



The furry orb would be hurtling towards me any second.

‘Concentrate, Steele,’ I told myself, tapping my bat on the concrete pitch.

It was day three of the before-school test match. The only thing higher than the other team’s score was the temperature.

Radley paused at the top of his run-up, squeezing the tennis ball between his grubby fingers. Sweat trickled down his angry face.

Weasel patrolled the outfield. He scurried in front of the cypress trees only pausing to

give his little brother a mouthful. ‘Ferret, drop another catch and I’ll drop you!’

*Left, right, left, right.* Radley stormed in. Each step seemed to double his pace.

His foot slammed on the skipping rope crease. Radley’s right arm flashed past his ear.

The ball flew down the wicket.

I swung like a windmill in a cyclone.

*Snick!* An edge!

‘Mine!’ called the wicket and first slip. They dove toward each other, arms outstretched. The ball shot between them.

‘Run!’ I called.

Holly bolted from the non-striker’s end. We flashed by mid-pitch. I slid my bat over the crease.

Weasel snatched the ball centimetres from the boundary.

‘Run again!’ called Holly. The heat must have vaporised her brain!

‘No! Go back!’ I shoved my palm towards her.

Too late. The ball crashed into the bin.

Umpire Nathan raised his finger from behind the makeshift wicket.

Radley also raised a finger. It was a different one to Nathan’s, but it meant the same thing. Holly had been run-out.

I tapped my bat behind the crease. ‘Wicket leave.’

Waving his bat in wild circles, Pete shuffled towards the pitch. I met my new batting partner in the dusty outfield.

‘Blowies giving you grief?’ I asked.

Pete swished his hand. ‘Nah, it’s the dust.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘Savage stuff ... dust.’

Lucky there's no fluff or we'd have to cancel the match, maybe even evacuate the school.'

Pete ignored my sarcasm, licked his finger and wiped a speck from the rim of his glasses.

Tactics needed discussing. Three more runs and we'd take the first innings lead. 'They'll push everyone back. We'll run three. Hit it—'

Pete licked another finger and dabbed at a dot on his t-shirt. 'I'm not running,' he said, matter-of-factly. 'It'll stir up more dust.'

'Been watching *How Healthy Is Your House?* again have you and now you're scared of dust? Last week that show made you think you could get chickenpox by eating chicken chips!'

Pete waved away my concern. 'I'm feeling awesome, mate.'

'What about this then?' I pointed at my best

mate. His normally scraggy red hair had been tamed with buckets of gel. His bright yellow t-shirt was tucked into an even brighter pair of yellow shorts. A lime green vest completed the outfit.

‘Did you lose a bet and have to dress like an unripe banana?’ I asked.

Pete waved his hands over his outfit and cheered, ‘The Corn-fest!’

Of course! I’d been so focussed on our test match I’d forgotten about the Annual Outback Creek Corn-fest! All locals know that 44 years ago Pete’s grandfather won a bet by growing the tastiest corn in the district. After his victory, Patrick Peterson threw the biggest party the town had seen. Next harvest, the other farmers demanded a rematch. Every year the competition, and the party, had grown.

Pete grinned so wide you could've shoved a whole corncob in his mouth. 'I can't wait until tonight: throwing corn-fetti at the Corn-ival, dancing at the Corn-cert.' He acted out each event before pausing mid bootscoot. Pete sighed.

'The Corn-test?' I asked.

Pete clenched his fist. 'I'm corn-fident this will be my year!'

My best mate's strike rate in the Corn-test was like his bootscooting: terrible. Every year since prep he'd entered. Every year since prep he'd lost. Pete does display community spirit, outstanding behaviour and an in-depth knowledge of corn. Just not enough to win the trophy named after his grandfather. I slapped him on the back. 'It's yours this year, mate.'

'Hopefully.' Pete crossed his fingers, legs

and eyes. ‘Then I can tell my victory speech joke I’ve been saving all these years.’

‘First things first,’ I said. ‘Cricket before corn!’

Radley studied the tennis ball as though the answers to our next spelling test were on it and he could read. He ran his thumbs along the seam. ‘The ball’s split. We’ll have to get a newie.’

‘Just bowl it,’ I called. ‘The morning bell will ring any minute.’ I didn’t mention that a new ball would travel faster and be harder to hit. Radley, of course, already knew that.

Nathan grabbed the ball and bounced it. He tossed it back to Radley. ‘It’ll last one more.’

His elbows flapping like a magpie attempting flight for the first time, Radley marched towards his mark. Halfway back, he

turned. 'The split's got bigger.'

'They normally do when you shove your thumbs into them!' I yelled.

Nathan had no choice. 'New ball.'

Radley's eyes lit up like the Corn-fest street lights. 'There's some tins of tennis balls in our classroom.'

Like the first flies of summer, Radley was back way too soon. The only thing brighter than his smile was the brand spanking new tennis ball in his hand. He raised his arm, signalling he was going round-the-wicket.

Pete copied and raised his arm, signalling he was going round-the-bend. 'Stop play!' He dabbed at several flecks of dust on his fluoro green socks, careful not to create a smudge.

Radley had one last trick up his grotty

sleeve.

‘Brittany Baxter’s here. And what’s that she’s carrying?’ He pointed to our classmate, her hair tied in a neat ponytail with orange ribbon, carrying a wooden shield through the back gate. A bronzed ear of corn sparkled in the middle of the trophy. Around it, small metal plaques listed the names of previous Corn-test winners.

‘Why does she even bring the trophy back?’ pondered Radley aloud.

Weasel chimed in. ‘She’s won three years straight. It’ll be hers again this year.’

Pete’s face glowed as red as his hair. His shoulders dropped. Winning that trophy meant everything to him.

I called from the non-striker’s end. ‘You can’t lose with that costume, Pete. But let’s

win this match first.'

Pete took face, carefully tapping his bat on his back foot to avoid stirring up dust.

A cloud rose behind Radley as he charged in. He leapt into his delivery stride. The ball flew from his hand, bounced mid-pitch and rose sharply. He'd put in a short one: a Head-Hunter! The ball shot towards Pete's nose. He had no option. It was hit or be hit. Pete closed his eyes and swung.

*WHACK!*

He swatted the ball. The yellow sphere flew off Pete's bat at twice the speed it had arrived.

The ball soared towards the boundary.

'CATCH!' called Radley.

Weasel dashed along the line of cypress trees, never taking his eyes from his target.

‘Mine, mine!’

And it would’ve been. If he were ten metres tall!

Nathan raised his hands above his head.

‘Six!’

Then we heard it: the sound that sends a shiver down the spine of every primary school student in the world. The sound that seems to freeze time ... breaking glass!