

Always stay hopeful.

That's my motto.

You're probably thinking, he's such a dreamer, that Wassim. What's he got to be hopeful about? He's ten years old and look at his life.

Thanks, but it's not so bad.

I've got a lot to be hopeful about.

So has Uncle Otto.

I can't wait to tell him what I've just discovered at the public library. How it's going to make such a difference to our lives.

Mine and Uncle Otto's.

No more Iron Weasels threatening to hurt him if he can't get the parts to fix their cars. Or if he tells anyone about their crimes. Or if he tries to stop them making monkey noises at me.

Very soon Uncle Otto will be one of the most unthreatened people in Europe.

One of the happiest as well, most likely.

You're probably thinking, somebody tell Wassim he's just a kid. Ask him how much hope a kid like him has got of standing up to the Weasels. Has he forgotten they've got guns?

No, I haven't forgotten.

But I've still got a lot of hope.

Specially now there's a person who can help me.

A person who knows more than anyone about staying hopeful and dealing with vicious bullies.

A person called Felix Salinger.

Always be careful in public libraries.

They can be more dangerous than they look.

If you're lucky there'll be a librarian who's kind and helpful. Who says things like, 'Good morning, Wassim. How's the research going? Don't forget to wash your hands before you touch the books.'

But there might also be a senior librarian who gives you long suspicious stares because it's a week-day and you're not at school.

I'm where I've been all week, at a desk behind a shelf of history books and a big panel encouraging old people to use the library's 3-D printer.

I have to be very careful. If the senior librarian sees I'm here again, she might start making phone calls. And the police around here aren't very friendly to people like me.

It's worth the risk.

Public library computers are very good at helping you discover people's secret identities.

People like Felix Salinger.

I'm reading about his very incredible life.

His amazing childhood in Poland in World War Two. How he fooled the Nazis just by changing his name. How the Nazis wanted to kill him very much, but they weren't able to.

After the way he dealt with all that, I bet Felix Salinger will be able to help me and Uncle Otto with our problems standing on his head.

All I need to do now is find out how to get in touch with him.

I reach for the mouse.

But I don't click.

I freeze instead.

Behind me, a sound has started. A sound you hear a lot on TV, coming from crowds in football stadiums, specially here in Eastern Europe.

I also hear it up close sometimes. So close I can feel hot breath and blobs of spit on the back of my neck, that's how worked up the person is who's making the noises.

The monkey noises.

I jump up and turn round.

Two big teenagers. One still jibbering, the other one grinning. Both wearing Iron Weasels jackets.

'Whatcha doing, monkey boy?' says the grinner.

I don't answer.

What I want to say is, 'What's wrong with you lot? Just because you support a football team that's not much good, don't take it out on everyone else.'

Bullying doesn't make a team better, you idiots.'

But I keep quiet.

Their dads are Iron Weasels too, and if you insult their team, some of the dads get their guns out.

The grinning teenager grabs me round the head. His arm is like a car wrecker's clamp, twisting my head into his armpit.

I catch sight of what the other one's doing. He's stopped making monkey noises and he's peering at the computer screen.

At the old photos in the newspaper article I was reading about Felix Salinger.

'Look at that,' he sniggers. 'Monkey boy's doing a school project on Nazis and Jews.'

I lunge towards the desk, trying to turn the computer off.

But I can't. The grinning Weasel clamps my head even tighter. It feels like it's being wrenched out of shape.

Doesn't matter. The article is in English, which I'm pretty sure these two thugs don't speak because they probably haven't got mothers who are as smart as mine was.

The other Weasel sees something on the desk and picks it up.

'*William Does His Bit*,' he mutters, staring at the cover of my Richmal Crompton book. 'Who said you could read about white people, jungle boy?'

'Put that down,' I say. 'It's not a library book. My grandpa left me that in his will.'

But the Weasel doesn't put it down. He sees what I'm using as a bookmark.

Grandpa Amon's secret note to me.

Which is not for anyone else to read.

The Weasel doesn't care about that. He grabs the note and reads it out loud.

'Dear Wassim. Your life won't be easy. And I won't be there to help you. So if you're ever in big trouble, see a man called Wilhelm Nowak. He'll help you because of what I gave him at Speerkopf. Good luck, from Grandpa Amon.'

The Weasels smirk at each other as if this is the funniest thing they've ever heard.

