

THE EMPTY CHAIR

There used to be an empty chair at the back of my classroom. It wasn't a special chair. It was just empty because there was no one sitting in it. But then, one day just three weeks after school started, the most exciting thing that could ever happen to anyone, happened to me and my three best friends. And it all began with that chair.

Usually, the best thing about starting a brand-new term is that you get extra pocket money to buy new stationery with. Every year, on the last Sunday of the summer holidays, my mum takes me on an Extra-Special Adventure to hunt down my stationery set for the new school year. Sometimes I get so excited that my feet feel jumpy inside and I don't know which shop I

want to go into first. There aren't many nice stationery shops where I live – they only ever have boring dinosaur sets for boys or princess sets for girls. So Mum takes me on the bus and train into the city where there are whole streets of shops – even huge department stores that look like tall blocks of flats from the outside.

Last year, I found a space-themed set with pictures of an astronaut floating past the moon. It was on sale too, so I bought a pencil case, a maths set, rubbers and a long ruler – and still had nearly a pound left over! The ruler is one of my favourite stationery pieces, because the astronaut floats across it in water mixed with silver stars. I played with it so much that the astronaut got stuck to one side and couldn't be bothered to move again. But it wasn't my fault. Mr Thompson, our teacher last year, had such a boring voice that my hands needed something to do. That's why it's important to have fun stationery with you in class – because you never know when you'll need to stop your brain from falling asleep or doing something that might get you into detention.

This year, I bought a Tintin and Snowy set. I love Tintin. Even though he's only a character in a comic

book and isn't real, I want to be just like him when I grow up. I think being a reporter and getting to solve mysteries and go on adventures must be the best job in the world. My mum and dad used to buy me a brand new Tintin comic book for my birthdays, and Mum saves all the comics her library are about to throw away because they're too old or ripped and gives them to me, so I have a whole collection of them now. I've read them all at least fifty times. But I'll have to think of another pet to travel with because I'm allergic to dogs. I don't think cats or hamsters or even trained mice could be half as useful as a Tintin's dog, Snowy. And even though I've thought about it for at least a year now, I still haven't come up with anything.

Because the Tintin stationery set was a lot more expensive than the astronaut one and wasn't on sale, I could only buy a pencil case, a small ruler and two rubbers. I had to think about it for a very long time but in the end, I decided spending all my pocket money in one go was worth it. Not just because everything had Tintin on it, but because if you press a button on the pencil case, Snowy barks and Captain Haddock's voice cries out 'Blistering barnacles!'. I've already been told

off for pressing it in the middle of maths class this year, but if you can't press a barking dog button in maths then I don't see the point of it.

I don't like maths. Simple maths is fine, but this year we're learning about long division and square numbers and all sorts of things that my brain doesn't like doing. Sometimes I ask for help, but it's embarrassing putting your hand up too many times to ask the same question. I'm lucky because Tom and Josie and Michael always help me with the things I get stuck with. They're my best friends and we do everything together.

Tom's got short spiky hair and a side-smile and a big Adam's apple that looks like a ping-pong ball got stuck in his throat. He's the smallest in our group but he's also the funniest. He only joined our class last year after his parents moved here from America, but we became friends instantly. He has three older brothers who all tease and bully him. Not seriously – only for a joke. But I think they steal his food too which is why he's so skinny and always super-hungry. I once saw him eat a whole pizza with extra toppings and a double cheeseburger for lunch and still not be full up! So I hide my snacks and chocolate bars from him when I can.

Josie has large, brown eyes and at least a million freckles across her face. She's tall and gangly and is always chewing on her hair. She's the fastest girl in our year and can kick a football past any goalie from the other side of the pitch. She's the coolest person I know, and I've known her since we were three. Our mums say we became instant friends the first day we started nursery, so they decided to become friends too. I don't really remember much about myself at that age, but Josie is in all my school memories. We even got our first detention together last year – all because of a hamster called Herbert.

