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Carnival of Creeps

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CARNIVAL OF CREEPS

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Writing

Richard Rodriguez

Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, Division of Humanities

Nova Southeastern University

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Spooked

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls!" the barker called as he twirled his cane. "I am your humble host, Dardano. This carnival is not your ordinary collection of rigged games and rickety rides. Pay close attention. There's magic and surprises around every corner for those who are willing to take a chance. But be warned!" The barker smacked his cane on the ground like a crack of thunder as a menacing grin spread on his face. "Not everyone likes what they see when they look behind the curtain. Welcome, one and all, to Dardano's Carnival of Delights and Amusements!"

Davis stared at the barker as he and his friends entered the carnival. Davis was entranced by his words and at the same time a little creeped out. Something about the barker seemed off to Davis, but he would never say so to his friends.

"What are you staring at?" Emmett said, startling Davis out of his thoughts.

"Nothing," Davis said immediately, shrugging off the uneasy feeling.

"Get your head out of the clouds, Davie," Emmett's twin brother Marty said.

"We're finally at the carnival!"

Davis finally took a good look at the carnival around them. As far as the eye could see, the grounds were filled with games, rides, and every type of junk food Davis could imagine. The air was thick with the smell of sugar and Davis could hardly smell anything else. Music of all sorts blared from stereos all around the carnival and drowned out the laughs and screams of kids as they whizzed through the air on all of the rides.

"Woah," Davis said. "This is the best carnival that's ever come to town! It's like

twice as big as the school fair!”

“So,” Emmett said as he started to walk, “what do you guys wanna do first?”

“Definitely no food before the rides,” Marty said as he and Davis followed.

Marty smirked at Davis and punched him softly on the shoulder. “Remember what happened at last year's fair?”

Davis felt his face get hot. “Yeah, well, maybe eating curly fries before getting on the Death Drop wasn't my best idea.”

Marty laughed. “Dude, you blew chunks all over the place. It was awesome!”

Davis felt queasy just thinking about it. “Not so awesome if you're going through it.”

Marty started to say what was bound to be another jabbing remark when Emmett spoke up. Emmett always played peacekeeper whenever Davis and Marty argued.

“No food first then,” Emmett said. “Rides? Games?”

Davis was about to suggest going on the Swing ride to start off their night when he heard the loud ring of a bell.

Davis looked ahead and saw a tall board with a bell at the top. A sign above the bell, written to look like lightning in a cloud, read Mighty Thor's Hammer. There were labels on the board at certain points. Each one read something like “Kitten”, “Baby” and so on until the highest one, which read “Thor.”

Davis looked at the base of the board and saw a brawny guy walking away and holding hands with a girl as he held a huge colorful bear in his other hand.

“Let's play a game,” Davis said as he walked toward Mighty Thor's Hammer.

Marty and Emmett looked toward where Davis was headed.

“That game?” Marty asked. “You won't even be able to lift the hammer. You may have a big brain, but you've got no brawn.”

Davis scoffed. “Go big or go home, right? Isn't that what you always say? If I'm gonna win a prize, I'm gonna win the biggest one I can find.”

Marty chuckled. “Okay, Mr. Muscles. Let's see if you can do it.”

The three reached the game and the carny looked them over. He gave them a little smirk and said, “You kids looking for the bathroom?”

“How much to try?” Davis asked.

The carny laughed. “You sure, kid? I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself. We've got loads of other games you could try.”

Davis rolled his eyes. “How much?”

The carny shrugged. “Your money, your choice. Three bucks a pop.”

Davis handed over \$3 and moved over to the sledgehammer.

“Let's see what you've got, Superman,” Marty said.

“You sure you wanna try this, Davis?” Emmett said. “That hammer looks really heavy.”

Marty smacked Emmett's shoulder. “Let him try. At the very least, this should be hilarious.”

Davis ignored his friends as he eyed the handle of the hammer. He bent down and grabbed the handle with both hands. It felt like smooth rubber in his fists as he yanked it up.

