Even When You're Sad
by Jenny Pearson

My best mate Elijah missed a day of school, which wasn't like Elijah. His mum always makes him go. One time in Year 3, when he'd tried to get out of cross-country, she shoved him in the car in his pyjamas and bare feet and marched him up to the school gates with an Aldi bag containing his sports kit, and told the headteacher he was her problem now.

When he didn't show up last week, Dylan said to me, 'George, I think something's up.'
We texted Elijah.
He didn't reply. Not even an emoji.

When he came in the next day we knew straight away that there was definitely something going on with him.
He was quiet. Unusual.
He didn't want to play bulldog at first break. Very unusual.
He didn't even want to finish my sponge and custard at lunch. Very, very unusual.

In the yard at afternoon play, Dylan and I found him sitting on a bench on his own and talking to himself.
Concerning.
'You alright, mate?' Dylan asked. 'It's just that you're talking to yourself.'
'My grandad,' he said.
Dylan and I looked at each other and I said, 'You're talking to your grandad?'
'I lost my grandad.'
'Can you remember where you last put him?' Dylan asked.
I elbowed him. 'I think he means his grandad died.'

Elijah nodded. Then started to cry. Dylan looked at me with big, concerned eyes, like I'd just broken Elijah. I didn't really know what to do. I don't know anybody who has died, so it was hard to put myself in his shoes.

I wanted to make Elijah feel better, make him know I understood. But I don't know if I did, not really, so I said, 'It's OK to cry. When Pugglypoo died I cried for days.'

I think Dylan didn't know what to say either because he said, 'I heard the lady who works in the fried chicken shop died the other day too.'

Elijah looked at us both. 'A dead dog is nothing like a dead grandad, George.'

'No.' I stuffed my hands in my pockets. 'You're probably right.'

'And I'm sorry about the lady in the fried chicken shop, Dylan, but I only really care about my grandad right now.'

'Course you do,' Dylan said.

Nobody spoke for a while. And I felt a bit uncomfortable and a lot upset for Elijah and I wished he would just stop being so sad. I wanted him to be happy Elijah again. For him. And probably for me a bit too.

'Do you want us to go?' Dylan said.

Elijah shook his head.

'How can we make you feel better?' I asked.

'You can't.'

'I wish I knew what to say,' I said.

Elijah wiped his eyes. 'You don't have to say anything. Just maybe sit down with me. That's enough.'

Dylan and I sat down on either side of him.

We were all quiet again, and I wracked my brains trying to find the right words to make Elijah stop being upset, but then he said, 'I was talking to him before – my grandad. I know he's not there, but it makes me feel a bit better.'

'You can talk to him now if you want,' Dylan said.

'I'd feel a bit daft.'

'I'll start then,' I said. 'Hi, Elijah's grandad, I'm sorry you're dead. That must suck.'

Elijah smiled.

I nudged him. 'Do you know what he said back?'

'No, what did he say?'

'He said, he's alright and he's very happy to know his grandson loved him so much, and that the lady from the fried chicken shop is keeping him well fed.'

Elijah did the smallest of laughs, then nudged me back. 'Thanks, George.'

'It's OK. I'm your friend. Even when you're sad,' I said, because that was true.

'Me too,' Dylan said.

Then I did a big swallow and said, 'I'm sorry about your grandad. It is very sad he died,' which is probably what I should have said to start with.

Elijah said, 'It is. And I'm sorry about your dog too. Can I see a picture?'

I took out my phone and showed him one of Pugglypoo wearing a bow tie. Elijah laughed. 'You know what?' he said. 'It's still not the same – them dying, but Pugglypoo doesn't look that different to my grandad after all.'