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English IV

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They’re Trying to Trick You

 Two boys sat around a dying campfire on a decaying log. They were in a small clearing underneath a canopy of massive, spiraling redwood trees. Above, the stars were barely visible. Only the moonlight found its way through the dense layering of leaves. The circle of charcoal and red embers extended long past the outer edge of the current flame, but the covering of white ash blended into the dry forest floor. The larger boy tossed a handful of redwood needles into the fire; it burned brighter for a moment, then died back down.

 The younger boy sat next to him, shivering in flip flops and bright green polyester shorts, but finding some warmth in a thick flannel and puffer vest. His smooth cheeks were flushed red from the cold, the lingering baby fat amplifying the color. Clasped in his hands was a can of baked beans. Making a valiant attempt to open the can with its pull-tab, the aluminum container held fast. Reluctantly, he handed the can over to the larger boy. “I can’t open it, James,” he whined.

 James took the can and placed the bottom on his worn-out blue jeans. Using his leg as a support base, he tugged the lid off the can. Folding the circular piece into the shape of a taco, he took a large spoonful of the beans. Carefully avoiding the sharp edges, he slid the food into his mouth. “Mmm, I love baked beans.” He smacked his lips and looked over at the younger boy, holding out the can. “Here, Remy, try some.”

 Remy pulled a broken disposable fork from his vest pocket and dug straight into the beans. Taking a large bite, he immediately made a face. “I want a stove.”

 The older boy next to him let out a grunt. His only facial hair was a thickening patch of dark peach fuzz above his upper lip. A mop of short, black hair hung messily off his head. Perhaps once a clean cut, stringy tendrils have crept their way over the top of his ears.

He combed his hand through the front of it, swooping it to the side. “I want a five-star dinner.”

 “Jaaames, these beans are *cold*. I want a stove.”

 “Too bad. We don’t have one.” James took another scoop of beans, a few sliding off the back of the makeshift spoon as he lifted it to his face. They landed on a crimson Wisconsin Badgers sweater and rolled off, leaving a trail of molasses-colored sauce behind.

 “I wanna go home. Momma has a stove *and* a microwave.” Long, tangled hair went down to just past his shoulders. Hanging limply over the sides of his face, it was the color of the bark behind them.

 “I already told you, we can’t go home.” James sighed and looked over. “You know that....” He trailed off, looking up to the living roof. He kicked a rock toward the embers; it bounced off the remains of a burnt log and settled near the other side. He looked back over at Remy and pointed to the can of beans. “If you really want to warm them up, I guess you can pull off the label and stick the thing in the embers.”

 “But that’s so much work….”

 “Then don’t.” James took the can from his brother and spooned himself another mouthful.

 “I wanna go home.” Remy looked at James definitely. ¨Momma’s not gonna hurt us.”

 “But she *will*--she will try to hurt us. She’s not our mom anymore.”

 “She is! You’re just saying that because she says you’re--”

 “Remy.”

 “--crazy. *You’re* the one whose kidnapping me.”

 “Remy.” A scowl grew on the side of James’s face. He gripped the can tightly, tendons popping from the back of his hand.

 Remy shrunk back with a whimper, his spark of defiance extinguished. “Sorry.”

 “If you don’t remember,” said James, his face softening. “You came with me.” James raised his eyebrows, releasing his grip and dropping the can to the ground.

 “Yeah, but--but that’s because you said Momma’s turned into a monster.” Remy scrunched up his face. “But Momma says there’s no such thing as monsters and that they only live in the movies.”

“Yeah, well, not anymore. Remy, you can’t trust anybody anymore. They’re all trying to trick us. They want to get us, and-and when they do, they’ll turn us into monsters too.”

“I don’t believe you.” Remy shook his head.

“I don’t care.” James looked at his hands, finding that his lid-spoon was still in his grasp, leaking sauce down his wrist. He threw it to the side, wiping off on his jeans and slipping both hands into his sweater. “As long as you’re safe from them you can believe whatever you’d like.”

A ringtone went off in James’s pocket. Pulling out the phone, he looked at the name. Frowning, he silenced it and slipped it back into his jeans.

“Was it Momma?” Remy looked hopefully at his brother.

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you answer it then?”

“Because Mom will try to trick us into going back.”

“Can you answer next time momma calls?” Remy looked over pleadingly. “I just want to ask her if she’s a monster. Momma would never lie.”

“No.” James stood up and dusted off his pants. “She’ll try to make you run away.” He walked over to the edge of the trees, looked around, and decided upon the largest redwood. Going around the back of it, he unbuckled and relieved himself. A mosquito flew into his face and he batted it away. More were gathering in the dusk, forming columns of twirling insect vortices that were only visible if they caught the light just right. “Fuck!” James walked right into a large group of insects on his way back, getting a faceful of unwanted, fluttering wings. “C’mon Remy, let’s get to bed early tonight. These bugs are gonna kill me and there’s no repellent.”

