Toby and Titch

Toby lived in a small apartment with his mother, his grandmother and his little sister, Jodie. Toby liked to play all kinds of ball games. He liked to climb and jump and skip and run.

Toby was a happy child. Sometimes he felt so happy that he hummed a little tune as he looked for exciting treasures on the street; a broken button, a stone shaped like a lion's head, or – if he was really lucky - a small shiny coin.

Toby had a best friend. His best friend was called Titch. His best friend was a black and white dog with a very waggy tail and a big sloppy tongue. Titch didn't live with Toby. He wasn't allowed to keep pets in his apartment. Titch belonged to the lady who lived on the corner. But he was Toby's best friend.

Whenever Toby went out, Titch was there, waving to him with his waggy tail. Toby would shout "Hello Titch!" and pat his chest. Titch would bark and run as fast as he could, towards Toby, and leap up to give him a big soggy lick on his cheek. Sometimes Toby would fall over and then they both landed, boy and dog, in a tangle of arms and legs, laughing and barking wildly with joy.

Wherever Toby went, Titch followed. Even sometimes to school, and Toby would have to put on a stern voice and tell Titch he couldn't come in the school gates because he was a dog and not a child, and dogs weren't allowed in. Titch's tail would droop, and he would look sad as he saw his friend wave and walk into the school building.

But Titch always seemed to know when school-time was over and playtime began; and he was often waiting at the school gates when Toby came out at the end of the day. The waggy tail greeted him, and they ran together down the streets and back into their neighbourhood.

On the days when there was no school, Toby and Titch walked together for miles exploring new places and hoping to find more unusual things to add to their treasure box. Toby was a happy child – and loved the joy and freedom of his explorations with his best friend.

It was a bright sunny day when Toby and Titch were far from home kicking up the leaves, and hopping up and down the kerb, accompanied by the occasional beeping of a passing car warning them of their safety. Titch paused by a nearby wall, sniffing to see who might have left him a little message, and Toby, with sunlight in his heart, ran with his arms high in the air singing a little tune at the top of his voice. There were patterns moving on the street where the sun was shining through the leaves of the tall trees, making the shadows dance as the wind blew. Toby hopped from one shadow to another, following the stepping stones of light along the road.

Across the road there was a tall wall like castle ramparts. Where the tall wall ended, a green gatepost stood to the side, beckoning him into the park beyond. He had never been this far before, and he did love to find new places. He was sure that there would be a wonderful new treasure to find and add to his collection.

"Come on Titch!" He sang loudly, and a short bark answered him from somewhere behind as he ran without turning into the park.

The soft green grass spread out in front of him and he could see swings and a climbing frame in the distance through the trees. And there were lots of trees; all different kinds, tall, thin, fat,

low, braches sticking out, branches reaching high, and lots of his favourite tree with branches like the long, long hair of his mother, sweeping the ground below – making a wonderful place to play hide and seek. Sometimes when he found these trees, he just loved to lie hidden by the foliage, and look up to the blue sky above, and let hi thoughts travel far beyond his little world.

"Come on Titch", he shouted as he hurtled down as fast as his legs would carry him, almost tumbling in his excitement to reach the trees. A short, sharp bark answered him in the distance, and then he disappeared into his new little world and waited for Titch to find him.

It was dark and light hidden under the trees - the sun sparkling, then hidden, then dazzling bright in his eyes. The distant sounds of traffic faded and the high-pitched screech of brakes could have been a bird calling to its mate high above in the foliage. Toby lay back expecting Titch to burst through and greet him with big wet licks, and closed his eyes, imagining they were in an underwater world of mermaids and pirates, of sunken boats and treasure chests.

The light grew colder, and Toby opened his eyes. Something had changed. He must have fallen asleep. Where was Titch? When he had fallen asleep before, he would wake up to find the warm fluffy body of Titch snuggled against him as he too slept. But Titch was not there. Was he off somewhere sniffing around? Toby got up, suddenly feeling a shiver of cold. Something felt wrong. It was time he went home.

