feel better the minute you get some sugary drink down you,' Nan had said. 'And then you'll want the tart. Trust me.'

Pale and droopy, Kevin had just held his head up with his left hand while scrawling his wish list with his right, occasionally sucking on the straw and waiting for the waves of sickness to ease off. He knew she was right. He'd had travel sickness all his life and his nan had dealt with it often enough to know exactly how it worked. As Nan started to read his napkin and the tide of fizzy brown liquid dropped to halfway down the bottle, Kevin found he was able to look at the Bakewell tart without heaving. And a few slurps after that he was able to think about the possibility of eating it.

'Well,' said Nan. 'We can sort out the last bit on your list, can't we? You look well enough to go and

sponge yourself off now.' She directed him to the men's toilets as she poured her tea. 'Use hot water and a wodge of loo roll,' she recommended. 'Nice and thoroughly, please. Don't want the car reeking all the way back.'

By the time he got back to the table he smelt a lot better and felt perfectly OK again. He reached for the tart and took a big bite, grinning through it at Nan.

She smiled back, knowing the worst was over now. Kevin only got properly car sick when he hadn't had enough to eat. He would go all floppy and sweaty and end up throwing up what little was inside him if you didn't get parked and get him out in time. After some food he was normally fine. He would make it home without any more trouble.

'Sweetheart—you do know that number five isn't really going to happen, don't you?' Nan said, holding the floppy yellow list in her hand and pointing at 5. Mum and Dad to get back together.

Kevin shrugged. He knew *better skin* and *Emma Greening* weren't going to happen either. And there was a good chance the gooey thing on his toe would still be there when he was drawing his pension. That was the thing about wish lists. They were about *wishes*. Not about likelihoods. If he'd made a list of likelihoods it would have read very differently.

WHAT KEVIN RUTLEY THINKS IS LIKELY:

1. Nintendo Wii for Christmas—maybe—if there's one for the right price on eBay. Or Christmas 2015 when they're old tech and nobody wants one any more
2. I will never be cool
3. Emma Greening will not know I exist unless I smack her in the face with a school dinner tray
4. A dog. Stuffed.
5. Mum and Dad to squabble about who has me for Christmas until they're both in nursing homes
6. Better skin—when I'm 35
7. I'll always be rubbish at sports
8. That gooey thing on my toe will pop during swimming—when Emma Greening is looking
9. World peace? Oh, come on.
10. There will always be sick

'You know—it has been three years since they split up.' Nan was still talking, gently, about his parents. 'If they were going to get back together I think they would have done it by now, Kevin.'

'I *know*,' muttered Kevin. 'It's just a list of wishes! I know they won't come true. My wishes never do.'

Nan tilted her head to one side and regarded him through her spectacles. Her eyes were vivid blue and slightly moist. 'Oh, Kevin. Of *course* some of your wishes will come true! You mustn't think like that.'

Kevin finished the tart and then started squashing the crumbs onto his finger and licking them off, staring out across the River Ouse, which powered the giant waterwheel of the carefully preserved working mill. 'It's OK, Nan. Life's just like that, isn't it? I mean—yeah—if I had my own personal fairy or pixie or *god* who could make my wishes come true, fair enough. But I haven't.' A breeze blew in through the window, scented with water and early summer grass. A small, curled white feather fell on his sleeve. 'My life's all right. I'm not starving in Africa. But I don't get wishes coming true, either.'

'Well—I can make *one* wish come true, anyway,' laughed Nan, getting up. She wandered off into the little gift shop and returned as Kevin was finishing the last of his Coke. With a dog. Stuffed. A soft furry Labrador puppy dog in a paper bag.

'There you go,' she said, plopping it in his hands. 'From your fairy grandmother!'

Kevin grinned and gave her a little hug, looking around to make sure nobody his age was there, watching. 'Thanks, Nan.'

'You want to get something for your mum, while we're here?' she asked, patting his tufty hair.

'Yeah—I've got some money,' said Kevin. He mooched into the gift shop and foraged about among the china and jewellery and postcards. There were little packets of flour, ground here at the watermill, and he got one of those, because he felt he should. Also a lavender-scented candle for Mum. And some fudge for them both. He spent most of his money. The girl in the shop put it all in a stout paper bag and Kevin tucked it under one arm as he and Nan headed back outside, holding the toy dog under the other.

They ambled along the river bank towards the car park and the wind blew the napkin of wishes, placed lightly at the top of the paper bag, away towards the river. Nan glanced back and sighed, guiltily. There was no point in chasing it. It was in the water now, drifting along and sinking rapidly.

'Ah well,' said Nan. 'It's probably biodegradable. Hopefully it won't smother a stickleback.' They walked on to the car.

'Pwah!' spluttered Kevin. A flurry of fluff danced around his face. Tiny downy feathers—from some swan's or duck's nest, no doubt. One had gone in his mouth and several of the others settled on his jacket.

'What's up?' said Nan, glancing back, her Peugeot key in her hand.

'Bird feathers in my mouth,' spat Kevin.

'That's good luck, that is!' laughed Nan, making the car chirrup and unlock.

'Good luck?'

'Or—no—that's bird *poo*,' amended Nan, as they got in. 'Bird *poo* is lucky.'

More little feathers blew past him into the car and settled on the back seat as Kevin shut the passenger door. He belted up, and set the paper bag and the dog down by his feet while Nan got the engine going and began to drive out of the watermill car park.

'I've had a really nice time,' Nan said. 'We must do it again soon. It's nice to get you on your own. Even if you do occasionally projectile vomit all over me.'

'I didn't this time,' grinned Kevin. 'I got out of the car first, didn't I?' He'd thrown up in a ditch half a mile from the watermill.

'Anyway. It's nice to have a drive in the country. Just you and me,' said Nan.

Kevin agreed. Just him and his nan in the car *was* nice. He glanced back to see the watermill through the back window.

And screamed.