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English IV

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Windflower Lane

With her sweaty palm clutching the wheel of her dirt-encrusted Kia Spectra, a woman stared ahead at the decaying stretch of road. Her viridescent eyes shone in the soft afternoon light and her olive skin was beaded with pearls of sweat clinging to her. Lines of pine trees hid the dense forest on either side of the barren road keeping her locked on her path. With Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild'' humming in the background, she was immune to the harrowing silence heard outside of the car.

Stretching over the passenger seat, the woman reached for her water bottle but was instead jolted back into her worn grey seat. Her car jerked along the road, short bursts of life thrusting the car forward followed by sudden stops.

“No, no, no...” she said as she slammed her foot on the gas.

The car slowed to a stop along the road and the entire area was once again flooded with silence.

She tried the key over and over, but the car refused to move.

“Come on!” she shrieked slamming her hands on the horn.

With one final failed turning of the key, she wearily thrust her head head back into her seat. A look outside gave her no hope. The low-hanging fog reached for the treetops and the only sign of life was a haggard crow that stared similarly back at the only sign of life it saw.

She pulled out a pen-covered, water-stained map and scanned the notes she had written on it. “Rosewood Lane-- QUARANTINED 2/12.” “Grovewick Street-- QUARANTINED 2/8.” Bright yellow highlighter warned of the fatal virus with every marked street name until she came upon one that was free from the grips of the deadly mark. “Windflower Lane-- SAFE 2/14.”

A staggering figure emerged from the darkness that the trees enveloped the surroundings with. Tangled dark grey hair matted with dirt, dreary hued skin, and a pair of anxious blue eyes met with the woman’s. The man’s eyes brightened and he ran towards the car with his eyes unwilling to unmatch the woman’s. The woman sat frozen, shocked at the sight of another human. With the man’s every stride towards her he coughed in agony, the whites of his eyes woven with the red lace of veins, and attempted to reach her faster.

The loud click of the car lock by the woman elicited a frown from the man. He reached the car with dust escaping out from underneath his previously racing feet.

“Let me in! I *need* help!” the man screamed with his hands making distinct prints in the dirty glass.

“I can’t let you in-- I can’t help you.”

“Why? Come on!” he pleaded.

“You-- you’re sick. If I let you in, I’m going to get sick-- I’m sorry-- I can’t. I *won’t*.”

“Me? Sick? Hah!” the man became hysterical at this point. “If I were sick--*which I am NOT*--would I still be here? That disease spread like wildfire, lady, and it kills you within *hours*. Look around you. I don’t see anyone. Everyone who had that goddamn disease is dead. Dead, you hear me? So look, you can let me in. I’m safe.”

“Look,” the woman said, taken aback with the man’s sense of urgency, “I can offer you water. I have some bottles somewhere in here-- that’s the best I can do, though. And then you’re *out* of here. You will leave me alone. For good.”

“Okay, yes, okay-- thank you.”

“Move away from the car. Go!” she motioned away from the car. “You can have it once I put it down.”.

“Alright, alright,” the man said with his eyes synced with hers as he stepped backwards.

A puff of dirt coughed into the air as the car door opened. With a plastic water bottle in the woman’s hand, she slowly went to place the bottle on the ground. The dehydrated man was euphoric at the sight of the water and leapt towards the bottle, ripping it from the woman’s hands.

“WHAT THE HELL! I didn’t put it down yet, you *PSYCHO*!” the woman screamed in the man’s face before slamming the brittle door shut. “LEAVE!” she shrieked.

“Fine…” the man said.

The woman took a brief moment to appreciate the beautiful sight of the man leaving. Her eyes followed his slow steps away before catching sight of him approaching a scattered patch of small rocks on the roadside. He had seen the loads of water bottles, maps, and food that flooded her car-- one bottle would not suffice him now.

“He wouldn’t…” the woman whispered to herself. The lightweight cloud of relief she had had dissipated into a booming thunderstorm of worry within seconds.

The man struggled to bend his achy, infected body enwreathed in the grips of the virus down to the ground. The woman slipped into the passenger seat, opposite to the side of the road that the man was on, and held her hand cautiously on the cold door handle. The man picked his brittle hands through the rocks before settling on a sharp, angular, sepia rock. He held it tightly in his hands as if the dusty rock were a precious jewel before turning back towards the woman with a blank face.