'What did he give him at Speerkopf, wherever that is?' says the Weasel who's crushing my head. 'A kiss?'

The Weasels both chortle.

I can't stand them being mean about Grandpa Amon, who died when I was three weeks old, but who I love very much.

'Put that note back,' I say. 'I only found it last week and I need it.'

I wish I was like Felix Salinger when he was young. I wish I had the fighting skills he learned from the partisan freedom fighters.

I don't have any fighting skills, but I'm desperate, so I give one of Felix's a try.

I twist my body, ignoring the pain, and jab my knee as hard as I can into the back of the head-crusher's knee.

He yells and half falls and I pull myself out of his grip, staggering backwards and crashing into a bookshelf.

The tall bookshelf begins to wobble.

It starts to fall.

I try to steady it.

Then I see both Weasels coming at me, faces pink with fury.

I let go of the shelves and jump sideways.

The bookshelf falls forward until it crashes against another bookshelf, which stops it.

But the history books don't stop. They hurtle off the shelves and smack hard into the Weasels, knocking them both off their feet.

Close by, a woman shouts something.

I grab my book and my note.

'You boys,' says the woman's voice, stern and furious. 'Leave this library immediately.'

The Weasels are both scrambling up, frantically brushing the books away as if they're poisonous.

The senior librarian is glaring at us. Next to her is the nice librarian, hands over her mouth with concern. The senior librarian holds up her phone. Which I think is official librarian language for *do what I say or I'll call the police*.

'Out,' she yells. 'Now.'

I do what she says. I duck past the Weasels and sprint towards the door and outside and across the carpark away from the library.

But not away from the Weasels.

I can hear them behind me, feet clumping, breath sucking.

Getting closer.

‘Maybe the monkey boy’s Jewish,’ one of them pants loudly, like he wants me to hear it. ‘Can you be black and Jewish?’

‘Dunno,’ says the other one. ‘Get his willy out, that’ll tell us.’

They’re even closer.

I have to do something.

Suddenly I stop. And turn. And glare at them.

For a second I haven’t got a clue what I’m doing. The Weasels don’t either. They stop too, a bit startled, but still angry and violent.

I don’t care. I’m bursting with the feelings I get when the Weasels, the grown-up ones, bully Uncle Otto. And mock him for looking after me.

‘Change of plan,’ I yell at the teenage Weasels in front of me. ‘Things are different now.’

They stare at me.

‘Your bullying days are over, Weasels,’ I say. ‘We’ve got Felix Salinger on our side now. He eats scum like you for breakfast.’

I glare at them.

They sneer at me, but I can see they’re a bit uncertain. And puzzled. They probably haven’t got a clue who Felix Salinger is.

Tough.

I’m not telling them anything else. Let them find out that Felix Salinger is the same person as the

Wilhelm Nowak in Grandpa Amon's secret message. If they can. I'm keeping Felix Salinger's details to myself for now. That's what you do with secret weapons.

'He must be one tough dude, this Felix Salinger,' growls one of the Weasels. 'Which he'll need to be.'

I know he will.

'Speerkopf,' says the other one. 'We'll check it out. See who this Felix Salinger is. Decide if we need to be scared.'

'Or,' says the first Weasel, 'if *you* do.'

They turn and walk away, both of them making loud monkey noises.

I walk in the other direction. Trying to swagger. But not finding it easy. My legs are trembling, and I'm starting to feel uncertain myself now.

I think I might have exaggerated about what Felix Salinger eats for breakfast.

He might prefer muesli.

I'm thinking he probably does, now I've just finished a slightly worrying calculation.

When Grandpa Amon met Wilhelm Nowak, who was actually Felix Salinger, at the Speerkopf Regional Nazi Command Centre in Poland in 1942, Felix Salinger was my age.

Which means that now he's eighty-seven.

Always try not to worry your parents.

That's my motto with Mum and Dad. Which is why, when I feel tears coming, I always do my best to have them before I get here.

Plus today, because it's been snowing, Mum will be worried about me catching a cold. So I'm making sure both my coat flaps are wrapped warmly round my legs as I kneel down next to her and Dad.

And gently brush the snow off their gravestone.

'Hi, Mum and Dad,' I say softly. 'I've got some really good news.'

It always feels weird whispering to them. But you have to in a cemetery. Talking loudly in a sad place can attract attention. You can end up being chased away by cemetery officials. Which is very upsetting for your parents when they're gone and they can't protect you.

