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English IV

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The Dig

I sat in the damp soil, bare toes hanging over the edge and a blade of grass between my teeth while I adjusted the straps on my stained overalls. Evan looked up at me, white hair falling into his eyes and mud caked across his face. Leaning on the little black shovel, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand which left a new trail of dirt that sweeping across his cheeks and upper lip. Carefully, he leaned the shovel against the sandy wall and pulled up his green shorts.

“I found a spoon while you were inside. And some worms.” He gestured to one of the buckets in the dirt beside him.

“Nice. Throw me the rope.”

He tossed me the end of the pink jump rope beside him, which I tied securely around the thin base of the apple tree, before turning on my stomach and sliding down the side of the pit, rope wrapped tightly around my small fist.

“Out n’ damage, Sophie, you’re gonna cave it in. Looook at all this dirt.” Evan moved to the other side of the pit, lifting the bottom of his once white t-shirt to catch the sand that slid down the walls. “I just finished digging this out and you’re ruining it.” He glared at me.

I glared back. “It’s ‘God dammit.’ And I’m the designer, and I told you to put steps in, but you didn’t.” I turned and marched three paces to the opposite wall. “Besides, Mom says we’re getting too close to the apple tree. We have to start digging that way more.”

“Racket!” He threw the miniature shovel aside and glared in the direction of the house. “But the supply shed is over there.” He gestured toward the tiny yellow play house with pale shutters, a look of grim realization spreading across his face. “We have to dig like, like, like three feet still.”

“I know. Wyatt’s coming later to see progress. Maybe he’ll have an idea.”

“Will you help dig until he gets here?”

“Okay fine,” I said, picking at a root that hung from the wall of the hole between the layers of sand and clay. I stared up and stretched my arms toward the cloudless sky; my fingertips could no longer reach the edge of the hole. In the last few weeks, it had grown deeper than we ever thought possible and now came just over our dad’s head, which we discovered after asking him to climb down to the bottom and stand as straight as possible a few days earlier.

We worked in silence, systematically filling the buckets at the bottom with the dirt that came from shaping our steps. Evan’s white hair took on a greyish sheen as silt and dust filtered through the sunlight and into the shadows cast by the walls.

He had begun digging with zealous devotion the day he got the little black shovel as a birthday gift from our grandmother. Every day, regardless of the weather or prior engagements, he would dig as soon as he returned from preschool. I was not interested at first, but eventually realized it was a prime opportunity to take advantage of his willingness to do as I said and create something amazing. At first, it was just a succession of small holes, which we then filled with water and stood in and built channels to connect them to one another, but one hole in the corner gradually grew deeper than the others, and this became the primary focus of our digging. Wyatt was my favorite neighbor, and therefore the first person I told about the newest project unfolding in my backyard. We decided to take a break from playing in the old man’s hedges down the street, fleeing in terror when he came out to yell at us, and instead focused all our attention of the excavation project. We had high expectations of what might lie at the bottom.

“Hey, Napoleon, gimme some a your tots.”

I looked up, brushing the hair out of my eyes and squinting against the sun. A silhouette appeared over the the rim, shovel in hand.

“Go get your own freakin tots.” I grinned up into the sunlight, then climbed the three finished steps and grabbed the rope. Wyatt pulled against the other end and succeeded in dragging me out over the edge. I stood and brushed the dirt from my hands on my overalls. Taking a seat on the edge of the sandbox, I held up a tattered piece of paper and pointed at the intricate crayon diagram of progress that Wyatt and I had carefully drawn two days earlier.

“As you can see, excavation is right on schedule.”

“Yeah. Diamonds are only like another four feet. And then, magma.” A thin smile spread across his face, which I mirrored. Loose curls emerged from under his baseball hat, and I watched his face as he studied the sheet of paper. His lashes cast long shadows that fell over his cheeks when he blinked, and I wondered briefly what it would feel like if I let them brush against my finger. Years later, when we were older and started to care about things like that, my friends and I would discuss how much more attractive we would be if only we had Wyatt’s eyelashes.

“Wanna come over and watch *Napoleon Dynamite* later?” he said, still studying the diagram.

“Okay. We just saw it yesterday though.”

“It’s a great movie. We have to watch it again. But at my dad’s house cause I’m staying there for a while cause he doesn’t like Rick, I think.”