He lifted his arm, preparing to throw but the woman bolted from the car and set off into the unknown wild that lay before her. The man, overcome with anger, chucked the rock towards her and shattered the glass into a brilliant explosion of crystal shards. Her heart beating with the strength to rip through her chest, she stood frozen in a body unwilling to move behind a pine tree close to the opening.

He approached the car, the grin of victory decorating his face. The woman listened carefully only to hear a slur of cussing and symphony of honking followed by the man’s disappointment at the car’s condition.

She breathed steadily, her heart slowing to its normal pace.

*Gotta keep going. I can’t stay here now-- not with him over there. .*

Her gaze set on the pacific northwest jungle of pines and ferns, she began her trek away from the danger that stood feet away from her. No map. No water. No food. No shelter. With the losses of all that had provided her hope, she walked with no intent. Her steps were heavy and poorly fueled by her despair. Stepping through the brown, lifeless leaves of the forest, she continued on.

Her dull, downturned face grew bright once the sunlight was exposed between the cracks of the last few pines in the forest. She looked up, a squinting, worn out face glaring into the light. Bubbles of light distorted her view for moments before they settled in with the change. She hesitated before approaching the light with a hasty pace.

She placed a dry hand on the bark of a pine tree and looked into the sunlight-ridden haven. Quaint wooden houses, all donning fresh coats of baby blue or light brown paint filled the region. The carefully manicured hydrangea bushes and angular hedges adorned the borders of the spotless, white picket fences that locked the perfect homes into an almost dystopian seeming neighborhood.

She scanned for street signs, public buildings, anything to give her a mere idea of where she was. No luck. She found luck in another way, though: there was no caution tape in sight. The tape had been abundant in neighborhoods where the virus had been found.

With soft steps on the pebble dotted pathways of the neighborhood, the woman walked along inspecting each of the houses. A peek into each window showed empty homes, the relics of families who had recently evacuated each home including framed family photos and chains of car keys littering the kitchen counters. Milling about, the woman stumbled upon a house located far from the forest opening she had entered from and proffering coolness amid the afternoon heat provided by the shade of the swaying willow tree in the front yard.

Enticed by the shade, she entered through the white picket fence bordering the house and hopped atop a wooden shoe rack on the porch to look through the windows. Her dirty hands cupped across the glass, she squinted her eyes struggling to see inside. Unable to see little more than a reflection of her weary eyes, she hopped from the rack and placed a hand against the door.

With a hesitant look around, she knocked on the door with an anxious fist. A miniscule bug that had been set in place on the door toppled from the cinnamon brown wooden door upon impact.

“Hello? Is anyone in there?” she asked.

No response. Her eyes darted around the front yard as she scanned for any means to enter. She pondered the thought of a hidden spare key somewhere in the yard, knowing it would likely be a futile effort. She debated using a rock to break in through a window, but shuddered recalling her earlier ordeal. Finding a key it was.

Scouring under terracotta plant pots bursting with daisies and beneath the large stones that formed a ring around the willow tree, the woman was intent on finding a key that she merely *hoped* was there.

Feeling defeated, she shrunk to the ground and rested upon the willow. With a look overhead, her spirits were lifted. Attached by a rust-decayed metal latch to the bottom of the willow tree’s bird feeder was a small, silver key.

With her newly found way in, she made her way through the door.

The barren home was like that of a picture from a catalog; no signs of use, a lifeless, empty home. The stagnant scene made her sick to her stomach, the loss of normal society clear in front of her.

A walk through the house was abundant in blessings; canned foods, water bottles, and no other humans in sight. With a smile adorning her tired face, she fell onto the long wrap around charcoal sofa that framed the living room.

Waking up from her afternoon nap, the woman was shaken by a violent coughing fit. Each painful cough wetted her eyes and her dry throat begged for water. She forced her unforgiving body to the kitchen, downing as much water as she could before sliding to her knees on the floor as she leaned against the smooth, cold surface of the refrigerator. Her eyes, forcibly made open locked onto an envelope stuck to the fridge. The address read “4825 Windflower Lane, Birch Creek, Washington, 98001.”

“Rosewood Lane-- quarantined…” she croaked. “Grovewick Street-- quarantined.” With her color drained, her body sick, her mind elsewhere, she said, “Windflower Lane-- safe. I’m *safe*...”