'I've found him,' I whisper to Mum and Dad.

‘I’ve found Wilhelm Nowak. The man Grandpa’s note says will help us.’

I pause to let this sink in.

‘His real name is Felix Salinger,’ I say. ‘He used to be Polish and now he lives in Australia. There’s a whole long article about his life in a newspaper there. And the Australian government gave him a really high-up award for being such a brilliant surgeon.’

I pause again.

I don’t mention Felix Salinger’s age. When I’m telling Mum and Dad my news, I try to be honest and truthful, but also hopeful. So they can be hopeful too.

‘A man like him,’ I say, ‘probably knows heaps of important people. So if he’s feeling a bit too old and weary to help us with the Weasels, he’s probably got loads of friends here in Europe who can do it instead. Important doctors, government ministers, army generals . . .’

A gentle breeze blows, just enough to lift the ear flaps of my beanie.

We don’t get many gentle winter breezes around here, mostly storms and gales, so this is how I know Mum and Dad have heard me and are wishing me good luck.

‘Thanks, Mum and Dad,’ I whisper.

I’ve had heaps of good luck, thanks to them.

Last week, for example, when I found Grandpa Amon’s secret message. That was my lucky day.

Mum and Dad are amazing, helping me with so much good luck after what happened to them.

No good luck for them at all.

I take a deep breath. Trying not to have tears.

I don't want to worry them.

Not now I'm so close to having the best luck of my life.

Which I'm hoping will happen tonight, after dinner, when me and Uncle Otto do the washing-up and then get in touch with Felix Salinger.

Always just trying to do their best, that's how most people are.

It was one of Mum's favourite mottos.

As I hurry through the darkness towards Uncle Otto's car-repair workshop, I can't help wishing it was one of Uncle Otto's mottos too.

It would make it easier for both of us when I'm late. He'd remember I've just been out trying to do my best, and he wouldn't get so cross and grumpy.

I'm not complaining.

I'm very lucky that Mum had Uncle Otto as her brother. Most of the time he's kind and loving, like her. I just wish he didn't get so stressed. It can't be good for him, when his head goes even more pink than usual.

I give the workshop door a push, but it's locked.

Then I hear footsteps thumping upstairs in the kitchen, which tells me Uncle Otto might be a bit cross and grumpy now.

If only I had a phone, I could have called him from the cemetery and told him about being late. But Uncle Otto doesn't think kids like me should have phones, because of unkind people online.

I find my key and open the door.

Uncle Otto's footsteps are still thumping.

The upstairs part of the workshop, where he lives, has a thick wooden floor.

But when Uncle Otto gets grumpy, he's so big and heavy the whole place shakes. Each time he has a girlfriend, they always complain about it.

I hurry up the stairs.

Uncle Otto is standing at the kitchen doorway, waiting. He looks at me with the expression he has a lot. Stressed and sad at the same time.

'Why d'you do this, Wassim?' he says. 'Why d'you make it so difficult?'

He turns and goes back to the stove.

I follow him in.

'Sorry, Uncle Otto,' I say. 'But I had to tell Mum and Dad about my research.'

Uncle Otto flips the pork chop over in the pan, slapping it down.

'Research for school?' he says.

'Better than that,' I say.

'What's better than school?' he says.

I hesitate. I always try to tell Uncle Otto the truth. But today I'd rather tell him the good news about Felix Salinger first, and then move on to the bad news about not being in class.

‘They rang,’ says Uncle Otto. ‘I had a gearbox in pieces and the school rang again. Wanting to know where you were.’

‘Sorry,’ I say.

Uncle Otto hates being interrupted when he’s working. He’s a brilliant car mechanic and he works very hard to do the best job for his customers.

Even though some of them don’t deserve it and should be in jail.

‘I’m not a real parent,’ says Uncle Otto. ‘I haven’t got the strong nerves of a real parent. So don’t make me worry about you. How many times have I told you that?’

I don’t reply.

We both know it’s a lot.

Uncle Otto turns off the gas. He squeezes a big dollop of chilli sauce on to his chop as usual. Then he opens the cupboard door under the sink where the vegetable box is.

‘I’ve got to do this,’ he says. ‘It’s what a parent has to do.’

I know what’s coming next. So I haven’t got long to say what I need to say.