Davis's hands slipped and the force of his pull propelled him backwards. He then slipped on the gravel under his feet and landed hard on his back.

Davis, a little dazed, heard Marty, the carny, and even Emmett laughing at his fall. His face felt hot again as he sat up and rubbed his back. He got up and looked at the hammer again.

Determined to stop his friends' laughter, Davis stepped back up to the hammer.

“Come on, man,” Marty said. “Give up while your arms aren't broken.”

“Yeah,” Emmett said. “Let's just go for another game or something. We don't want you to get hurt.”

Davis wiped his hands on his shirt and looked over at his friends. Marty had a big grin on his face and Emmett was looking around the carnival trying to hold back a smile.

Davis glared down at the hammer while he flexed and stretched his arms. Then, he bent over, gripped the handle, moved his feet and made sure his legs were stable. He took a deep breath and started to lift the hammer.

The weight of it made him grit his teeth. He grimaced as he held it. His arms shook and he pressed his feet harder into the ground. He could feel the strain in his back and legs. But he held on as hard as he could.

He lifted the hammer inch by inch until, finally, he had lifted the hammer up past his knees. He quickly swung the hammer over the end of the lever. With a cry of rage, Davis dropped it as hard as he could.

The weight at the end of the lever sailed up past “Kitten” and “Baby,” but its ascent slowed right as it reached “Wimp.” Then, the weight dropped back down.

Marty chuckled a bit. “Well, look at that, Strong Man. It got a whole two feet off the ground.”

Davis was panting. “That thing is like a hundred pounds heavier than it looks.”

The carny patted Davis on the back. “Nice try, kid, but you only got to 'wimp.’”

Davis felt a hard lump in his throat. But he tried to swallow it. He shrugged and said, “Hey, at least I tried.”

Marty smirked. “And it was hilarious to watch. Come on, 'Wimp.' Let's find something else.”

Davis couldn't get rid of the lump in his throat and he felt a familiar cold feeling rising in his gut. He hated being called a wimp, a chicken, a coward. For most of his life, he had had the reputation of being a wuss thanks to a bully named Luis Vasquez. One day, when Davis was seven, Luis was pushing Davis around and calling him “Crybaby.” Davis couldn't defend himself and instead ran away to the bathroom, locked himself into a stall, and started crying. After that, all of his classmates knew him as the biggest coward in school.

Davis met Marty and Emmett two years ago when Davis was 10. Two different bullies named Caesar Ferris and Joey Buck were pushing him around. The twins had come to his defense and sent the bullies away soaked by a few water balloons. They had all been friends ever since.

Even as friends, Marty liked to tease Davis, too. It was part of Marty's nature. Marty always had to be the class clown, the center of attention. Davis didn't mind Marty making fun of how smart Davis was and calling him “Brainiac.” Davis was proud of his

smarts, actually. He just really hated being called a wimp.

Even now, Davis couldn't get away from his old reputation. He was still seen as a coward, and every time someone called him a wimp, he felt the old emotions stir up: Anger at all the kids who had bullied him, regret for the times he ran away crying, and above all else extreme embarrassment.

As Davis and the twins looked for another game to play, Davis's phone buzzed in his pocket. He took it out and saw the word "Dad" blinking on the screen. He answered the phone and covered his other ear with his hand.

His dad's voice sounded weak against the noise of people in the background. "Hold on a second," his dad said. Davis heard him moving through a crowd for a bit before he got to a quieter area. "Sorry about that. How's the carnival going?"

"It's great! There are so many games and stuff--"

"That's great, buddy! Listen, I can't talk for long. The party is gonna go on for longer than I thought. Your mom and I can't duck out early. Can you ask the twins if you can sleep over at their house?"

"Uh, sure," Davis said. "One sec." Davis went up to Marty, who was about to try to knock over a pyramid of cans with a baseball. "Hey, you mind if I sleep at your place tonight?"

"Sure, sure," Marty said, aiming the ball. "It's cool. Just back up, man. You're throwing off my aim."

Davis turned back to the phone. "It's fine, Dad."

