

The invitation from Alex had sat on the refrigerator for three days, held by a magnet shaped like a pineapple. Every time Thomas passed it, his fingers drummed against his leg, and his stomach performed a peculiar flip. His mother had already packed his overnight bag, which now waited by the front door like a sentinel. Within its depths lay his toothbrush, pyjamas, and—tucked secretly between his folded clothes—his small stuffed dragon that no one at school knew about.

"Five minutes until we leave," called his mother from the kitchen. Thomas stood frozen before the mirror, adjusting and readjusting his hair. He rehearsed his greeting to Alex's parents for the sixth time, then checked the zipper on his bag for the fourth. His palms left damp prints on the fabric. Outside, the afternoon sun stretched long shadows across the cobblestones, signalling the approach of evening—the first he would spend away from his own bed. With a shaky breath, Thomas hopped into the brown car and waited with silent trepidation for his mum to drive him off to Alex's house.

The car journey passed in a blur of houses and trees. Thomas's leg bounced rhythmically against the seat while scenarios played through his mind: What if Alex's dog didn't like him? What if he spilt something at dinner? What if he couldn't fall asleep? Yet alongside these thoughts ran others—of midnight snacks, of sharing secrets in whispers, of being treated like one of the older kids at last. Thomas found car rides soothing, the gentle rocking and engine noise creating a lullaby. But today, the familiar sounds were a constant reminder of the approaching moment, amplifying his everlasting anxiety.

As they pulled into Alex's driveway, Thomas's heart raced at such speed that he was certain it must be visible through his crimson shirt. His stomach tightened into knots. Jake and his mum greeted him warmly with handfuls of cinnamon biscuits. The entrance of the towering house had polished wood floors and a graceful banister that curved up towards the second-floor gallery. Thomas managed a trifling smile.

After showing Thomas around the house, the friends built a blanket fort and played Nintendo. With every new activity he tried, there seemed to be a beacon of confidence rising from Thomas's chest. However, when the lights went out, he stared at the unfamiliar ceiling and clutched his pillow from home. The shadows looked different there. Night fell swiftly, bringing with it a chill that seeped into his bones and a quiet that felt almost tangible.

As soon as Alex, slipped into his bed like cheese in a pizza pocket, he dozed into an unfathomable sleep. Thomas stayed awake, fidgeting with his blankets that smelt of bleach, his eyes wide and agitated.

As he stared out the rattling window, the damp street was windswept, a stretch of empty pavement under the glow of the stubborn street. The moon hung low and full, casting an ethereal glow over the silent landscape. Shadows danced in the flickering lamplight,

creating an eerie, almost enchanting atmosphere. Downstairs, the dripping of the tap in the kitchen kept perturbing Thomas, each patter a final countdown to the moments he bid farewell in the morning, which was six hours and 26 minutes away, according to Alex's wristwatch on the nightstand. Every now and then, his eyelids drooped and fluttered in exhaustion, but something was keeping him awake.

Using his left arm, he reached down to his overnight bag, and rummaged through its contents, until he pulled out his beloved stuffed dragon by the tail. It smelt of his mum's lavender perfume and his dad's burnt sausages on school mornings. Thomas squeezed it tight, burying his nose into its silky surface. At last, he dozed off into a soothing sleep.

In the morning, Thomas woke up first, still clutching his stuffed toy dragon. He fleetingly tucked it under his jumpers, and was about to shake Alex awake, when he spotted something that caught his attention. It was the same supple stuffed dragon in his grasp.

Thomas gasped in both awe and belonging. At least he wasn't the only one who slept with stuffed toys!

He clambered down the steep steps, feeling electric energy dissolve from the tip of his frizzy hair to the dirt in his nails. He mounted the kitchen stool, and his jaw dropped so low it nearly created a new floor level as he was served with a lip-smacking breakfast. In front of him was a plate of fluffy, sun-kissed pancakes, drizzled with sweet maple syrup and topped with fresh, tart berries. Alongside it a cup of rich, fragrant hot chocolate. The sizzling sound of smoky, crispy bacon, paired with perfectly seared, savoury eggs and buttery toast wafted through the bustling kitchen and swirled in Thomas's nostrils like a cyclone of his favourite nourishments.

By the time he finished his breakfast, patting his stomach in satisfaction, Alex ambled down the stairs, rubbing his eyes and groaning. In an instant, a duplicate of Thomas's meal appeared before his eyes, and he ate slowly, cautiously. Thomas felt the urge to ask him if Alex needed some help with his meal, which he kindly accepted.

When it was time to bid farewell, Thomas almost didn't want to leave. All that diversion had left bubbles in the pit of his stomach, but they felt contenting, like a new memory had been twisted to recall forever.