Still silent, Remy nodded and tromped over to the tent sitting a few feet from the campfire clearing. It was a green ridge tent meant for a family of four, but the supplies and luggage took up most of the space, leaving only a cramped sleeping area for the two boys. Remy unzipped the door and flopped down on the meager pads, ignoring the sleeping bags in favor of outstretched limbs.

 James crawled in and zipped closed the fabric opening behind him. With all of his clothes on, he wormed into his sleeping bag and closed his eyes. “Goodnight Remy.”

 Remy let out a grumble and shifted his body.

 “I said Goodnight, Remy.” James kept his eyes closed, but the corners of them tightened.

 “G’night.”

*Bzz. Bzz.*

*Bzz. Bzz.*

Remy’s eyes shot open.

*Bzz. Bzz.*

From James’s side of the tent, a phone buzzed. Remy crawled over and looked at the name lit up on the screen: *Mom.* Glancing quickly to make sure his brother was still asleep, Remy grabbed the phone and snuck out through the door. Sliding to answer, he put the phone up to his ear.

*“James! James, is that you?”*

“Momma?” Remy walked to the edge of the clearing and stopped.

*“Remy?”* his mother yelled.

“Uh huh.” He trooped around to the back and crouched down, keeping an eye on the tent.

 *“Oh Remy, you’re okay!”* A deep sigh of relief came from the other end of the phone. *“Where are you guys? We’ve been so worried and the police couldn’t find you but I knew something was wrong because I saw that your stuff was gone and I thought that maybe you’d run away and...”* His mother let out a sharp gasp. *“Oh god, did someone kidnap you?”*

“No momma, we’re okay. I promise,” Remy whispered.

“*Oh thank God!* *Where have you guys been? Where’s James?”*

“He’s sleeping in the tent.”

“*Tent? Why are you guys in a tent?”*

“It’s the one James brought from the house.”

“*Wait, James brought the tent? Where are you guys!* *Why hasn’t he been picking up!”* His mother was getting more frantic as she spoke.

“I dunno. He said that you were a monster.”

“*A monster?”* she yelled.

“Uh huh. And he said that if I picked up the phone you would try to trick me to run away.”

“*Oh my God. Oh my God. Where are you? I’m coming right now to pick you up!”*

“I’m in a forest somewhere.”

*“A forest! Is there a road near you?”*

“I think so. We walked a lot to get here.”

“*Okay, find the road and follow it until you see a street sign. Get away from your brother!* *Make su-- th-- go and--call-.”* The phone started to cut out.

“Momma? Momma, I can’t hear you!”

“*Re-y, jus- Run!”*

The call ended. From the tent came the sound of rustling.

“Remy?” James’s voice came groggily. “Remy, are you out there?”

Remy backed up a few steps then turned around and spirited off into the forest.

“Remy!” James shouted his name. “Remy, where are you!”

There was no answer.

“Oh God. Shit. Shit. Remy!” James’s voice echoed through the forest.

There was no answer.

James sat down heavily, a few tears starting to form in his eyes. He just *knew* that something was wrong, that these monsters were no longer their parents. He also knew that he would have to get a move on since Remy would surely lead them back to where he was.

After a short time, the tent was packed and everything was away. James poured water from a nearby river on the leftover embers and looked around one last time. In his hands he had the gun he stole from his father; a necessary protection from whatever took over his family.

The tall redwoods loomed overhead as he started his walk. He decided to follow the river downstream. After a sweaty twenty minutes, James heard twigs snapping behind him. He turned sharply.

Nothing.

He looked back around and let out a yelp, quickly raising his gun.

In front of him stood Remy, hair tousled and scratches along the side of his face. “James!”

“Remy, how did you find me?” He kept the gun raised.

“I just kept running and I heard you walking! You were right, Momma tricked me!” Tears started falling from his eyes. “She came to pick me up and her face was all black and there was something crawling over it and she tried to take me!”

“I told you she was a monster. Why couldn’t you believe me?”

“Because it’s *Momma*. But now she isn’t and it wants to get me.”

James stared at Remy, never lowering his gun. “How am I supposed to know that you’re not a monster?”

“I’m not, I swear! Please don’t shoot me!” Remy pleaded.

“I’m sorry Remy, but what if you’re a monster and trying to trick me? I can’t trust you.”

“*Please.”*

“Remy. Leave. I don’t want to shoot you.”

“Then don’t! I’m not a monster! Momma’s gonna get me!”

“Go.”

“James!”

“Now.”

“James, please!” Remy took a step forward.

“Remy, get the fuck away from me!” He adjusted his gun in his hands. Tears were in his eyes now, too.

“I don’t wanna die!”

A shot rang out in the forest. And another. A boy fell to the leaves and another began to sob.

“Oh God, Remy!” James dropped to his knees and held the bleeding boy. “Oh God, what’d I do?”

The forest was silent but for the soft sound of weeping. The boy’s eyes were closed; he never noticed the black tendrils creeping from the back of the bleeding child’s neck--up and up and up, reaching for its final destination.