



The Secret Code

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Age: 9+

Mart and Siim are best pals, no matter that one of them lives in the country and the other in the city. They can still hang out during holidays and send messages to each other when apart. Whenever one wants to tell something top secret to the other, he uses a secret code the two have come up with. One day, Mart gets a message reading "Black bird at the window," which means he needs to get to the countryside as soon as possible. Now, all he needs to do is convince his parents to take him to Grandma's house. Mart feels anxious until then. What happened to make his friend call for immediate help? Will Mart even be able to help at all?



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Mart went to the garden gate and watched Dad's car growing smaller and smaller as he approached the crossroads, finally disappearing as he drove left beyond the woods. The sun was already low in the sky and the air smelled as it always does in autumn: of a mixture of earth and apples and potatoes and damp. And from somewhere far, far away a gentle gust of wind brought the smell of bonfires to his nostrils. Mart walked through the gate and looked towards Jaanus-at-the-Corner's house. It stood there in the distance, somehow darker and more isolated than usual. All at once Mart felt that the whole village was particularly calm and deserted. Only the bonfire smell told him that people somewhere were going about their normal business and were not remotely involved in mysterious assignments like the one he was now expecting to tackle.

Mart went round to the neighbour's. He stood on the steps, but just as he was about to knock, the door opened and Siim yanked him indoors by the hand.

"Come on," Siim whispered.

"Are you home alone?" asked Mart.

"Gran's watching TV," Siim replied, adding that there was no time to go and say hello to her, and that it would be better for Mart to make straight for his room. So that's exactly what they did, with Siim shutting the door quietly behind them.

"Well?" Mart asked, looking directly at Siim with an anxious expression.

Siim listened for a while and then began. "It all started on Monday evening," he said and explained how that night he'd woken up for some bizarre reason or other. As if he'd heard something, but he couldn't be absolutely sure about it.

"So what was it then?" Mart wondered.

"Hang on, I was just telling you, I couldn't work it out," Siim explained. "I tried to go back to sleep but I couldn't. And that's when it happened. Someone screamed."

"Screamed? What kind of scream? Like a shout do you mean?" Mart asked.

"I mean screamed. Long and loud," Siim replied, and you could see in his face that he remembered very well just how terrifying the scream had been.

"What did you do next?" Mart whispered.

"Nothing. I just pulled my quilt over my head and waited," Siim replied.

"And what happened?" Mart probed.

Siim told him that nothing more had happened that night. Rather, he'd heard nothing at all and when he'd woken up in the morning and left for school everything had appeared to be calm and normal. He hadn't noticed anything on the way back from school either, and had begun to wonder whether the scream really had in fact been a scream, or just a dream.

“Or the TV?” Mart suggested.

“But it wasn’t,” Siim said. “It wasn’t a dream and it wasn’t the TV. It was a definitely a scream.”

Siim said that the next night he had been unable to sleep. Instead he’d tossed and turned and tried to work out whether the thing that had happened the night before had actually been real or not.

“Until suddenly I heard something,” he whispered to Mart. “Most of all it sounded like the kind of noise a car makes. Not right next to our house -- a little way off. Then there was a murmuring like people talking among themselves, but I can’t be sure because the sounds were so quiet. Then there wasn’t time to hear anything.”

“And?” Mart whispered. “What happened then?”

“Exactly the same thing,” Siim replied.

“What do you mean?” Mart was confused.

“Another terrifying scream,” Siim whispered and said that he was absolutely certain it was no dream.

“But the scream was exactly the same as the previous night – just as long and just as loud,” he continued.

“No way,” Mart was puzzled. “What did you do? Did you go and investigate?”

Siim shook his head.

“I didn’t dare. When I left for school everything seemed normal, there was nothing to see. And in the morning I didn’t have the time to

check things out else I’d have missed the bus. But I did go after school.”

“And did you find anything?” Mart asked.

Siim nodded and Mart knew from the way his friend’s face drained of colour that indeed he had.

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Using the binoculars Mart scoured the area around Jaanus’ house. And suddenly he felt a cold sweat dampening his skin. A light suddenly flared in front of Jaanus’ house. Not from inside though, but from the road. The light was from a car, no question about it. Someone’s car was outside Jaanus’ house. And it looked as if that someone was about to drive off because all at once the boys also heard the rumble of an engine, and two beams of light moved slowly along the gravel road.

It suddenly dawned on Mart that this was really happening now. Something really monstrous was happening right now. He was rooted to the spot and could only watch the beams of light moving ever closer and hear his heart thudding unpleasantly, louder even than the car engine.

“The bus!” whispered Siim. “It’s the same bus! What shall we do now?”