"Perfect," his dad said. "Tell their parents we'll pick you up first thing in the

morning. I've gotta go. Have a good time, Davis."

Before Davis could answer, his dad hung up. Davis rolled his eyes a little and put his phone away. *Typical Dad*, he thought.

"Aw, man!" Marty said, kicking a little at the stand. "This game is rigged! They must have glued those cans together or something!"

Davis shrugged and followed the twins away from the game. Marty sulked a bit and kicked at the ground.

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The boys went on with their night, playing (and losing at) games, riding rides and having a blast. Even with all the fun, Davis couldn't shake the shame from the hammer game. Still, he tried his best to ignore it as they continued going through the carnival

About two hours later, they got off of a spinning ride called the Sizzler.

Davis stepped out of the ride a little woozily. He stumbled a few steps before he found his footing. "Man, I think this Sizzler's even faster than the one at the school fair."

Emmett thrust a fist in the air and leaned against the fence at the ride's border.

"Woohoo! Man, that was fun!"

Marty shook his head at his brother and friend. "You guys are ride amateurs."

Marty took a step and stumbled a bit but managed to catch himself and leaned against the railing.

Davis laughed. "Whatever, Marty. You're in the same boat as us."

Marty chuckled and held his forehead. "Yeah, fine. C'mon, let's sit down for a

sec.”

They found a bench near the ride and all decided to sit down.

As the twins discussed what rides they would go on next, Davis looked around. Nearby, he saw something that made his chest tighten.

It looked like a fun house, but instead of being decorated with clowns and circus animals, it was decorated to look like a haunted house. Bats, cobwebs, and rats were painted in a few corners. A sign running over the top, written in blood red, said “Spook House.”

A figure stood on a balcony on the house's second story. It was draped in a cloak and had boney white hands and a skull-like face. Even though it was just a guy in a mask, it made Davis's heart start pounding. The Grim Reaper beckoned to the carnival guests, dared them to enter the Spook House, and laughed maniacally when they refused.

Davis was staring at the Spook House when Marty said, “Hey, the Spook House looks really cool.”

Davis swallowed a lump that had formed in his throat. “Uh, yeah. Cool.”

Marty grinned as he glanced at Davis. “Are you scared, Brainiac?”

Davis blinked and looked at Marty. “What? No! I'm just hungry, that's all.”

Marty smirked at him. “Well, if you're not scared, let's go to the Spook House.”

Marty stood up and started walking toward it.

Emmett glanced at Davis and shrugged. “I'm sure it's totally lame anyway. Probably nothing but rubber bats and plastic rats.” Emmett followed his brother.

Davis had to think fast. He knew that if his friends went in without him, he'd be

the butt of every joke for the rest of the night. After the incident with Thor's Hammer, Davis couldn't stand to be called a wimp again. He didn't want a haunted house to add to his cowardly reputation. "Wait!" Davis yelled.

Marty turned to him and crossed his arms. He had a smug smile on his face. "Yes?"

Davis hesitated and heard a loud rush of noise followed by delighted screams. Davis looked ahead and saw a familiar ride. "The roller coaster! Come on, I've just gotta ride the Whiplash."

Marty nodded. "We'll go on the Whiplash, but only after we go in the Spook House."

Davis ran to keep up with them. "Can't we just ride something else?"

Emmett turned to Davis. "Oh, come on, Davis. It's just a haunted house. Not like anything is actually gonna hurt us."

Davis frowned. "I know, but..."

Marty stopped to let Davis catch up, then started gently shoving him toward the Spook House. "If you're not scared, then prove it. Let's go in."

Davis moved away from Marty and let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, okay, fine. Just quit shoving me."

When he reached the entrance, Davis stopped. He looked up at the sign again and spotted the Grim Reaper. He could see the teeth in his skull as he grinned at him from the balcony. Davis was almost sure the Grim Reaper was mocking him.

Another carny sat by the entrance to the Spook House. He was letting in one

group at a time. He paid little attention to the customers as he thumbed through a magazine.