‘I know where Wilhelm Nowak is,’ I blurt out.

Uncle Otto turns and stares at me.

He saw Grandpa Amon’s note last week when I found it hidden in my Richmal Crompton book. He said it was a very kind thought of Grandpa’s, but I shouldn’t get my hopes up because Wilhelm Nowak was probably lost in the mists of time.

‘I know Wilhelm Nowak’s real name,’ I say. ‘It’s Doctor Felix Salinger. He lives in Australia. Their government gave him a medal. A newspaper did a big article about him.’

I keep on talking very fast, trying to fit in as much detail about Felix Salinger’s life as I can while I have the chance.

Uncle Otto’s face is getting the stressed and sad look again.

Mostly sad.

He holds up his hands, which means I have to stop talking.

‘Wassim,’ he says. ‘Listen to me. Your grandpa loved you. Didn’t matter he only knew you for a few weeks. But that note of his is two pistons short of a Daewoo. Think about it. Some kid a person shares a couple of books with back in the mists of time doesn’t come helping seventy years later.’

You don’t usually argue with Uncle Otto, but sometimes you have to.

‘Felix Salinger remembers Grandpa Amon,’ I say. ‘Really well. He’s very grateful to him. He says so in the newspaper.’

I hold out a piece of library toilet paper. On it is the link to the Australian newspaper article in my best handwriting. And a link to a website that’ll translate the article for Uncle Otto.

Uncle Otto takes the piece of paper and tosses it on the table without looking at it.

Which makes me sad.

Next year is 2020. Uncle Otto turns fifty next year. A person deserves a really good present for their fiftieth birthday. Specially when they've been looking after a kid for eleven months and fifteen days who's not even their son.

But I can't afford to buy a really good present. So I'm giving him Felix Salinger instead.

'Please,' I say to Uncle Otto. 'Felix Salinger will help us, I know he will. And his friends will too. Imagine what that would be like, a Weasel-free life.'

Uncle Otto sighs and his shoulders sag.

For a moment I think he's going to agree.

But instead he snorts wearily.

'You're your mother's son,' he says. 'She was like you, stubborn as a rusted-on tube clamp. Coming back from England with a husband she knew would have a struggle fitting in here.'

I glare at Uncle Otto.

Sometimes he doesn't stick to the point.

'There's a big difference between what Mum did and what you're doing,' I say. 'Mum was in love with Dad, plus he was kind and generous and brave and funny. The Weasels are violent criminals.'

Uncle Otto doesn't like me saying things like that about the Weasels. And not just because he supports the same football team as them.

'They're my customers,' says Uncle Otto. 'I know they're not perfect, but I haven't got any choice. So stop dreaming about people from the past, Wassim. I'm here now and I look after you.'

Uncle Otto's shoulders sag again. They always do when he talks about how he hasn't got any choice.

He's right, he hasn't. Not at the moment.

But it doesn't always have to be like this.

I want to tell Uncle Otto not to lose hope, but he turns back to the cupboard under the sink and squats down and puts his head inside.

I wait while he finds what he's looking for.

When he's found it, he stands up, closes the cupboard and comes over.

And puts his arm round my shoulders.

Which he doesn't do very often, so I'm a bit surprised and speechless.

'Are you being bullied at school?' he says.

I think fast.

The last time Uncle Otto asked me about that, I told him the truth and he went to the school and threatened a lot of people. Not just kids.

I tell him the truth again.

But only about today. I wasn't bullied at school today because I wasn't there.

'No,' I say.

'Good,' he says. 'OK, you know the deal.'

I have to go to my room. It's the punishment Uncle Otto always gives me for skipping school.

But Uncle Otto's not a cruel person. He doesn't want me to starve. So when he sends me to bed without any dinner, he always gives me something from under the sink.

For basic nutrition.

He's holding something out to me now.

Tonight it's a carrot.

I flop on to my bed.

Carefully, because I don't want to damage it.

Uncle Otto built this bed for me with his own hands. He built this whole bedroom, using brand-new pieces of plywood and a new curtain.

Which was very kind, because it was a lot of hard work and trouble.

Fitting a whole new room into his workshop, even a small room like this, meant he had to shift a lot of tyres over against the wall. Plus brake linings and spark plugs and gear boxes and chemicals for flushing out engines that Uncle Otto says might explode if they get spilled.