Josie had heard one of the upper school bullies say that he was going to flush our class hamster, Herbert, down the toilet at home-time. Josie told me, and we decided to go on a Hamster Rescue Mission. We hid Herbert in my rucksack before home-time and took him straight to my house. But of course, Mum found out and made me take him back the very next day. I tried to explain to boring Mr Thompson what had happened, but he wouldn't listen and gave me detention. And even though she didn't have to, Josie stood up and said she had helped to steal Herbert too – just so we

could do detention together. You know a friend's a Best Friend when they're willing to sit in detention with you.

Michael has the neatest, puffiest Afro out of all the boys in our year. Most people think he's weird. But not us. His glasses are always broken, and his shoelaces are never done right, so he's always tripping up or bumping into things when he walks. But we're all so used to it now that we never notice. He's mostly quiet but when he does say something, grown-ups usually look impressed and say that it's 'ingenious' or 'insightful' or use other strange words beginning with 'in'. I don't know what they mean, but I guess they mean he's clever. Grown-ups always like coming up with long words for simple things.

Michael gets made fun of a lot because he can't run fast or kick a ball in a straight line, but he doesn't care. I wouldn't care either if I was as rich as him. His dad is a professor and his mum is a lawyer, and because they're always busy, they buy him all the latest gadgets and books and the coolest new games. When we went to his house last year for his birthday party, we saw his room for the first time. It looked like the inside of a toy store. I think it must be easier not to care about what people think when you've got that many toys in your life.

Josie and Michael are always competing with each other to see who can get the most gold stars and As in class. Michael is the best at history and Josie is the best at maths. But I'm better at reading and spelling than both of them – especially Josie. She hates reading and never, ever reads anything outside class. She says she doesn't have an imagination, so there's no point to reading books. I find that strange, because how can anyone not have an imagination? I think she must have had one when she was younger but that it was knocked out of her when she fell off her bike last summer. Mum says people without imaginations are dead inside. I don't think Josie is dead anywhere – she talks too much.

Having three best friends can make school seem like the best place to be, even on the most boring day. Although this year, school has become a whole lot more fun – and that's because of our new teacher, Mrs Khan.

Mrs Khan has extra bouncy hair and always smells of strawberry jam – which is much better than smelling of old socks like Mr Thompson used to do. She's new to the school and extra clever – much cleverer than Mr Thompson ever was. And she gives us prizes on Fridays when we've all been good. No other teacher in our year does that.

Mrs Khan lets us do all sorts of interesting things that we have never done before. In the first week of school, she helped us make musical instruments out of things we found in the school's recycling bin, and in the second week, she brought in a brand-new comic book to read to us that wasn't even in the school library yet.

Then in the third week, something happened that was so surprising and made everyone so curious, that even Mrs Khan couldn't make us focus on our lessons properly. And it all began with the empty chair.



It was on the third Tuesday after school had started, and Mrs Khan was taking the register. She was just about to call my name when there was a loud knock at the door. Usually when there's a knock on the door it's just someone from another class bringing a note, so no one really pays any attention; but this time it was Mrs Sanders, the Head. Mrs Sanders always wears her hair in the exact same way and peers over her glasses whenever she talks to anyone. Everyone is scared of her, because when she gives detention, she doesn't just make you sit in a room; she makes you memorise long

words from the dictionary and doesn't let you leave until you've learnt them all off by heart – the meaning AND the spelling. I've even heard of lower graders being stuck in detention for hours because they had to learn words that were as long as this page!

So when we saw that it was Mrs Sanders at the door, we all fell silent. She looked very serious as she walked up to Mrs Khan, and we all wondered who was in trouble. After she had whispered and nodded for a few seconds, she suddenly turned around and, peering over her glasses at us, pointed to the empty chair at the back of the class.

All of us turned around to have a look at the empty chair. This was the chair: