



I placed the football down on the wet grass, brushed my blonde hair from my eyes, and looked up at the giant scoreboard high above me. The enormous stadium was full of home fans, but you wouldn't know it. The crowd was almost silent. Waiting. Praying for a miracle to happen. The scoreboard read:

ENGLAND	0
BRAZIL	0

Extra time was seconds away. My legs felt like jelly as I looked around at my teammates. They were all bent over, hands on knees, exhausted. No doubt about it — this would be the last kick of normal time. It was all up to me,

just how I liked it. My white shirt flapped in the wind. I hadn't bothered to tuck it back in after I'd been dragged down by the Brazilian defender. It waved behind me like a flag of surrender, but they would be conceding, not me. I reached down and scrubbed the mud from my knee, took a deep breath, and stepped back three paces. *Same routine every time.* It all came down to this free kick. I could win the World Cup for England.

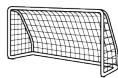
"OLLIE?" A teammate shouted from behind me. I ignored him, putting my hand to my forehead as I squinted through the floodlights and fixed my eyes on the top corner of the goal. The wall of yellow shirts stood like giants in my path, pawing at the ground like bulls in a pen, waiting to be released. Wishing me to slip. To kick the ball high and wide. They were pulling faces at me, tempting me to smash it straight at them. Anything but score.

"OLLIE..." The teammates voice came again.

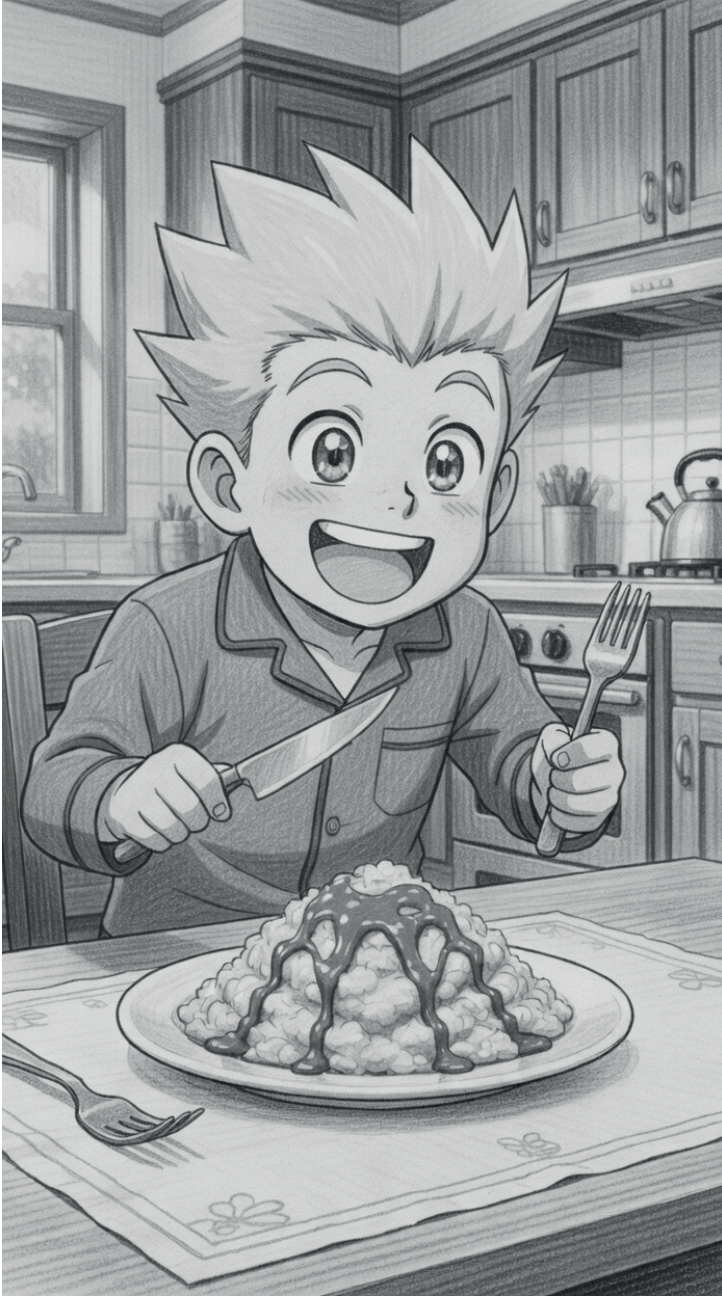
"OLLIE... OLLIE! YOUR BREAKFAST IS GOING COLD!" Mum? I opened my eyes. My right leg was sticking out of my bed covers straight up into the air.

