

Poor Matt Thompson. He started out in Mud Run, where in chapter one he was trapped on a portable roof. In Mud Happens he ended up racing a whole fleet of bicycles in a rainy training run. And in Road Rage, Matt tries to impress Ashley Grovier, and almost ends up at the end of police investigation. This book was also included in the Canadian Children's Book Centre Our Choice list.

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A Simple Dare

Matt Thompson typed aimlessly on the computer keyboard at the Clarington Public Library and tried to ignore Ashley Grovier.

That was not an easy job. Ashley had shoulder-length brown hair, a turned-up nose and big brown eyes. She wore a hot pink hair band and a new nose ring.

“So what are you going to write your report on?” Ashley said.

Earlier that day, their teacher had assigned an essay that they had a week to complete. Matt figured it was one of those projects that some teachers like to assign near the end of the year to keep everyone busy. Now, they were in an afternoon field trip to the community library. Which Matt thought was not big thrill.

“Not from Ms. Wellesley,” said Ashley. “Miss Wellesley doesn’t work like that.” Matt had to admit that Ashley was likely right. Ms. Wellesley, their home room teacher at S.T.Lovey Elementary School, had also coached them in track for much of the year.

“But she might,” Matt said, struggling with the idea. He still had a topic to pick for his report. “Maybe she’s too busy with her training, and just wants to keep us busy.” To Matt, that did sound plausible.

“Yes, but you still have to write the report,” said Ashley. “To do that, you need to have something to write about.” She smiled in the way that Matt liked. “I’m doing mine on Emily Stowe. Do you know who Emily Stowe was? She was the first woman doctor in Canada. They named a school after her.”

“Yeah, who didn’t know that?” said Matt, who had heard of Dr. Emily Stowe Public School. It was in his neighbourhood, not far from S.T.Lovey, and not far from where he lived.

“Okay, who was she then?” taunted Ashley. “Mr. Smartie.”

Matt fumbled. “Umm, the first doctor. That stuff.” He poked aimlessly at the computer keyboard again. Sometimes libraries just, well, sucked.

“You know diddly-squat,” said Ashley. “Don’t try to fake it. So what are you going to do for your report?”

Matt shrugged. He had no idea.

Ryan Abolins, a tall boy with orange spiked hair, shuffled up to them. “Hey, man, we still goin’ to run that race a week from Sunday?”

Ryan did not look like an athlete, with his coloured hairdo and baggy clothes. But he and Ashley had been invited to join the elite Durham Riders Track Club. Matt had been invited, too. But he and Baz had instead chosen to run with the Clarington Vikings. Because they could have more fun.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” said Matt. He called out to another boy who stood by the bookshelves nearby.

“Hey, Baz,” said Ryan. “You’re on for that race, right?”

“The Alfie Shrubbs Run?” replied a third boy, with gleaming black hair and sparkling eyes. “I thought we all agreed on that. Count me in.”

Ashley suddenly stood up. She snapped her chewing gum and tapped Matt’s fingers. “There’s your topic,” she said. “Why don’t you do the report on Alfie Shrubbs?”

Matt blinked.

“Alfie” He was going to make the name a question. At the last shaved second he drew the name out, like a long breath, so he would not sound dumb.

“You don’t know who Alfie Shrubbs is,” said Ashley. “You just didn’t want to sound dumb.”

Girls, Matt thought.

“He’s the guy they named the race after,” Matt said, floundering.

“Not knowing is no crime,” said Ashley. “Pretending is. Try searching for his name.”

Matt looked Ashley in the eye, holding contact just long enough to feel mildly embarrassed. Feebly, he typed the name into the search field on the computer screen.

ALFIE SHRUB.

“Two ‘B’s,” said Ryan, peeking over his shoulder.

“I knew that,” said Matt, adding another ‘B’.

ALFIE SHRUBB.

Nothing came up on the screen.

“Try Alfred Shrubbs,” said Baz. “It may be fussy that way.”

Matt typed again. The search screen showed one book.

“The Little Wonder : the untold story of Alfred Shrubbs, world champion runner / Rob Hadgraft. --by Hadgraft, Rob, 1955- . . .”

“It’s out,” said Baz.

“How’d you know that?” asked Matt.

Baz pointed to a place on the screen. “There. It says there is one copy, and it is out.”

“Oh.” Matt was disappointed.

“Well, it’s the Museum that sponsors the race,” said Baz. “Why not scoot over there and see what they have?”

He was kidding, of course. Matt knew that.

“What’s the museum go to do with it?”

“I dunno. They sponsor the race, I think.”

“WhatEVER,” said Ashley, beginning to show impatience. “What are you guys up to?”

Ryan lit up with a Popsicle smirk. “I dare you to try the museum,” said Ryan.

Matt looked at Ryan. He had hoped to see twinkles there, to show he was kidding. Instead, he saw a challenge. This was the same glint Ryan gets in his eyes before a 1500-metre race. Matt knew he was serious.

“Aw, man, you heard what Mrs. MacMillan said. Anybody leaves the library, even to post a letter, will get detentions until next September,” said Baz. Mrs. MacMillan, the school principal, had accompanied the class on the library. The year before, several Grade Eight students had skipped out of the library to visit beautiful downtown Bowmanville. Rather than cancel this year’s trip, she said, she had decided to go with them.

“She can’t do that, can she?” asked Ryan. “Give us detentions all summer?”

“I don’t want to be the one to discuss that with her,” said Matt. “Do you?”

The Clarington Museum, a half a block away, could be reached in less than a minute. With only four weeks left in the school year, Matt thought, how bad could it be?

“I dare you,” Ryan repeated.

A dare from anyone else might not tingle to the same extent. Ryan was usually the one accepting a dare. It was Ryan who, the previous Fall, had kicked in a glass door at their school. That was in anger though.

“To the museum and back?” said Matt.

“Without being caught?” asked Baz. “To get to the museum and back without getting caught?”

Ryan shrugged. “Who cares if he gets caught?” he asked. “It’s a dare.”

Matt knew he could not resist.