As he waited in the short line with his friends, Davis could hear screams from the patrons inside. One person – it sounded like a girl – had such a loud screech that it made Davis wince a little.

Marty saw this and rolled his eyes. “Oh, don't be such a baby. Let's go. We're up next.”

The carny stopped them at the door by holding his palm out. He waited almost a full minute, then motioned the boys into the building.

*This is it, Davis thought. Calm down. It's not like you're gonna die. It's all just fake.*

He took a deep breath, puffed out his chest, and went through the doorway ahead of his friends.

The hallway to the first room was dark, lit only by the light streaming in from the doorway. Davis tried to walk calmly. He wanted to get through the Spook House as quick as possible.

“Ooh,” Marty moaned as if he were a ghost. “Beware, Davis! You're going to die!”

Davis muttered, “Shut up.”

The rooms of the Spook House were gross and horrifying. The first room featured a group of zombies eating bloody brains from decapitated heads at a dinner table. In the next one, there was a group of vampires emerging from their coffins, teeth

bared and eyes hungry. All the rooms featured a unique horror scene: there was a scene of a werewolf attack, one with aliens conducting experiments, and another with a mad doctor making an inhuman monster. The house was throwing every terror trick it knew at the unsuspecting customers.

With each new room, Davis's legs shook and his heart raced. He was breaking out in a cold sweat. Still, he endured it and tried his best not to scream as things leaped out at him in the darkness and blasts of air from unseen sources surprised him.

Davis and his friends approached what he hoped was the final room. As soon as he stepped in, he wanted to get out. The room was pitch dark. He could barely see a foot in front of him. The darkness was so thick it seemed to absorb the sounds of the rest of the house.

“Uh, guys?” Davis said, his voice shaky.

There was no response at first. Then, out of nowhere, Davis felt a hand grip his shoulder.

Davis gasped.

Marty chuckled. “Calm down, Davie. It's only me.”

Davis took a breath. “Jeez, man. Don't give me a heart attack.”

Emmett gulped a little. “It's so dark in here. I can barely see you guys.”

Davis nodded. “I know. I can't see any—”

Davis was interrupted by a sudden movement, a flash of light so bright it was blinding at first, and a blast of loud music.

In the light stood a tall man with a blank white mask showing nothing but a pair

of dark, piercing, angry eyes. He was holding something over his head. An axe! A rusty, bloody axe!

It was all too much for Davis. The noise, the light, the danger.

He jumped at the sight of it all. He screamed as loud as he could. He tried to run but tripped in the darkness and fell at the foot of the maniac.

Still screaming, Davis waited to hear the “whoosh” of the axe and feel the whack of it against his neck in a killing blow.

Instead, the only thing he heard was laughter. When he looked at the twins, he saw that they were laughing so hard they had tears in their eyes.

Marty wiped his face. “Oh, man, that was priceless!”

Davis frowned and looked back at the maniac. It was then he realized that the man hadn't moved. It was just another prop in the house. Davis felt his face get hot again and he stood up.

Marty wiped his eyes and said, “That high pitched squeal. Oh, I'm gonna remember that forever.”

Emmett tried to calm himself down. “Sorry for laughing, Davis, but it was definitely pretty funny.”

Davis knew his cheeks were bright red. He hurried through the door and into the night. He heard the twins following behind him.

Marty was still laughing. “Dude, you are the biggest scaredy cat I know. You even got scared by a stupid dummy in a carnival ride!”

Davis groaned. He knew he was going to be hearing about this for the rest of his

life.

Emmett shrugged and said, “You gotta admit that you're not all that brave, though. What about that time you almost ran into traffic 'cause you thought there was a roach on you?”

“Or,” Marty said, “that other time when you were scared of the mummies in the museum so you had to close your eyes and have someone guide you through the exhibit.”

“Or the time you woke up screaming 'cause you thought Freddy Krueger was after you.”

“We can't even get you to play that dumb mirror game with the ghosts.”

With each mention of another embarrassing incident from his past, the feeling in his gut got colder. Still, Davis didn't want his friends to see him as a wimp. He puffed out his chest and glared at them. “Just because I did those things doesn't mean I'm not just as brave as you guys.”