"SO CLOSE..." I whispered as I shot out of bed and slipped my feet straight into the football boots I'd cleaned and carefully laid out the night before. I thundered down the stairs two at a time and dived into the kitchen.

"YES! THANKS, MUM!" I shouted. My favourite breakfast was waiting on the table. I leapt onto my chair, rubbed my hands







together, and licked my lips. A mountain of fluffy scrambled eggs piled on warm, buttery toast greeted me. Ketchup oozed from the top like lava spilling out of an active volcano. It was my favourite breakfast on my second favourite day of the week. *What a result!* It was Thursday. Saturdays were my favourite (Thornbrook Primary School match days), but on Thursdays we had football training. Dad was our manager and he always put on the best sessions after school.

"TAKE THOSE OFF!" Mum snapped, pointing at my feet. **"HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO SAY NO BOOTS IN THE HOUSE?"** she sighed, rolling her eyes at me while holding back a smile.

"DOPS. SORRY, MUM," I said, reluctantly pulling them off and lining them up beside my chair.

Just as I started digging into my eggs, Dad appeared in the doorway, smiling from ear to ear. He could only just fit through it. He was very tall, with a tummy that had grown over the years. His light grey hair was freshly cut, his face clean-shaven, and he wore thin metal-rimmed glasses that made his eyes look bigger than they really were.

"GOOD MORNING! OH YUM – THANKS, LOVE," Dad said, stooping down to kiss Mum on the cheek as she put his breakfast on the table. She handed him a fresh cup of tea and left the room. **"IT'S GOING TO BE A GOOD DAY!"** he added, barely containing his grin.

"WHY ARE YOU SO CHIRPY?" I asked, shovelling mounds of

scrambled eggs into my mouth as quickly as possible. **"YOU USUALLY HATE MORNINGS."**

"I'M CHIRPY BECAUSE I GOT SOME REALLY EXCITING NEWS FOR THE TEAM LAST NIGHT. I'M GOING TO TELL YOU ALL BEFORE TRAINING LATER," he said, scooping his own giant forkful of eggs into his mouth.

I can't wait that long! **"WHY DON'T YOU JUST TELL ME NOW?"** I begged.

Dad shook his head. **"NOP TANCE,"** he spluttered as his half-chewed toast flew across the table and plopped into my orange juice.

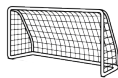
"UUUUUUUUURGH, DAD! THAT'S DISGUSTING!" I chuckled, fishing it out with my fork. I decided to stop asking questions to avoid any more of Dad's breakfast being spat towards me, and we finished eating together in silence.

Ding-dong. *Who could that be?* I glanced over at the kitchen clock above the window. It was only 7:45. I didn't need to be at school for another hour.

"OLLIE!" Mum called from the hallway. **"TREVOR AND FREDDIE ARE HERE!"**

"ALREADY?" I muttered, grabbing the last bit of toast, dipping it in ketchup, and getting up from the table.

"HE'S ALWAYS EARLY, FREDDIE SHARP," Dad said, reaching over and stealing my crumb-filled juice. I nodded in agreement and rolled my eyes, stuffed the toast into my mouth, picked up my boots, and sprinted down the hall. I



shoved my feet into my already-tied school shoes, swung my bag over my shoulder, and jumped out of the front door. Standing in the driveway were two of my teammates: Fred Sharp and Trevor Morris. Trevor was short and pale, with curly ginger hair and freckles all over his face. Freddie was the complete opposite: tall, dark, and athletic, with short black hair. Freddie and I had been neighbours for years.

"PAHAHA!" Trevor snorted, pointing at me and nudging Freddie.

"WHAT?" I asked, confused — still chewing my toast.

"OH NOTHING," Trevor said innocently. **"I JUST DIDN'T REALISE IT WAS WEAR YOUR PYJAMAS TO SCHOOL DAY,"** he said, as they both burst out laughing. I looked down slowly. I was still wearing my bright red pyjamas. My face instantly turned the same colour.

"DIDN'T YOU GET THE EMAIL ABOUT IT LAST NIGHT?" I frowned, in an attempt to play it down. **"GO BACK AND GET CHANGED — I'LL WAIT,"** I said, waving my hand at them and trying my best to look serious.

"NO CHANCE MATE, WE WEREN'T BORN YESTERDAY. COME ON, HURRY UP AND GET DRESSED," Trevor said.

"WE WANTED TO HAVE A KICK-ABOUT AT THE PARK BEFORE SCHOOL," Freddie added. The idea made me smile. I never turned down a chance to play football.