"Come on Titch", he called, but there was no answering bark.

"Titch!" Toby shouted, now worried.

"Titch, come here. Time to go home."

Toby stepped out of the tree-curtains and saw it was late afternoon. The sun was beginning to lower. He was further away than he had been before. Titch must be too far to hear him.

He shouted again;

"Titch! Come on boy. Time to go home." But there was no reply.

Titch began to have a funny feeling in his tummy. He looked all around the park, but so much of it was hidden by the different trees. Where was Titch? Why wasn't he coming? Why didn't he hurtle out of the grass and knock Toby over with his big friendly paws as he so often did? Toby walked over to the swings, but there were some big children standing around climbing frame drinking out of cans, and Toby was afraid to ask them.

He stood at a distance and the tummy ache became bigger. He felt like his insides were tied up with string, and it was beginning to hurt.

Toby didn't know what to do next. He went back to his leafy hideout and sat down hugging his knees. His eyes felt sore and his tummy ache was worse. Toby felt that his head was light and airy. He didn't feel as if he was really there at all. Maybe if he shut his eyes very tightly, he would wake up and find Titch sitting beside him, wagging his tail expectantly.

Toby sat for a while, rocking backwards and forwards gently, calling Titch inside his mind. 'Please Titch' he whispered, 'Please come back to me. I don't know where you've gone. I don't know where to look for you. Please come and find me Titch. I'm getting cold,' he added as he thought of the soft black and white fur of his best friend.

As the light grew dimmer and the sun no longer sparkled through the treetops, a tear rolled slowly down Toby's cheek. Titch wasn't coming back. Something had happened to him. Another big tear rolled down Toby's nose and plopped off the end making a big round wet patch on his shoe. Toby opened his eyes and looked at it. It was getting dark. His mother would be worried. He would have to go home without Titch.

Slowly Toby got up and felt his feet turn into pins and needles. He wiggled his toes like he had been shown, and sniffed all the wet back from his nose. But as he walked back through the green gateposts he had no run left in him and no sunshine in his soul to sing out. He crossed the road carefully, and walked past the wall that Titch had been sniffing so many hours ago.

Suddenly Toby stood up straight. What if Titch had got muddled when Toby disappeared into the park, and instead of following him in, followed his smell the other way – home. A feeling of joy buzzed through the pain, and Toby's arms and legs were filled with energy and he began to run back towards his road, with the apartment blocks and the lady on the corner where Titch lived.

Suddenly Toby's tummy-ache had gone and he ran fast as the wind with his hair streaming behind him. It seemed to take forever to get home. How had he come so far without realising it, wrapped in his own little world of him and Titch. His chest was heaving and his legs were aching, but he kept on running.

Finally he reached the corner of his road. There was a police car parked outside the lady's house. That was exciting. He would look forward to telling Titch about that later. He couldn't wait to hug the shaggy dog and feel its rough tongue lick away the dirt stains on his face. All that time he had wasted in the park when all the time he should have known Titch would be at home waiting for him.

Toby's door was open, and as he stopped breathless in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs, he could see a policeman taking to someone in the doorway – maybe his mother. He wondered if it was this policeman whose car was outside Titch's house.

Toby clattered up the stairs and the policeman turned to look at him. Behind the policeman, his mother stepped out and swooped him up into a big hug.

"Oh Toby. I've been so worried." She spoke softly and he could feel the sweet smell of her breath on his cheek.

"Is that your police car?" Toby asked the policeman, "the one outside Titch's house?" The policeman nodded and looked at Toby's mother.

"Your mother has been worried about you. It's nearly dark, you know, Toby. You should be home by now, where it's safe!"

"I lost Titch, you see, I lost him in the park. I looked everywhere for him and called him and called him, but he didn't come. But I guess he came home without me, isn't that right Mum? Is Titch back home with the lady on the corner?"

Mother and the policeman looked at each other, and they took Toby inside the apartment.

"Toby," his mother said. "The policeman is here because of Titch."

"Why? What's happened? Has someone found him? Police sometimes look after lost things, don't they?"