“Wait. I've got it!”

Marty got a look on his face Davis had grown to fear. It was the look Marty got when he was just about to have a really bad idea.

“What?” Davis said as he tried to ignore the feeling in the pit of his gut.

“I know the perfect way for you to prove that you're as brave as us,” Marty said. “I challenge you to a dare.”

“Oh no,” Davis muttered under his breath. Marty loved dares. He was always daring Davis or Emmett to do something stupid like climb to the highest branch on a tree or sneak into the school after it closed. Davis had never actually fallen for any of the

dares before and Marty would always make fun of him for it.

Marty pointed at Davis. "I dare you to do a little midnight scavenger hunt."

Davis gulped and he felt as if a stone had fallen into his gut. "M-Midnight scavenger hunt? You mean... Stay here after the park closes and collect things?"

Marty smirked and nodded.

Emmett spoke up. "Isn't that a little more dangerous than usual?"

"Oh, it's not that bad," Marty said. "This carnival's security is probably weak."

Davis stared at him. He thought about bringing up his parents, but Marty already knew Davis's father expected him to stay with the twins. "What would I have to get? Hypothetically."

Marty thought and paced before looking at Davis. Then, he snapped his fingers. "Just three things. A prize from the baseball toss game that was rigged. The 'Wimp' sign from the hammer game. And, uhm..." Marty looked around and spotted the Spook House. A wide grin spread across his face as he turned to Davis and said, "The mask off of that axe maniac dummy."

Davis shuddered at the thought of going into the Spook House after the carnival was closed. "Wh-What would I do with that stuff after?"

"You'd come to our house," Marty said. "Not like we live that far away from the carnival. I mean, we walked here."

Davis tried to think of a way out of the dare. He knew that it was one of the dumbest ideas Marty had ever come up with. If he backed out now, though, he knew that Marty would always hold this particular failed dare over his head.

Davis shook his head and said, “What if I get caught?”

At this, Marty put a terrified look on his face. He started talking with a dramatic voice. “H-Hello? Oh, thank goodness you're here! I got l-locked in the carnival. I c-can't find my way out!”

Davis looked at Emmett, but he just shrugged. “You don't have to do this,” Emmett said, “but it's your decision.”

Davis thought about it but shook his head. “No way. Even if all that worked... I mean, I don't wanna—”

“Come on, Davie,” Marty said. “What are you, a wimp?”

Davis glared at Marty a little.

“I'm not a wimp,” Davis said. “And don't call me Davie.”

“Yeah, that's right,” Marty said, ignoring the comment. “You may be a brainiac, but you're also a wimp, just like the Thor's Hammer game said. A big scaredy-cat wimp.”

Davis clenched his fists and felt himself getting hot. He had had enough. Just this once, he wanted to prove that he wasn't a coward. He needed to go through with this dare if for nothing else than to prove to himself that he wasn't afraid.

“Fine,” he said. “I'll do it.”

Davis saw both Marty's and Emmett's eyes widen. The shock on their faces was almost worth him agreeing to the dare.

“What?” Marty said, stunned.

“I'll do it,” Davis said, trying to sound more confident. “I'll stay in the carnival and do the scavenger hunt after it closes. On one condition.”

“Listen,” Emmett said, stepping forward. “You don't need to—”

“Yes, he does!” Marty said, shoving Emmett aside. “What's the catch, Davis?”

Davis looked at them. “If I do this, you guys never ask me to do a dare again.

AND you can't bug me about being a wimp anymore.”

“Deal!” Marty said.

Emmett stared at Davis. Davis could tell that Emmett couldn't believe he would ever actually agree to a dare as dangerous as this one.

“Are you sure about this?” Emmett said. “I mean, if you're caught, you could get arrested. Or worse, grounded for the rest of your life!”

Davis hesitated but nodded. “I'm sure.”

“Great!” Marty said and grinned. “Just try not to get scared while you're all by yourself in a dark, spooky carnival.”

