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Scat

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ONE

The day before Mrs Starch vanished, her biology students trudged silently, as always, into the classroom. Their expressions reflected the usual mix of dread and melancholy, for Mrs Starch was the most feared teacher at the Truman School.

When the bell rang, she unfolded stiffly, like a crane, and rose to her full height of nearly six feet. In one hand she twirled a sharpened pencil, a sure sign of trouble to come.

Nick glanced across the aisle at Marta Gonzalez. Her brown eyes were locked on Mrs Starch, and her thin elbows were planted like fence posts, pinning her biology book open to Chapter Eight. Nick had left his own textbook in his locker, and his palms were sweating.

"Good morning, people," said Mrs Starch, in a tone so mild that it was chilling. "Who's prepared to tell me about the Calvin cycle?"

Only one hand rose. It belonged to Graham, who always claimed to know the answers but never did. Mrs Starch hadn't called on him since the first week of school.

"The Calvin cycle," she repeated. "Anybody?"

Marta looked as if she might throw up again. The last

time that had happened, Mrs Starch had barely waited until the floor was mopped before instructing Marta to write a paper listing five major muscles used in the act of regurgitation.

Nick and the other students had been blown away. What kind of teacher would punish a kid for puking?

"By now," Mrs Starch was saying, "the photosynthetic process should be familiar to all of you."

Marta gulped hard, twice. She'd been having nightmares about Mrs Starch, who wore her dyed blonde hair piled to one side of her head, like a beach dune. Mrs Starch's school wardrobe never varied: a polyester trouser suit in one of four faded pastel colours, and drab brown flats. She painted heavy violet make-up on her eyelids, yet she made no effort to conceal an odd crimson mark on her chin. The mark was the shape of an anvil and the subject of wild speculation, but nobody had ever had the nerve to ask Mrs Starch about it.

Marta's eyes flicked miserably towards Nick, then back to the teacher. Nick was fond of Marta, although he wasn't sure if he liked her enough to sacrifice himself to Mrs Starch, who had begun to pace. She was scanning the class, selecting a victim.

A droplet of perspiration glided like a spider down Nick's neck. If he worked up the courage to raise his hand, Mrs Starch would pounce swiftly. Right away she'd see that he had forgotten his biology book, a crime that would be forgiven only if Nick was able to explain and then diagram the Calvin cycle, which was unlikely. Nick was still struggling to figure out the Krebs cycle from Chapter Seven.

"Plants, as we all know, are vital to human existence," said Mrs Starch, on patrol. "And without the Calvin cycle, plants could not exist. Could not exist..."

Graham was waving his arm and squirming like a puppy. The rest of the class prayed that Mrs Starch would call on him, but she acted as if he were invisible. Abruptly she spun to a halt at the front of Marta's row.

Marta sat rigidly in the second desk, behind a brainy girl named Libby who knew all about the Calvin cycle – all about everything – but seldom made a peep.

"The chart on page one hundred and sixty-nine," Mrs Starch went on, "makes it all plain as day. It's an excellent illustration, and one that you are likely to encounter on a test. Quite likely..."

Marta lowered her head, a tactical mistake. The movement, slight as it was, caught Mrs Starch's attention.

Nick sucked in a breath. His heart raced and his head buzzed, because he knew that it was now or never. Marta seemed to shrink under Mrs Starch's icy gaze. Nick could see tears forming at the corners of Marta's eyes, and he hated himself for hesitating.

"Come on, people, snap out of your coma," Mrs Starch chided, tapping the pencil on Libby's desk. "The Calvin cycle?"

The only reply was a ripping noise – Marta's trembling elbows, tearing holes in the pages of her book.

Mrs Starch frowned. "I was hoping for a sea of hands," she said with a disappointed sigh. "But, once again, it seems I'll have to pick a volunteer. An unwilling volunteer..."

As the teacher pointed her pencil at the top of Marta's

head, Nick raised his hand.

I'm toast, he thought. She's gonna crush me like a bug.