The policeman knelt down next to Toby, who was leaning on his mother, frowning. The policeman spoke with a deep, soft, voice – a gentle voice filled with sadness for the news he had to give.

"I'm sorry, Toby, but Titch was killed today. He was hit by a van down near the park. He just ran into the road; the van couldn't stop. Several people saw it. The driver was upset, he didn't know what to do, so he called us. We tracked the dog down to Mrs Parvinda; and she said to come and tell you. I'm sorry lad."

No. No. No! Toby's head was full of air and it felt like bursting. He couldn't breathe properly and felt like his eyes must be about to pop out. It was as if a giant was standing on his chest, crushing out all the air. Hot tears squeezed out of his eyes as if cracks were opening up inside of him. Something warm trickled down his nose, and suddenly he felt a huge sob escape from his chest, then it tightened up again.

Titch. Titch. The waggy tail and the soggy tongue. No. It wasn't true.

"No. No!" Toby burst out. He pushed his way out of his mother's arms and ran down the stairs and out into the street.

Standing between the corner house and the police car he shouted, "Titch! Titch! Titch! Titch!"

The lady from the corner house came out, dressed in a beautiful yellow sari. She looked very sad. Toby felt sick. His mother and the policeman appeared at the door to the apartment block.

"Titch! Titch! Titch! Titch!"

Toby yelled at the top of his voice. It felt good to shout. It released the pressure in his head, but his stomach still hurt.

"Titch! Titch! Titch! Titch!" he started crying and the words got jumbled as they mixed with his salty tears.

Toby's mother came over and stood by him. Suddenly Toby felt empty. He felt like someone had pulled a plug out of him and all of his insides had drained away, leaving only an outside. His face turned pale and his mother picked him up and held him closely. She was crying too, sharing the pain in his heart. He buried his head in her neck and wept – feeling great heaving sobs breaking out from within him.

After a while he felt calmer, as if a lot of the pain had been washed out with the tears. He let himself be carried back to the home; but he lifted his eyes to look at the woman in the bright yellow sari. Her sad, dark eyes met his and she smiled a sad smile. He lifted one hand to her, that felt heavier than all his schoolbooks together. After all, she had lost Titch too. They were connected – this woman and this boy, by the love and loss of a best friend.

Toby woke the next morning watching the sun stream through his curtains. He felt a bit funny and his head felt hot, but he couldn't think why – until all of a sudden he remembered about Titch dying. Then he felt as if someone had kicked his head and his tummy. He felt bad that he had forgotten it, even for a moment. It felt disloyal to his best friend somehow; but mother said it was okay. The feelings would come and go for a long time. She said it was okay to feel sad, and it was fine to cry. In fact, she said, sometimes crying would help wash away the pain even if only for a short time. She told Toby that Titch was in a happy place and will never be sad again; but it was okay for Toby to miss his friend and to feel sad.

She let him have a day off school to stay in bed, and she read stories with him. Mrs Parvinda came over and brought a photo of Titch which Toby's mother said she would frame for him. Somehow, seeing Titch in the sunshine wagging his tail, and showing his big floppy tongue, made Toby smile and feel warm; even at the same time he felt so sad he could cry again.

The days passed and Toby went back to school among his classmates. Sometimes he would find his mind drifting out of the window – to a leafy road where he and Titch would be searching for strange new treasures, running together and having fun. Then the teacher would call him and his mind would be pulled back into the classroom; and he would feel a dull ache deep within him, and he felt lonely for his best friend Titch – who was dead and was not coming back.

And sometimes he wanted to cry, and the teacher would let him go and sit in the toilets for a few moments while he cried. Once, when he came back into the classroom, the teacher asked him to draw a picture of Titch to go on the wall. Toby thought carefully and drew a large picture of Titch playing in the leaves with his tail wagging.

Toby often looked at that picture on the wall in his classroom. He was sad and lonely for a long time, but it felt a little better knowing that his best friend Titch was really okay.

And eventually, Toby felt happy once more.