And then a few weeks ago, he had to shift everything again when the Weasels made him store a huge pile of stolen iPads here.

I sigh and have a bite of my carrot.

I'm very lucky I've got this room. And Uncle Otto. Some kids have to live on the streets when their parents aren't around any more.

I switch on my lamp and pick up *William Does His Bit* by Richmal Crompton. Who, I learned at the library today, was also Felix Salinger's favourite author when he was a kid.

That must be how he met Grandpa Amon.

I stare at Grandpa Amon's note.

I feel sad that I only knew Grandpa Amon for three weeks and I can't even remember his face.

But I feel very happy that me and him are both giving Felix Salinger to Uncle Otto.

Tomorrow I'll go back to the library and use the creative thinking I got from Grandpa Amon and the determination I got from Mum and the hopefulness I got from Dad.

I'll use them to find out Felix Salinger's address, and then I'll contact him.

I must have fallen asleep reading, because when I open my eyes I've still got my coat on and there's cold dribble on my chin and my eyes are bleary.

But my ears are working.

They're full of the sound I hate the most.

Big old Mercedes cars roaring across the waste ground outside the workshop and stopping right in front of our side entrance.

Car doors slamming. Like my chest is now.

I haven't got a clue what the time is.

Late, probably.

They don't care about that. They never do.

The Iron Weasels.

Always have a glass of water in your hand.

That way, if people see you out of your room when you shouldn't be, specially violent thugs, at least you've got an excuse.

I read that motto in a story.

This is the first time I've used it.

I tiptoe up the workshop stairs, trying to hear what the Iron Weasels are saying to Uncle Otto in his office. Their gruff voices are angry but muffled. Some of the Weasels are even bigger than Uncle Otto, and I can hear their thumping feet even on the shag-pile office carpet Uncle Otto bought from someone in a pub.

At the top of the stairs I duck into the kitchen and half fill a glass with water, slowly so the pipes don't bang. Then I creep along the dark hallway to the office door.

It's closed, but I can still hear better up here.

A voice is speaking.

I haven't heard this voice before.

It's not gruff like the others. It's more sort of grating and whiny. Like when a crankshaft is doing damage to an engine.

'Last warning, Kurtz,' the voice says in Polish. 'Here's what'll happen the next time that little jungle vermin of yours sticks his nose where it doesn't belong and shoots his mouth off. We'll find someone else to fix our cars. Then we'll fix you.'

I feel sick. I should have warned Uncle Otto that I'd yelled at some teenage Weasels.

Another voice replies, mumbling.

It's Uncle Otto, but I can't hear what he's saying.

I hate it when they threaten Uncle Otto. And I hate how he has to take it because there's always more of them than there is of him.

I wish I was bigger.

And armed.

But I'm not, so I keep quiet.

On the other side of the door, the crankshaft Weasel is speaking again.

'We're losing patience with you, Kurtz,' he says. 'If you've got a problem doing what we tell you, remind yourself what a cruel and unlucky place the world is. And how there's one person in your family who hasn't been unlucky. So far.'

Uncle Otto mutters something.

There's the sound of a slap. And a yelp. I've never heard Uncle Otto yelp before, but I know it was him.

In pain.

I bang the door open.

‘Stop doing that,’ I yell. ‘It’s not his fault. Those teenagers at the library started it. You can’t punish Uncle Otto for something he didn’t do. It’s not fair.’

That’s all I get to say.

Big hands grab me round the throat.

And squeeze. Hard.

I can’t breathe. My neck is being crushed. The room is going wobbly.

Faces all around me are glaring and sneering. Uncle Otto is looking horrified.

I can’t help it, I drop my glass of water on to the floor. Then I’m on the floor too, gasping.

Uncle Otto is crouching over me, his eyes wide and frantic.

‘Wassim,’ he says, gently massaging my neck.

‘It’s OK,’ I croak. ‘I’m OK.’

Two of the Weasels try to drag Uncle Otto away from me. He doesn’t let them. I can see they’re about to get more violent.

I manage to take a deep breath.

‘See,’ I say to Uncle Otto. ‘I can breathe. It’s OK. Don’t worry.’

‘Enough of this,’ says the crankshaft voice, cross and irritable. ‘Back to business.’

The Weasels pull Uncle Otto to his feet, but then they let go of him.

‘Go back to bed,’ Uncle Otto says to me, his face showing how much he means it. ‘Now.’