Lowering his eyes, he braced to hear Mrs Starch call his name.

"Oh, Duane?" she sang out.

Great, Nick thought. She forgot who I am.

But when he looked up, he saw the teacher aiming her pencil at another kid on the other side of the classroom. The mean old bird had totally faked him out, and Marta, too.

The other kid's name really was Duane, and Nick had known him since elementary school, when he was two years ahead of Nick and known as Duane the Dweeb. One summer, Duane the Dweeb grew ten centimetres and gained sixty-eight kilos and from then on everybody called him Smoke, because that's what he wanted to be called. Some kids said it was because he was a pyro.

"So, Duane," Mrs Starch said sweetly. "Have you finished Chapter Eight?"

Rumpled and sleepy-looking, Smoke grunted and raised his eyes towards the teacher. Nick couldn't see his expression, but the slump of his shoulders suggested a profound lack of interest.

"Duane?"

"I guess I read it, yeah."

"You guess?" Using a thumb and two fingers, Mrs Starch spun the yellow pencil into a blur, like a miniature aeroplane propeller. Under less stressful circumstances it would have been entertaining.

"I read so much," Smoke said, "I forget which is which."

Several students struggled to smother giggles.

Marta reached across the aisle, nudged Nick, and mouthed the words "Thank you."

Nick felt his face redden.

"For raising your hand," Marta whispered.

Nick shrugged. "No big deal," he whispered back.

Mrs Starch moved across the classroom and positioned herself beside Smoke's desk. "I see you brought your biology book today," she said. "That's progress, Duane."

"I guess."

"But you'll find that it's much easier to read when it's not upside down." Mrs Starch rotated the textbook, using the eraser end of her pencil.

Smoke nodded. "Yeah, that's better."

He tried to flip open the book, but Mrs Starch pressed down firmly with the pencil, holding the cover closed.

"No peeking," she said. "Tell me how the Calvin cycle produces sugar from carbon dioxide, and why that's so important to photosynthesis."



"Gimme a minute." Smoke casually began to pick at a nasty-looking spot on his meaty, fuzz-covered neck.

Mrs Starch said, "We're all waiting," which was true. The other students, including Nick and Marta, were on the edge of their seats. They were aware that something major and possibly legendary was about to occur, though they had no clue that within forty-eight hours they would each be questioned by sheriff's officers and asked to tell what they'd seen and heard.

Smoke wasn't as tall as Mrs Starch, but he was built like

a bull. His size and attitude intimidated all of his classmates and most of his teachers, though not Mrs Starch. When Smoke tried to flick her pencil off his book, it didn't budge.

He leaned back, cracked his knuckles, and said, "What's the question again?"

Marta groaned under her breath. Nick gnawed his upper lip. The longer Smoke stalled, the worse it was going to be when Mrs Starch closed in.

"For the last time," she said coldly, "tell us about the Calvin cycle."

"Is that like a Harley?" Smoke asked, and the students erupted in laughter.

They grew quiet just as quickly, because Mrs Starch was smiling – and Mrs Starch never smiled.

Marta covered her face. "Has he got a death wish, or what?" she said to Nick, who had a bad feeling about the whole scene.

"So, Duane, it turns out you're a comedian!" Mrs Starch said. "And all this time we thought you were just another dull lump with no talent and no future."

"I guess," said Smoke, who had resumed probing his inflamed blemish.

"You do a lot of guessing, don't you?"

"So what?"

"Well, I am guessing that you haven't even glanced at Chapter Eight," said Mrs Starch. "Am I right?"

"Yeah."

"And I'm also guessing that you're more interested in playing with your acne than you are in learning the photosynthetic process."

Smoke's hand came off his neck and dropped to his side.

Looming over him, Mrs Starch said, "A teacher's job is to identify and cultivate each student's strengths, and then encourage him or her to utilise those strengths in the pursuit of knowledge."

There wasn't a trace of anger in her voice, which Nick found creepy.

"So, Duane," she continued, "what I'd like you to do – since you're obviously fascinated by the subject – is to write a five-hundred-word essay about spots."

