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English IV

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An Unexpected Visit

I was still in my plaid pajamas listening to music when I became aware of a mumbling voice in the room next to mine. Putting “Lane Boy” on hold, I listened closely to the voice. It was my mother’s, and she sounded tired. I got up and walked over to her room before standing in her doorway. She was still in bed, one slender arm was over her face, and she held her cell phone up to her ear with the other.

“Who are you talking to?”

She moved the phone away from her wrinkling face. “Joseph.”

“What’s wrong?”

“His car broke down in our driveway.” As she put the phone back up to her ear, her graying hair shifted slightly on the pillow. “No, Joseph, I’m not coming out just to bring you water.”

“I can take it to him if you want.”

She lifted her arm off her face and look at me with half-open eyes. “Joseph, Anna’s coming out to bring you some.” She hung up the phone and put it on her chest.

I walked back into my small room and slipped on a pair of black flip-flops that were lying on the floor before going to the dim living room. Bending down by the hideous, yellow couch by the door, I pulled out a bottle of water from the pack that was stored underneath it. I hesitated for a moment before grabbing another one.

I couldn’t remember how long it had been since I last saw him. When he walked out of the front door for the last time with a black trash bag full of his belongings, I was just a little kid.

The last time I saw him was at my great-uncle’s funeral, and he seemed to be doing well. When he saw me, he picked me up and spun me around in his arms. In that moment, I felt like he was my older brother, and I even laughed with happiness. I hadn’t felt that way in years, not since my older sister, Rosalie, and I used to hang out in his room to look at his various betta fish and his fish tank with the little crabs that we named Mr. Pipes and Mr. Claws. Mr. Claws later died because Joseph took him out of the tank, and the crab jumped out of his hand and onto the floor. As for the betta fish, Joseph had put some of the males in the same fish bowl, and they killed each other.

Before he was expelled from school his senior year, he used to punch holes in the plaster walls in our house when he got really angry while talking to my father. I even I hid in my dark closet in a pile of towels once because Joseph unexpectedly showed up at our house and threatened us years after he was kicked out. Although he never showed aggression towards me, how he treated Rosalie often ended up with her taking it out on me.

A blast of hot, humid air rushed into the house after I unlatched and opened the front door. While stepping out onto the small, brick porch, my eyes squinted shut as the bright light reached my eyes. I blinked a few times as I opened my eyes and gazed out at the dark-green mountains on the other side of the valley. Putting my brunette hair up in a bun, I stepped off the porch.

As I left the confines of the decaying fence that surrounded the front yard, the ground crunched beneath me as I stepped onto the gravel driveway. Parked under the shade provided by the trees that lined the edge of the driveway was a small, beat-up, white truck with its driver side door open, and a man was sitting sideways in the driver’s seat. As I got closer, I thought I was looking at a stranger. The man wore a plain gray t-shirt and a pair of beige cargo shorts. Upon seeing me, the man smiled, revealing a gap where one of his front teeth was supposed to be.

“Hi, Joseph.” I presented the two water bottles I had in each hand to him.

He took the bottles from me and put them in his truck. When he looked back at me, there were tears in his intense, green eyes, and his lips were trembling.

“You’re an angel, you know that?” He held my small, delicate hands in his large, beefy ones.

The corners of my mouth pulled upwards slightly, but my eyes stung with the threat of tears.

Letting go of my hands, he turned around and picked up a small, unlabeled jar off the top of the passenger seat. “Can you help me with something? Uncle Ray gave me this to help stop my leg from cramping.”

“Uhh… I guess.”

He opened the jar and handed it to me. The jar contained a brownish-green, gel-like substance. I hesitantly swiped three fingers across the surface of the substance that felt like Vaseline before rubbing it onto one of his hairy calves. When I was done, I stood there looking at the greasy residue that remained on my hands before reluctantly wiping it off onto my pajamas.

Joseph stood up and walked to the back of his truck. He seemed shorter, stubbier than I remembered, and he had gained some noticeable weight and had a scraggly beard. After he had rummaged for a while through the back of his truck filled with chairs, baskets, and anything else that could be found at a thrift shop or garage sale, he pulled out a plastic container of salad. The lettuce looked dark and weepy, and when Joseph opened the lid, a pungent smell of vinegar and decaying plant matter escaped. My nose wrinkled at the smell.

He closed the lid and put the container back into the truck before turning back to face me and spreading his arms wide. “Come here.” The brief grin on his face revealed the gap in his teeth.

