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When the Stars Begin to Fall

Matt

None of it would ever have happened if it hadn't been for Grandma's tree. And that's a fact. Ever since Grandma died – that was about three years ago now – Grandpa had always come to spend the summer holidays at home with us up in

Manchester. But this summer he said he couldn't come, because he was worried about Grandma's tree.

We'd all planted that tree together, the whole family, in his garden in Cambridge. A cherry tree it was, because Grandma especially loved the white blossoms in the spring. Each of us had passed around the jug and poured a little water on it, to give it a good start.

"It's one of the family now," Grandpa had said, "and that's how I'm going to look after it always, like family."

That was why, a few weeks ago, when Mum rang up and asked him if he was coming to stay this summer, he said he couldn't because of the drought. There had been no rain for a month, and he was worried Grandma's tree would die. He

couldn't let that happen. He had to stay at home, he said, to water the tree. Mum did her best to persuade him. "Someone else could do that, surely," she told him. It was no good. Then she let me have a try, to see if I could do any better.

That was when Grandpa said, "I can't come to you, Matt, but you could come to me. Bring your Monopoly. Bring your bike. What about it?"

So that's how I found myself on my first night at Grandpa's house, sitting out in the garden with him beside Grandma's tree, and looking up at the stars. We'd watered the tree, had supper, fed Dog, who was sitting at my feet, which I always love.

Dog is Grandpa's little brown and white spaniel, with a permanently panting



tongue. He dribbles a lot, but he's lovely. It was me that named him Dog, apparently, because when I was very little, Grandpa and Grandma had a cat called Mog. The story goes that I chose the name because I liked the sound of Dog and Mog together. So he never got a proper name, poor Dog.

Anyway, Grandpa and me, we'd had our first game of Monopoly, which I'd won, and we'd talked and talked. But now, for a while, we were silent together, simply stargazing.

Grandpa started to hum, then to sing. "*When the stars begin to fall*… Can't remember the rest," he said. "It's from a song Grandma used to love. I know she's up there, Matt, right now, looking down on us. On nights like these the stars seem so close you could

almost reach out and touch them."

I could hear the tears in his voice. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing for a while. Then I remembered something. It was almost like an echo in my mind.

"Aman said that to me once," I told him, "about the stars being so close, I mean. We were on a school trip down on a farm in Devon, and we snuck out at night-time, just the two of us, went for a midnight walk, and there were all these stars up there, zillions of them. We lay down in a field and just watched them. We saw Orion, the Plough, and the Milky Way that goes on for ever. He said he had never felt so free as he did at that moment. He told me then, that when he was little, when he first came to live in

Manchester, he didn't think we had stars in England at all. And it's true, Grandpa, you can't see them nearly so well at home in Manchester – on account of the street lights, I suppose. Back in Afghanistan they filled the whole sky, he said, and they felt so close, like a ceiling painted with stars."

"Who's Aman?" Grandpa asked me. I'd told him before about Aman – he'd even met him once or twice – but he was inclined to forget things these days.

"You know, Grandpa, my best friend," I said. "We're both fourteen. We were even born on the same day, April 22nd, me in Manchester, him in Afghanistan. But they're sending him back, back to Afghanistan. He's been to the house when you were there, I know he has."

"I remember him now," he said. "Short fellow, big smile. What do you mean, sending him back? Who is?"

So I told him again – I was sure I'd told him it all before – about how Aman had come into the country as an asylum seeker six years before, and how he couldn't speak a word of English when he first came to school.

"He learned really fast too, Grandpa," I said. "Aman and me, we were always in the same class in junior school and now at Belmont Academy. And you're right, Grandpa, he is small. But he can run like the wind, and he plays football like a wizard. He never talks much about Afghanistan, always says it was another life, and not a life he wants to remember. So I don't ask. But when Grandma died,

I found that Aman was the only one I could talk to. Maybe because I knew he was the only one who would understand."

"Good to have a friend like that," said Grandpa.

"Anyway," I went on, "he's been in this prison place, him and his mum, for over three weeks now. I was there when they came and took him away, like he was a criminal or something. They're keeping them locked up in there until they send them back to Afghanistan. We've written letters from school, to the Prime Minister, to the Queen, to all kinds of people, asking them to let Aman stay. They don't even bother to write back. And I've written to Aman too, lots of times. He wrote back only once, just after he got there, saying that one of the worst things about

being locked up in this prison place is that he can't go out at night and look at the stars."

"Prison place, what d'you mean, prison place?" Grandpa asked.

"Yarl's— something or other," I said, trying to picture the address I'd written to. "Yarl's Wood, that's it.'