Mart suddenly realised that there was no chance that Jaanus had come home on the last bus. The light in his house could mean only one thing: that he was in trouble and needed help right away.

Also in trouble was the lady who lived next door to him, Mrs Viidikas, whose telephone had been mysteriously cut off. And perhaps even the boys themselves.

“Look,” exclaimed Siim. “It’s turned back towards the yard!”

In fact the beam of light on the gravel path abruptly changed direction and Mart saw the bus driving into Jaanus’ next door neighbour’s garden. The engine was turned off, then the lights, and suddenly the silence of the grave descended.

“Quiet!” Mart whispered and crouched down next to Siim.

For a while the boys didn’t dare look out of the window. They stayed quiet as mice, motionless, and Siim even kept his eyes closed.

Suddenly they heard a bang.

“A car door,” Mart whispered. “They’re out of the car.”

Mart and Siim could hear someone talking, but couldn’t make out what was being said. It sounded like there were a few people, no more than two or three. And they were talking in normal, calm voices. No one was afraid or shouting for help.

“I’ll sneak a look,” Mart said. He pulled himself up a little more, put the binoculars to his eyes and peered over the windowsill into the yard. Siim opened his eyes but still didn’t dare move.

“Strange,” Mart said.

He stood up and looked attentively into the

darkness.

“They’ve gone,” he said. The bus is there but the people who were talking have gone somewhere. Only, I can’t work out where.”

Mart climbed onto the windowsill and tried to see as far into the distance as he could.

“I can’t see beyond the corner like this,” he said.

“But they must have gone somewhere through the back yard.”

“There’s another path across the field,” Siim said, looking through the window.

Obviously Mart knew that there was a path across the large field that led to the small wood. But why would the robbers need to go along it in the dead of night? It didn’t seem logical.

“You can see that far from the living room,” Siim said.

Mart sprung to his feet.

“Let’s go!” he whispered and the boys crept out of Siim’s room.

It looked like Siim’s Grandma had gone to bed. Her bedroom door was closed. The lounge was quiet and the only sounds were the clock ticking and the gentle hum of the fridge in the kitchen. Siim took Mart to the living room window and drew back the curtain edge. Mart held the binoculars against the window pane and strained his eyes.

“There they are,” he whispered. “Over there! Look!”

He quickly handed the binoculars to Siim,

who looked in the direction Mart was indicating.
“Three or four people,” Siim whispered. “They’re holding something! Look! Cases or something!”

Mart snatched the binoculars. Indeed, four people were walking along the narrow path across the field carrying boxes or cases. And one of them was smaller in build.

“Looks like one of them’s a woman,” said Mart.

“The next door neighbour?” Siim asked.

Mart put a finger on his lips, as if silence would help him see into the distance better. In fact he couldn’t really see much any more, the dark shapes were disappearing into the distance and pitch dark was descending outside. But from somewhere inside Jaanus’ house there was a strange white gleam.

Mart lowered the binoculars.

“We have to go and help Jaanus right away,” he whispered. “We don’t know where they’ve gone or how long for, but we have got to get to Jaanus’ before they get back! Let’s go! Right now!”

Siim looked straight at him, eyes wide.

“Right now!” Mart whispered. “Let’s go! We don’t have time to think about it!”

“I can’t” Siim shook his head.

“What?! Are you kidding me?” Mart said.
“Something really weird is going on at Jaanus’. We have to go and help him right away!”

“I can’t! How can I make you understand?!”

Siim suddenly shouted so loudly that Mart took him by the hand and pulled him back behind the corner.

“You’re the one that doesn’t understand!” he whispered and he was suddenly so furious with Siim that he felt like crying. “I must help Jaanus! I just have to! Let’s go! Right now!”

Siim did not move from the spot. And Mart realised that Siim was probably just as angry with him because his eyes were suddenly bright with tears.

“I can’t leave Grandma alone!” he said “I can’t just go and leave her here by herself!”
Mart looked into Siim’s face and saw his eyes welling up and a single tear brimming over and splashing onto the floor.

“Jaanus will help us!” Mart said gently. “Can you hear me? Perhaps he’s just locked in somewhere and all we’ll have to do is let him out and then he’ll help us! But if we don’t go now, then we won’t get there. Do you understand?”

Siim looked at Mart. His eyes were suddenly so serious it was as if they belonged not to Siim but to someone much older.

“Can you hear me?” whispered Mart.
Siim didn’t respond. Suddenly he turned into the hall and grabbed his coat from the coat rack.

“You coming or what?” he asked.
Mart stood for a moment. He watched as Siim pulled on his jacket and trainers, and unlocked the front door. Then he was off like a shot, running after his friend.