

The Key to finding Jack

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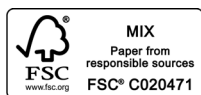
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One

‘So listen to this one. You have a treasure chest that you want to send me in the post. Each of us has our own padlock with a key, but you don’t have the key to my padlock and I don’t have the key to yours. How can you send me the treasure chest and make sure nobody else can open it?’

We were sitting on Jack’s bed, staring out through the skylight. I was supposed to be in my own room fast asleep, but I’d sneaked up the stairs as I did so often.

Being six years older than me, Jack stayed up until whatever time he wanted, and he was hardly ever asleep when I crept in.

That night I could already hear the familiar engine roar. I knew without checking the clock

that it was the 10.15 p.m. flight to New York. Right on cue, the flashing dot appeared in the black square of Jack's skylight. I liked to imagine all the people sitting in the plane waiting to reach their destination. I even made up stories about them. The old lady going to visit her businessman son, who'd recently started working in Manhattan. A newly married couple off on their honeymoon – drinking champagne and kissing. And, in the row in front of them, a family with loads of kids coming home after spending a few weeks in London over the summer holidays. The stewardesses were a bit annoyed because the kids kept getting out of their seats and running up and down the aisle, colliding with the food and drinks trolleys.

I tried to focus my mind on Jack's riddle.

'Easy. I would send you the key in a separate envelope. Only you and I would know what it's for,' I declared triumphantly.

'Nah. Come on, Flick, you can do better than that. It could easily be intercepted.'

I racked my brain.

'Oh, I don't know. Crack the padlock open with

a hammer?’ I asked, although I knew it was the wrong answer.

‘You have to be subtler than that. If it’s possible to force it open, anyone could. Think harder, sergeant.’

We had a joke from when we were little that Jack was a detective doing lots of undercover work, and I was his main contact in the police force. He’d explained that this role was much more important than being his assistant (which I always wanted to be), because it meant heading up the detective operations in the field. ‘The difference is that all your work is legal. Some of what I do is undercover and shady. Together we make a great team though.’

The roles were perfect, because I loved to follow rules and Jack hated them. One of his absolute favourite things was to make people laugh. He often got away with his practical jokes, and when he didn’t, he got detentions. Quite a lot of them. That made Dad really cross, especially now, as Jack was supposed to be concentrating on his work and getting into uni. Then Mum would be cross because Dad was cross, and normally Mum was on Jack’s

side. Dad said she was over-protective of him. But Jack was also cleverer than anyone I knew and could solve the hardest puzzles and mysteries in seconds.

‘Remember that working out a riddle might take a few steps. Let me start you off. You have your own padlock with a key. You send me the chest with your locked padlock attached. I receive it, but instead of trying to open the chest, I add my padlock to it, also locked. Then I send it back to you. Is it beginning to make sense? You’d be receiving the same chest but this time with two padlocks.’

‘Of course! I unlock my padlock and send the chest back to you with only your padlock attached, and you can unlock it and get the treasure!’

He held up his hand for a high five. Jack was like that – helping me towards the answer but making me feel I’d got there myself.

He passed me his box of chocolate frogs and I sucked on one happily, even though I’d brushed my teeth. At first the mix of minty toothpaste and chocolate was disgusting, but I knew that after about thirty seconds my mouth would be filled with caramelly wonder.

Each time I cracked one of Jack's puzzles I immediately felt sleepy and he had to pinch me to send me back to my own room. But that night I was determined to stay awake for as long as possible, because it would be the last time in ages we'd be able to have this kind of conversation face to face. In the corner of his room, by the window, my brother's rucksack was already packed, and his passport and plane tickets were lying on the bedside table.

Jack would be gone for a whole ten months. He wouldn't be with us when we went to the fireworks for my birthday in November. He wouldn't bring me huge sticks of marshmallows like he did every year and tell me the names of all the weird and wonderful flashes in the sky. I could never tell which were real and which he'd made up on the spot.

He'd also miss Christmas. Grandma Sylvie would come round, as she did every year, and complain about her aches and pains, and without Jack, there would be nobody to distract her by suggesting a card game, or giving us all some really complicated puzzles to solve.

I tried not to think about it too much, because it made a painful ball, which I couldn't swallow, form in my throat.

So as I sat there, looking up at the skylight, I tried to think about everything other than Jack leaving, which was easier said than done. I told myself that I would remember this evening as 'The Night of the Treasure Chest' because otherwise it would have to be 'The Night Before Jack Left'.



I kept replaying the short birthday greetings film that Jack had sent me from Brazil. It was strange seeing him there on the beach, when Mum and I were in the middle of our Christmas shopping. We went to Uncle Michael's for New Year's Eve dinner and when I lit my sparkler, I made a couple of important resolutions. The first was that I would finally complete at least one of the stories that were swarming in my head, inspired by Jack's riddles. The second was that I would persuade Dad to pay for us all to visit Jack.

On the wall calendar that he'd made for me, I kept counting down the days that he'd been away and fortunately, time was passing quite quickly. The new term started and we were set an exciting writing project in English. Otherwise, life carried on as normal. There were no signs that everything was about to change. Even the flashing lights of the 10.15 p.m. to New York still sped reliably past Jack's skylight night after night. But then, halfway through January, the boy who used to lie watching them was somewhere on the other side of the world, caught in what the lipsticked newsreader on TV said was 'one of the worst natural disasters in living history'.