“Ah.” I nodded knowingly, even though I had little understanding of exactly why Rick was a problem. He just always ruffled my hair, which I found annoying and unnecessary. I was told years later, after the whole ordeal was over, that he was also crazy.

I was willing to put up with Wyatt’s mom’s new boyfriend, however, just to be in Wyatt’s house and with his mom. Debbie was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and I fell instantly in love with her. She constantly gave me presents and invited me to come to the barn with her and Wyatt to see the hunter-jumper horses. They were so big that I barely came to their shoulders, yet they would become alarmed by the littlest things, bolting at the sight of a leaf floating in the wind. They snorted and moved their feet constantly, shoe-adorned hooves tapping on the pavement and coats glistening with nervous sweat. “They are beautiful, but they will never have the rational minds of a little quarter horse,” she would say, smoothing her blond hair. I agreed and imagined one of their large hooves placed on my head and squashing me into the gravel.

“What are you staring at?” Wyatt glanced away from the diagram just in time to see me look quickly in the other direction.

“Just your eyelashes,” I said. “They’re super long, you know.”

“Oh, yeah I know. My mom said I got them from my dad.” He blushed slightly, then reached for a stray crayon and made a few correction marks on the yellowing sheet of paper, and I looked up at the sky instead. They looked just like Debbie’s, but I decided not to mention it.

“You guys, I have an idea! You guys, an idea!”

Pulled from my momentary stupor, I jumped up and ran to the edge of the hole, grabbing Wyatt’s hand and pulling him behind me. When he was sure he had our attention, Evan put his shoulders back importantly and nodded at the far wall.

“We dig like, like a little room under the supply shed.” Turning, he drew a half circle in the sandy wall with the tip of the shovel: the doorway. “We can reinforce the roof with wood and stuff.” He grinned up at us.

Wyatt and I looked at each other. This changed everything; an underground fort was the dream and had always been the dream. We started construction immediately.

In two days, we had dug a small circular cave, just big enough for the three of us to sit in, scrunching our knees up to our chests. Over lunch, Evan and I chattered incessantly about improvements that had to be made to make the fort bigger without the roof to caving in. The doorway especially had begun to crumble during excavation that day—a problem that we found worrisome, but not impossible to solve.

“What’s happening with the hole now?” my mother said, having taken an uncharacteristic interest in the excavation talk.

“We’re making a cool tunnel! And, and we can already all fit in it!” Evan beamed around the table, then stuffed a baby carrot in his mouth.

My mother looked momentarily horrified, then rose and walked outside to the site of the dig and looked in disbelief at the progress. “You have to fill this in immediately. It could collapse on you and kill you all. You would suffocate to death.”

We stared at her. She usually left the unnecessary worrying to our dad. Evan explained about the reinforcements, but she would not change her mind. We started filling in that afternoon.

“Racket racket racket! So so unfair. There are reinforcements. Out n damage!” Evan muttered under his breath and glared in the direction of the house, wiping his nose as tears rolled through the dirt on his face.

I helped in silence and regretted having told her. It could have been great.

Wyatt’s mom died that year, not long after the completion, then reluctant filling in of the hole. He moved in with his dad, got a buzz cut, and stopped coming over to my house. I still saw him every day at school—we went to school together for a total of ten years—but we never resumed excavation or watched *Napoleon Dynamite* again. My mom told me a few years later that Debbie had severe mental illness and depression and was on a lot of medication. And Rick was crazy. The night she died, he tried to burn the house down because he said her ghost was still inside, trying to escape.

When I told Wyatt about the hole—that we had to fill it in, that there was nothing that could be done, and that we could not tunnel any more—his face fell and he didn’t say a word. I told him I would come over to watch *Napoleon Dynamite,* but I never did. My mom had stopped letting me go to his house when Rick was there, which was all the time.

More quickly than I could believe, I forgot what Debbie’s face looked like, how she talked, and what she used to make us for lunch, but Wyatt didn’t talk about it, so neither did I. I remember him saying once years later that if he had just stayed at his mom’s house that night, instead of going to his dad’s, he could have done something. Stopped crazy Rick from giving her the wrong pills, called 911 in time, just something. I didn’t know what to say. I watched his eyelashes and told him we were too young to know what was happening, that he couldn’t have done anything, that it wasn’t his fault. We never talked about it again. I still can’t imagine what that type of regret feels like.