"That's near here, I know it is. Not far anyway," said Grandpa. "Maybe you could visit him."

"It's no good. They don't let kids in," I said. "We asked. Mum rang up, and they said it wasn't allowed. I was too young. And anyway, I don't even know if he's still in there. Like I said, he hasn't written back for a while now."

Grandpa and I didn't talk for some time. We were just stargazing again, and that

was when I first had the idea. Sometimes I think that's where the idea must have come from. The stars.

"And They Keep Kids in There?"

Matt

I was worried about how Grandpa might react, but it was worth a try, I thought.

"Grandpa?" I said. "I've been thinking about Aman. I mean, maybe we could find out. Maybe you could ring up, or something, and see if he's still there. And if

he is, then you could go, Grandpa. You could go and see Aman instead of me, couldn't you?"

"But I hardly know him, do I?" Grandpa replied. "What would I say?"

I could tell he didn't much like the idea. So I didn't push it. You couldn't push Grandpa, everyone in the family knew that. As Mum often said, he could be a stubborn old cuss. So we sat there in silence, but all the time I knew he was thinking it over.

Grandpa said nothing more about it that night, nor at breakfast the next morning. I thought that either he'd forgotten all about it, or he'd already made up his mind he didn't want to do it. Either way, I didn't feel I could mention it again. And anyway, by now I think I had almost

given up on the idea myself.

It was part of Grandpa's daily routine, whatever the weather, to get up early and take Dog for a walk along the river meadows to Grantchester – his 'constitutional', he called it. And I know he always liked me to come with him when I was staying. I didn't much like getting up early, but once I was out there, I loved the walks, especially on misty mornings like this one.

There was no one about, except a rowing boat or two, and ducks, lots of ducks. There were cows in the meadows, so I had to keep Dog on the lead. I was having a bit of a struggle hanging on to him. There was always some rabbit hole he just *had* to stay behind to investigate, or some molehill he insisted he must make friends with. He was pulling all the time.

"Funny coincidence though," Grandpa said suddenly.

"What is?" I asked.

"That Yarl's Wood place you were talking about last night. I think that could be the detention centre place Grandma used to visit, years ago, before she got ill. My memory's not what it was, but I think it was called Yarl's Wood – that's probably how I knew about it. She was a sort of befriender there."

"A befriender?"

"Yes," Grandpa said. "She'd go in and talk to the people in there – you know, the asylum seekers, to cheer them up a bit, because they were going through hard times. She did that a lot in prisons all her life. But she never said much about it, said it upset her too much to talk about it.

Once a week or so, she'd go off and make someone a little happier for a while. She was like that. She always said I should do it too, that I'd be good at it. But I never had her courage. It's the idea of being locked up, I suppose, even if you know you can leave whenever you want to. How silly is that?"

"Do you know what Aman wrote in his letter, Grandpa?" I said. "He told me there's six locked doors and a barbed wire fence, between him and the world outside. He counted them."

That was the moment we turned and looked at one another, and I knew then that Grandpa had made up his mind he was going to do it. We never got to Grantchester. We turned round at once and went home, and Dog did not like that one bit.

Grandpa had been a journalist before he retired, so he knew how to find out about these things. As soon as we got back into the house, he was on the phone. He discovered that in order to visit Mrs Khan and Aman in Yarl's Wood, he had to write a formal letter, asking permission. It took a few days before the reply came back.

The good news was that they were still there, and the people at Yarl's Wood said that Grandpa could come on Wednesday, in two days' time it was, and that visiting times were between two and five in the afternoon. I wrote Aman a letter at once telling him Grandpa was coming to visit him. I hoped he'd write back or phone. But he didn't, and I couldn't understand that at all.

All the way there I could see Grandpa was a bit nervous. He kept saying how he

wished he had never agreed to do it in the first place. Dog was in the back seat, leaning his head on Grandpa's shoulder watching the road in front, as he always did. "I think Dog would drive this car himself if you let him," I said, trying to cheer Grandpa up a bit.

"I wish you could come in with me, Matt," he said.

"Me too," I told him. "But you'll be fine, Grandpa. Just go for it. And you'll like Aman. He'll remember you, I know he will. And you've got the Monopoly, haven't you? He'll beat you, Grandpa. But don't worry about that. He beats everyone. And tell him to write to me, will you? Or text, or phone?"

We were driving up a long straight hill. It seemed to lead to nowhere but the sky.

Only when we reached the top of the rise did we see the gates, and then the barbed wire fence all around.

"And they keep kids in there?" Grandpa breathed.