The class cracked up again – Nick and Marta, too, in spite of themselves. This time the kids couldn't stop laughing.

Mrs Starch waited before continuing. "You should start with some basic human biology – what causes glandular skin eruptions in adolescents? There's plenty of information on the internet, Duane, so I'll expect at least three different research references. The second part of the paper should summarise the history of acne, both medically and in popular culture. And then the last section could deal with your own personal spot, the one with which you seem so enchanted."

Smoke stared darkly at Mrs Starch.

"And here's the best part, Duane," she said. "I want the essay to be funny, because you're a funny fellow. An extremely funny fellow."

"Not me."

"Oh, don't be modest. You had everybody in stitches just a moment ago." Mrs Starch turned her back on Smoke and bobbed the pencil gaily in the air. "Come on,

people, what do you say? Wouldn't it be amusing for Duane to write a humorous essay on spots and then read it aloud to the whole class?"

Nobody was giggling anymore, and even Graham had yanked down his hand. Smoke wasn't a popular kid, but it was impossible not to feel sorry for him. Mrs Starch was being exceptionally brutal, even for Mrs Starch.

Marta looked queasy again, and Nick was starting to feel the same way. Smoke was a loner and definitely freaky, but he never hassled anybody as long as he was given plenty of space.

"Nick?" Mrs Starch said.

Nick sagged at his desk and thought: I can't believe this.

"Mr Waters, are you with us today?"

"Yes, Mrs Starch."

"Be honest – wouldn't you and your classmates enjoy hearing Duane read his pimple paper?"

Nick's chin dropped to his chest. If he answered yes, he'd risk making a mortal enemy of Smoke. If he answered no, Mrs Starch would pick on him mercilessly for the rest of the school year.

He wished that he could make himself faint, or maybe swallow his own tongue. An ambulance ride would be better than this.

"Well?" Mrs Starch prodded.

Nick tried to think of something to say that would free Smoke from doing the essay and at the same time not anger Mrs Starch.

"Honestly, I'd rather learn about the Calvin cycle," he said, "than Duane's zits."

A few students snickered nervously.

"No offence," Nick added, with a lame nod to Smoke, who sat expressionless.

Mrs Starch showed no mercy. She spun around and tapped Smoke on the crown of his head. "Five hundred words," she said, "by the end of the week."

Smoke scowled. "I don't think so."

"Excuse me?"

"It ain't fair."

"Really? Is it fair for you to come to my class so unprepared and hopelessly unfamiliar with the study material? To waste my time, and that of your fellow students – you think that's fair, Duane?"

Smoke brushed a shock of jet-black hair out of his eyes. "I 'pologise, 'kay? Now just let it go."

Mrs Starch bent down slowly, peering like a heron about to spear a minnow. "Well, what happened to our class comedian?" she asked. "Are you all out of jokes?"

"I guess."

"That's too bad, because I expect five hundred hilarious words – double-spaced."

"No way," Smoke said.

Mrs Starch positioned the tip of the pencil so that it was even with the tip of his nose.

"Way," she said.

Nick looked anxiously at Marta, who had closed her biology book and laid her head upon the desk.

Smoke took a swat at the pencil, but Mrs Starch jerked it away.

"Get outta my face," he said, "or else you'll be sorry."

"Is that a threat, Duane?" Mrs Starch didn't sound too worried.

Smoke said, "Ain't a threat. It's a fact."

"No, here's a fact." Once more she levelled her pencil at his nose. "You will write a five-hundred-word essay about spots and you will read it aloud to all of us, or you will fail this class and have to take it again next year. Do you understand?"

Smoke crossed his eyes as he stared down the yellow shaft of Mrs Starch's sharpened pencil.

"I guess," he said.

Then he calmly chomped the pencil in half, chewed up the graphite along with the splinters, and swallowed the whole mouthful with a husky gulp.

Mrs Starch backed away, eyeing with alarm the moist stump of wood that remained in her fingers.

