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OF
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ONE

Toby was sweltering. The dark forest seemed to swallow him even though he tried to run down the path as fast as he could. Toby cursed his bad shape. F'kin fatso! Slow lump! A voice echoed from the trees. And where on earth was that annoying sound of knocking coming from? Suddenly, the ground beneath his feet turned into soft mud and his pace slowed down even more. Now Toby panicked for real. What was happening? That tapping sound kept coming closer and closer. Clearly someone was chasing him but he couldn't understand who and why.

"Toby, are you in there?" A voice was heard somewhere in the darkness.

The tapping continued. Toby tried desperately to struggle forward in the mud. He could hear the voice already beside him. Toby cried out in terror and woke up in his bed, dripping wet.

"Did we wake you up?" A sarcastic voice asked behind the ventilation window. "We agreed that we'd leave at eleven o'clock, if you remember?"

Still half-asleep, Toby groped his cell phone from the table. Indeed, it was already few minutes past eleven, he had overslept heavily. The voices

Toby heard from outside belonged to his friends, the brothers, Matty and Marc. The boys had agreed earlier that they would go to the school yard to see the destruction. The spring semester had ended last Saturday and some of the pupils had apparently celebrated the event far too boisterously. Toby tried to remember what day of the week it was today. Guess it was Thursday. On summer vacation, the days got mixed up easily.

Feeling still a bit dizzy after the abrupt waking, Toby staggered to open the window curtain. Bright daylight blinded him for a moment and he had to squint his eyes to see outside. Two grinning faces stared against him. Matty, the older of the brothers, had brown flattop hair and narrow, tanned face with deep dimples. Two years younger Marc had little longer and lighter hair and he was a head shorter than his big brother. Otherwise, the brothers were like two peas in a pod, brown and slender both.

"What happened in there?" Matty asked, chuckling. He claimed that Toby's scream had been heard all around the neighbourhood.

Toby stretched and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He told the brothers that he had seen a terrifying nightmare. In the nightmare, for some reason, he had been in a dark forest and someone had been chasing him.

"Then your knockings and calls mixed up in the dream," Toby said, continuing that he had already thought his days were numbered, until he had woken up.

The boys burst into laughter behind the window. Matty joked that they had, if not quite a major role, then at least a side role in Toby's dream. Toby wasn't amused at all. He moaned that he had just seen the worst nightmare of his life and his friends only laughed at it. Behind the window, the laughter continued. The brothers chuckled at Toby's hair which was sticking out all over the place. They thought it looked like a spike strip. Ostentatiously, Toby threw himself back on the bed.

Matty and Marc had to press their faces up against the window to be able to see inside.

"Come on! We've got to get going!" Matty lost his temper when he saw that Toby had gone back to bed. "We need to go to the grocery store too."

"I have to have some breakfast first," Toby mumbled, face against the pillow.

The brothers wondered why anyone would eat breakfast at midday. Toby grimaced towards the window, saying he would have lunch then if it had to be so precise.

"I'll just have a quick snack," Toby promised.

Matty told Toby to hurry up, Marc and him wouldn't wait all day. Matty was about to

wisecrack something about Toby's eating habits but he managed to keep his mouth shut. Toby had probably heard enough comments and taunts about his overweight already. He had been bullied at school for that matter since the first grade.

The brothers waited Toby in the front yard. The first week of summer vacation had been warm and sunny and this day was no exception. When they had left home, the thermometer had shown already for twenty-five degrees Celsius. Matty and Marc decided to sit down in the shade of the wall. The brick wall felt enjoyable cool after the cold night of early summer.

"How long will it take?" Marc asked, looking mischievously at his older brother.

"Hmm... Toby and breakfast," thought Matty in a sarcastic tone.

Marc corrected, laughing, that it was lunch.

"Oh... right. A lunch," Matty continued. "I'm optimistic and say half an hour."

Marc laughed at his brother's thoughts but stopped immediately when he saw Toby appearing in the front yard. Matty praised Toby that it was the fastest lunch he had seen in his life. Toby was still chewing food in his mouth. He recalled promising the boys that he would be quick and eat just a small portion. Marc inquired Toby what that small portion consisted.

"Chocolate cereal and a piece of cake," came the reply.

The brothers were laughing again.

"So, a small and nutritious breakfast," Matty needed. "The most important meal of the day."

Again, Marc corrected that it was Toby's lunch, not breakfast.

Toby didn't want to harp on food anymore but changed the subject, asking why the boys had knocked on the window. Because last time he checked they had a doorbell. Matty said they had assumed that Toby's Dad was in the evening shift that week. They had reckoned he could still be sleeping and would wake up to the sound of the doorbell. Toby said his Dad was up already but praised that the brothers had thought pretty nicely anyway.

"By the way," Marc suddenly urged. "How come you were still sleeping?"

"Well, it's summer vacation now, after all!" Toby grinned.

"Yeah, it is!"

Wide, happy smiles spread over all three boys' faces. The thought of two and a half months of freedom felt more than good. Although going to the school, voluntarily, seemed a bit silly, the trio still decided to go to have a look what had happened there at the weekend.

The brothers had come by bicycle so Toby fetched his bike from the garage too. Just when the boys were about to leave, the front door opened and Toby's Dad, Luke, peeked outside.

"Hello Matthew and Marcus!" Luke always used their given names.

He wondered how the brothers were so tanned already, so early in the summer, but then guessed that they had probably spend some time in the sports field. Matty and Marc admitted that that was the case. Luke glanced, smiling, at Toby who looked white as a sheet, standing beside the tanned brothers. He said the brothers should try to drag Toby to the sports field too. Toby ignored the uncomfortable subject and informed his Dad that they were going to the school. Sports and stuff could wait for better time and cooler weather. Dad reminded Toby that lunch would be at one pm, no sooner nor later. Or maybe later, but it would be served cold then. Toby promised to be back on time.

It's the beginning of summer vacation.
A small town of Fort Sara is sleeping peacefully.
Three schoolboys, Toby, Matty and Marc,
are feeling bored and looking for something to do.
Then, a mysterious van appears in town
and strange events start to unfold.
Soon the boys find themselves
in the middle of a dangerous game.
What is going to happen
when the darkest hour of the night comes?

Age 10+

