

35 CALORIES WITHOUT SUGAR

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Snow was falling straight into the eyes

Jovana dialed the number, put the phone to her ear and waited. There was no answer on the other side. They must be in the yard, cleaning the snow – she thought and glanced at the wall clock. It was half past three in the afternoon.

She approached the Christmas tree that was in the corner of the room and turned on the Christmas lights. Colorful lights spilled between needles and silvery balls. The phone was still ringing. Jovana switched the phone to her other ear. Christmas lights were turning on and off evenly. It seemed as if the Christmas tree was breathing. The magic was happening. Jovana smiled. She loved New Year, snow, Christmas tree, gifts, winter holidays...

“Hello.”

A female voice on the other side startled her. She almost forgot who she called.

“Aunt, it’s me, Jovana. I am coming to your home for winter break. I am also bringing a friend of mine.” - she said cheerfully and spun the ball on the Christmas tree. She watched it spin. “Is it ok?”.

“Fine by me, just in time to chop the wood so that we have enough until the end of the winter.”

Jovana laughed and spun one more ball. The aunt continued:

“Let us know when you are coming so that we can sharp the axe. What are you laughing at? You are getting a free meal, that’s on the house, but you have to earn your accommodation. Just tell me what do you want me to prepare for lunch – roast chicken with sauerkraut or stuffed cabbage rolls?”

“We will get to it once we arrive there. You know... Tara sometimes has certain stomach issues, so she has to watch what she eats...”

“Is she sick?” – the aunt suddenly got serious.

“No, no. She is not sick...” – Jovana stopped for a moment – “I don’t know how to explain this to you...” – there was a short silence again. “Tara doesn’t like eating that much.”

“She doesn’t like eating?” – the aunt repeated in a higher tone.

“Actually, it’s not that she doesn’t like eating...She eats, she just doesn’t like when someone is forcing her.”

“Hm...so I should hide the food from her?”

“No, nothing like that. Just don’t bother her too much about food. Okay? She likes healthy food... like vegetables, fruits, orange juice without sugar, oats, and things like that.”

“You mean, she is vegetarian?”

“No, she is not vegetarian, although she doesn’t eat that much meat. And just so that you know, she neither eats bread nor sweets. She says that her stomach gets swollen and she has spasms because of that.”

“Then what does she eat? Little kids? Should I hide Bata and Gasa just in case?”

Jovana smiled. She reached her hand towards another ball. She spun this one too. It was significantly smaller than the other ones. It looked like a silver snowflake hovering in the air.

“Just come the two of you, and then we will easily figure something out. What’s your mother doing?”

“She’s at work.”

The fourth and fifth ball were already spinning. The sixth was just about to start.

“And your dad?”

“My dad is sleeping, he was on call last night.”

“Your uncle wants me to tell you that he caught a four and a half kg catfish and that he is preparing catfish stew on Sunday.”

The balls were glittering, the branches trembling. Just when the entire Christmas tree was about to spin and Santa Claus about to show himself up in the room or at least one of his reindeers, the whistle from the “Kill Bill” movie started. Jovana hurried towards her backpack. The Christmas tree remained behind her back.

“Aunt my mobile is ringing. I will call you later! Bye!”

“Just tell Dusica and Branko that we are expecting them for lunch on Sunday. Bye!” – she said quickly and hung up.

Jovana switched the phones and started talking agitatedly:

“Hey Tara, I was just talking to my aunt. Everything is taken care of. We just need to let them know when we are coming.”

Jovana was walking along the room. The balls were slowly coming to a stop. She was now spinning on an entirely different carousel.

“Do you want to leave tomorrow?” – she asked impatiently her friend.

“Sure. My mother will drive us...”

“Awesome!” – Jovana was more than pleased. “I always get bored in the bus. Grocka is not that far away, but there are always terrible traffic jams on the Smederevo road.”

Jovana was walking through her house talking loudly. The plans were going smoothly. She would spend one week of her winter break with Tara. They would have the chance to talk about everything and get to know each other even better.

“Have you ever been to Grocka?” – she asked curiously.

“Yes, when I was just a kid. My grandparents had a summer house there, but sometime later they sold it. I remember that once I fell into the Danube, between two boats. I almost drowned. It was autumn and I know I had some high ankle shoes with a zipper that were dragging me to the bottom of the river. When my dad pulled me out from the river and put me on the boat, I took them off immediately and threw them into the river. Because of those shoes I was beaten up by my mother, as never before (in my life).

“And now you are going back to the crime scene” – Jovana said as she sang the theme song of the movie *Jaws*.

Tara was new in Jovana’s class. She was different from all the other girls – a bit mysterious, very intelligent and, most importantly, she didn’t listen to folk music. With her you always had something to talk about.

“I downloaded everything from Amy Winehouse. I burned a CD for you too.”

“You don’t say! Bring me the CD tomorrow!” – Jovana jumped and touched with her fingers the little bells that were hanging in front of the window.

Resonant, cheerful sounds spread all over the house. Jovana turned around and went towards the kitchen. All the balls on the Christmas tree were still, except one, the silvery little one that looked like a snowflake.

“Is there somewhere we can go for a walk at your aunt’s place?” – Tara asked curiously.

“Of course. You can choose whether you want to go up the hill or along the Danube. You will see, it’s really pretty. You will love it for sure. And just wait to get to know my aunt, she is so awesome...”