

In this excerpt from the novel Tamar, 15-year-old Tamar reminisces about the relationship between her grandmother, Marijke, and her grandfather, who had been a code breaker during World War II. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from **Tamar**
by Mal Peet

- 1 He loved her. It was dead simple, the way he loved her. Seamless. His love was like a wall that he'd built around her, and there wasn't a chink or flaw in it. Or so he thought. But then she started to float out of the real world, his world, and he was like a little boy trying to dam a stream with stones and mud, knowing that the water would always break through at a place he wasn't looking at. There was nothing desperate about the way he did it, though. He was always calm, it seemed. Expecting the worst and determined not to crack. She started to get up in the night and turn on all the taps, and he would get up too and stand quietly beside her watching the endless flow of water as if he found it as fascinating as she did. Then he'd guide her back to bed before turning the taps off. One night I heard something and went into the living room and saw the two of them standing out on the balcony. He'd wrapped his dressing gown around her, and I heard him say, "Yes, you are right, Marijke. The traffic is like a river of stars. Would you like to watch it some more, or go back to bed?"
- 2 When the calls started coming in from police stations, he handled them as if it were just business, something that happened in the normal course of things. He'd call a taxi, get his coat, rescue her, and return the stolen goods to the supermarket. (Usually it was exotic fruits, sometimes just bags of rice or potatoes.) I never once heard him complain or curse, not even so much as sigh. At first I thought he was being pigheaded stubborn, refusing to recognize the reality of the situation. Sometimes I thought he was just too distant from the world, not really grasping what was going on. But it wasn't like that at all. He and Gran had gone through terrible things when they were young, during the war. Bravery—endurance, all that—was a deep part of him. In other words, he was being heroic. It took me a long time to see it.
- 3 It's a very private thing, losing your mind. And all sorts of people, complete strangers, get involved. It was that, the invasion of his privacy, that started Grandad crumbling. And the fact that all those people—the social workers, doctors, police, psychiatrists—were younger than him, and not as clever, but more powerful. He felt—he must have felt—control slipping away. And what he did was build the wall higher, work harder to dam the stream, fight even more fiercely to keep the world at arm's length.

4 Mum and I both knew that Gran would have to go away sooner or later. Mum was good; she treated me like a grownup; we talked about it all. But with her it was the practical stuff. What if this happens? Do you think we should do this or that? What about the flat?¹ And so on. Which was missing the point, really. It was a small thing that made me realize. I went to the flat after school one day and got out of the lift,² and Grandad was standing there in his coat. He couldn't hide the fact that he was hoping to see Gran, not me. She'd gone wandering. He looked straight past me at the empty lift, and his face just collapsed. I understood then that his walls had fallen at last. That while we'd all been focusing on Gran, he was the one desperate for support, for love. Standing there by the lift, looking up at his desolate face, I realized that there was only one person who could provide it. And it scared me. I didn't think I was up to it.

5 He was not what you'd call a lovable man, my grandad. It wasn't that he was cold, exactly. It was more as though he had a huge distance inside himself. There's a game I used to play with my friends. One of us had to think of someone we all knew, and the others had to work out who it was by asking questions like "If this person was a musical instrument, what would it be?" or "If this person was a place, what would it be?" I used to think that if Grandad were a place, it would be one of those great empty landscapes you sometimes see in American movies: flat, an endless road, tumbleweed blown by a moaning wind, a vast blank sky. And after Dad disappeared, he withdrew even further into this remote space.

6 It was a funny thing, a surprising thing, that brought him back to me. It was algebra.

7 I collided with algebra in my first year at secondary school, and it sent me reeling. The very word itself seemed sinister, a word from black magic. *Algebracadabra*. Algebra messed up one of those divisions between things that help you make sense of the world and keep it tidy. Letters make words; figures make numbers. They had no business getting tangled up together. Those *as* and *bs* and *xs* and *ys* with little numbers floating next to their heads, those brackets and hooks and symbols, all trying to conceal an answer, not give you one. I'd sit there in my own little darkness watching it dawn on the faces of my classmates. Their hands would go up—"Miss! Miss!"—and mine never did. The homework reduced me to tears.

8 "I don't see the point of it," I wailed. "I don't know what it's for!"

9 Grandad, as it turned out, liked algebra, did know what it was for. But he sat opposite me and didn't say anything for a while, considering my problem in that careful, expressionless way of his.

¹ *flat* — apartment

² *lift* — elevator

- 10 Eventually he said, “Why do you do PE at school?”
11 “What?”
12 “PE. Why do they make you do it?”
13 “Because they hate us?” I suggested.
14 “And the other reason?”
15 “To keep us fit, I suppose.”
16 “Physically fit, yes.” He reached across the table and put the first two fingers of each hand on the sides of my head. “There is also mental fitness, isn’t there?”
17 Behind us, Gran was watching a comedy game show with the sound off.
18 “I can explain to you why algebra is useful. But that is not what algebra is really for.” He moved his fingers gently on my temples. “It’s to keep what is in here healthy. PE for the head. And the great thing is you can do it sitting down. Now, let us use these little puzzles here to take our brains for a jog.”
19 And it worked. Not that I ever enjoyed algebra. But I did come to see that it was possible to enjoy it. Grandad taught me that the alien signs and symbols of algebraic equations were not just marks on paper. They were not flat. They were three-dimensional, and you could approach them from different directions, look at them from different angles, stand them on their heads. You could take them apart and put them together in a variety of shapes, like Lego. I stopped being afraid of them.
- 20 I didn’t know it at the time, of course, but those homework sessions were a breakthrough in more ways than one. If Grandad had been living behind an invisible door, then algebra turned out to be the key that opened it and let me in. And what I found wasn’t the barren tumbleweed landscape that I’d imagined. It was not like that at all.
- 21 I’d known for a long time that he was fond of puzzles. When I was younger he used to send me letters with lots of the words replaced by pictures or numbers. They always ended 02U, which meant *Love to you*, because zero was “love” in tennis. He was often disappointed when I couldn’t work them out. Or couldn’t be bothered to. Now I discovered that Grandad’s world was full of mirages and mazes, of mirrors and misleading signs. He was fascinated by riddles and codes and conundrums and labyrinths, by the origin of place names, by grammar, by slang, by jokes—although he never laughed at them—by anything that might mean something else. He lived in a world that was slippery, changeable, fluid.

. . .

- 22 He taught me that language was rubbery, plastic. It wasn’t, as I’d thought, something you just use, but something you can play with. Words were made up of little bits that could be shuffled, turned back to front, remixed. They could

be tucked and folded into other words to produce unexpected things. It was like cookery, like alchemy.³ Language hid more than it revealed. Gradually I became a crossword freak.

23 “These people who make them up,” Grandad said, “the compilers, they all have their own little codes. You can learn these codes, break them, and that can lead you to the answer.”

24 “Show me. Give me an example, Grandad.”

25 “Okay. This one here,” he said, tapping the *Guardian* with his pen, “he is fond of using the language of maps. When he says *going north* in a down clue, it means the word is written backwards from the bottom to the top. Because north is always at the top of a map.”

26 “Like *drawer* and *reward*,” I said, remembering. “That could be *Artist going north for prize*, yeah?”

27 He leaned back in his chair, faking amazement. “Hey, that’s right. Well done. PE for the head, yes?”

28 Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “It seems to me,” he said, “that your grandmother is talking to us in crossword clues these days. And unfortunately I am not clever enough to work many of them out.”

³ *alchemy* — changing something common into something special