I went closer to him, and he gave me a big hug and softly swayed from side to side. I was a rag doll in his arms, my legs hanging limply above the ground. His arm muscles were quivering, and he smelled strongly of sweat slightly masked by Old Spice. After he set me down, I looked at him. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and there were streaks of white and dark-green on some parts of his face.

While rummaging through his truck, he pulled out a medium-sized, brown statue of a mother chimpanzee holding her baby to her chest. “Look what I got for Mom. Now she’ll always think of me when she sees it.”

“That’s… nice.”

He put the statue back. “I got something for you too.” He walked back to the front of the truck and picked up a small, wooden box.

I sighed before following him. “You didn’t need to.”

He took two rings out of the box and handed them to me. Both were simple with geometric patterns. I slipped the rings into the pocket of my pajama pants.

“You know, I was talking to one of my friends about you recently.”

“You were?” I shifted uncomfortably.

“He asked me if you were hot, and if I would hook you up with him.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Oh….”

“I told that *asshole* that he better *not fucking* touch you.” He seemed proud of this. “By the way, how’s that friend of yours I met at Lawrence's funeral?”

“You mean Maisy?”

“Yeah. You should hook her up with me.”

“*No*!” I nervously glanced back at the house. “Besides, I don’t think she’s into guys,” I lied.

He took out a shot glass and glass bottle with a black-and-white label that was half-full of a brownish liquid. He poured himself a drink before taking a shot. While pouring another glass, he looked at me. “Do you want some?”

“No thank you.”

He took another shot. “Well aren’t you a *good* girl.” His gray shirt was stained with sweat.

“So… what happened to your truck?”

The sides of the truck were dented and scratched, and the right side mirror was cracked.

He scratched his chin that was hidden under his scraggly beard. “I was racing against a friend and bumped into some trees.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“Why doesn’t Mark just fucking give me one of his? *That son of a bitch has all of these fucking cars just lying around*.” He gestured aggressively at one of my father’s cars parked in the driveway. “*If that fucker cared about me, he would give me one of his fucking cars*.”

I slowly took a few steps away from him. “I’m sure Dad does care about you.”

“*He fucking doesn’t*. If he *did*, he would give me the things *I fucking asked for*.”

I closed my eyes and released the breath I was holding.

I had forgotten that there was no reasoning with him. My mother once tried to tell him that his chicken coop needed to be more protected, but Joseph wouldn’t listen, so his chickens got eaten by a fox.

“Oh, I have something else for you.” Going to the back of the truck again, he pulled out what looked like a red, leather photo album. “Do you know what Magic the Gathering is?”

“I’ve heard of it. I think there’s a club at my high school.” My eyes widened, and I quickly put my hand over my mouth.

“I’m going to come to your school and *beat* their little asses.”

“Uhh, please don’t.” I nervously glanced back at the house again.

He opened up the photo album, and inside, encased in thin plastic sheets, where various playing cards with detailed pictures. Joseph flipped through the flexible pages before taking out two cards and handing them to me. The second card he handed me was titled “Anguished Unmaking.” I read its description, and a part of it caught my eye.

*A cruelty beyond imagining, a pain beyond description.*

I looked back up at Joseph as I realized he chose this card on purpose.

“Now take care of these.” He looked down at me with a serious expression. “Don’t be like the *fucking assholes* I play with sometimes. They place their cards down *so fucking hard* that they *bend* them.” His hand slammed down onto his truck with a loud *bang*.

I flinched.

“*Those bitches make me want to punch them for disrespecting their cards*.” He pointed at the cards in my hand. “These things are *valuable*.”

I carefully slipped the cards into my pocket with the rings. “Don’t worry. I’ll put them in a safe place.”

“You better.” He stared at me intensely with his green eyes.

I heard the sound of gravel grinding together, so I turned my head to looked at the part of the driveway that sloped down toward the road. Upon seeing Rosalie drive up in my grandma’s silver Toyota, my muscles relaxed, and my grateful smile met with her worried look.

She got out of the car, her purple ponytail bobbed as she walked toward us. “Hi, Joseph.”

“Here, I have something for you.” He handed her the same cards he handed me earlier.

She looked at them. “I would stay longer to talk, but Anna and I have things we need to take care of inside.”

Joseph gave us both a hug. “This is for Mom.” He gave Rosalie the chimpanzee statue before she and I headed for the house. As we passed the decrepit fence, I showed her the rings and cards he gave me.

“You know he’s just trying to buy his way back into the family with all of these gifts, right?”

I looked up at her, my eyes beginning to water. “Yeah, I know.”