Nobody else in the room moved a muscle except for Smoke, who dropped his biology book into a camouflage-patterned backpack, stood up, and ambled out of the door.



TWO

As they were walking home from the bus stop, Nick told Marta: "It's not over between those two. You just wait."

"I am so glad there's no lesson tomorrow," she said. "I can't deal with it – she's a witch and he's a total moron."

The science classes were taking an all-day field trip to the Black Vine Swamp, which was out near the Big Cypress Preserve. Mrs Starch herself had picked the location, describing it as 'a festival of photosynthesis'. The swamp was famous for exotic orchids and ancient cypress trees, but Nick was hoping to see a panther.

"We'll probably catch malaria from the mosquitoes," Marta said, "but it can't possibly be more painful than her stupid biology lesson."

Nick laughed. "We haven't had rain for two weeks. There won't be many mosquitoes."

"Spiders, then. Whatever." Marta waved and turned up the driveway of her house.

Nick lived three blocks away, in the same part of town. His house was actually closer to the bus stop, but lately he'd been taking the long way home so that he could walk with Marta.

From the front step, she called back to him: "Hey, do you think he'll show up for the field trip?"

"Smoke?"

"Who else?"

Nick said, "I hope not."

"Me, too." Marta waved once more and disappeared through the doorway.

As soon as Nick got home, he hurried to the computer in the den and checked his emails. He was waiting to hear from his father, a captain in the National Guard who for the last seven months had been stationed in the Anbar province of Iraq.

Nick's dad emailed almost every morning, but Nick and his mother hadn't heard from him in three days. This had happened before, when his father was on a field mission with his unit. Nick tried not to let himself worry.

His mom was a guard at the Collier County Jail. She finished work at four-thirty in the afternoon and was usually home by five-fifteen at the latest. Nick stayed at the computer, researching an English paper and rechecking his emails every few minutes. By the time his mother came in the door, he'd still heard nothing from his father.

"How was your day?" his mom asked.

"Some kid ate Mrs Starch's pencil. You wouldn't believe it," Nick said. "Gobbled it right out of her hand."

"Any particular reason?"

"He was mad, I guess. She made fun of a big ol' gnarly zit on his neck."

Nick's mother set her purse heavily on the kitchen counter. "Tell me again why we're spending all this

money on a private school."

"Wasn't my idea," Nick reminded her. "Smaller classes?"

"That was one reason."

"And better teachers, you said."

"So we'd been told."

"And the low Freak Factor," Nick added.

"Right." His mother frowned. "And now you're telling me there's a boy in biology who thinks he's a termite."

"More like a beaver," Nick said. "But Mrs Starch shouldn't have made fun of him. He's not a kid you want to mess with."

Nick's mother took a carton of orange juice from the fridge and emptied it into a small glass.

"What's the pencil-eater's name?" she asked.

"Duane Scrod. You don't know him."

"Spelled S-c-r-o-d?"

Nick said, "Yeah, that's right."

"Then it's Duane Scrod Jr. I know his father, Duane Sr."

"From the jail?"

Nick's mom nodded. "He did six months for burning down a Chevy dealership in Port Charlotte, all because his Tahoe's gear box went on Alligator Alley."

No wonder the kid turned out the way he did, Nick thought. His old man's a whack job.

"What's for dinner?" Nick asked his mother.

"Spaghetti, spaghetti, or spaghetti."

"Guess I'll try the spaghetti."

"Excellent choice."

"Hey, did Dad email you at work today?"

"No. How about you?"

"Not yet," Nick said.

His mother managed a smile. "Don't worry. He's probably away from base camp."

"I'll go look on the computer again—"

"Let's eat first, Nicky. Know what? I'm not really in the mood for pasta. Why don't we go out for some barbecue?"

"You sure, Mom?"

"Sure as can be," she said, finishing off the juice. "What time is it in Iraq right now?"

"Like one-thirty in the morning."

"Oh, then he's probably asleep."

"Yeah," Nick said. "I bet he's sleeping. I bet we'll hear from him tomorrow."

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