“Good luck, dude,” Emmett said. “See you at our house when you've got everything.”

Davis walked away from his friends. He tried to quiet the buzzing in his stomach telling him that this dare was an awful idea. Instead, he searched for a place to hide until the carnival was closed.

Eventually, he discovered a cotton candy booth with a sign outside reading “Cotton Candy Machine Out of Order.” He looked around to see that no one was watching him. Then, he ducked inside and sat on the ground to settle in for the night.

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Davis woke with a start some time later. He was disoriented for a moment and tried to remember where he was. Finally, he remembered: The carnival, the dare.

He took out his phone and checked the time: a little past 1:30 in the morning. He'd been asleep for at least three hours.

When was the carnival supposed to close again?, he wondered

He picked himself up off the ground. The cloth walls of the booth were still. The music and constant chatter were all dead silent now. He listened hard for any signs of life outside of the booth but heard nothing. Moonlight shone through the thin fabric of the walls.

Davis carefully slipped under the fabric of the tent and, when he saw no one was around, he stepped out into the night.

As he walked into the streets of the carnival, Davis felt like he was stepping into a whole other world. Somehow, everything felt off kilter and dangerous in the night.

The smell of sugar was still present, but now it seemed stale and was mixed with the smell of gas. Davis guessed the smell was coming from a generator somewhere.

The colors were all muted under the moon. The once colorful carnival was now various shades of silver-grey.

The strange calm of the night made Davis feel the world had ended. There was absolutely no wind, no movement, not even any crickets chirping in the night.

“Hello?” Davis whispered. His throat had gone dry. He stopped and shivered hard, then cleared his throat.

“Hello?” he said again, this time a bit louder. Still nothing.

A chill went up Davis's spine. *I really am all alone*, he thought to himself. *What if something happens? What if...*

Davis shook his head. *Get it together. So you're alone. So what? Heck, I don't even hear any security guys wandering about.* He found this a bit odd, but he shook the thought away. *Maybe they can't afford night guards.*

Davis took a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

Don't lose focus, Davis. Think about what you need to do. The mask, the toy, the sign. The mask, the toy, the sign...

The thought of going into the Spook House while it was dark and quiet made him feel sick. He really didn't want to do it, but he knew he had to if he wanted to prove he was brave.

Swallowing a heavy lump in his throat, Davis decided to make the Spook House his first stop.

Might as well get it over with quick, he thought. *Like ripping off a band aid. Just do it.*

Davis made his way through the carnival as quickly and quietly as he could. When he reached the Spook House, he looked up at it.

The Spook House looked even stranger in the dark, like a real, abandoned, haunted house. Davis felt the cold feeling in his gut getting stronger as he looked at it. He knew it would be pitch black inside.

He took out his phone and thumbed on the flashlight feature. The light clicked on. Davis looked at the Spook House's exit door.

Smarter to go through the exit. It's the closest door to the maniac... And his mask.

Davis went up to the door. His heart was beating hard enough that he thought it was trying to escape his chest. His knees were shaking beneath him. He could already feel himself breaking out into a cold sweat. *Keep it together*, he thought. *Get the mask and get out.*

He gripped his phone tightly, its hard, plastic case and its slight weight almost a comfort to him.

Finally, he reached the room. It was decorated with fake trees all around, something Davis hadn't noticed when he was in it before. There in the corner stood the maniac.

Davis jumped a little when he saw it, forgetting briefly that it wasn't real. He had thought it was an actual insane lumberjack here to chop off his head. He calmed himself down again and forced himself to get closer to the maniac.

Looking closer at the dummy, Davis saw that he was wearing a plaid shirt and overalls. His clothes were splattered with brown and red spots. The face of the mask was completely blank, as Davis remembered, except for eyes.

As Davis stepped closer to the maniac, he had to crane his neck to look into its eyes. The eyes had a lot of detail in them. They seemed to glisten as he flashed his light at them. They were dark and bloodshot, glaring out from the mask.

Davis swallowed a lump in his throat. *He almost seems... real.*

He shook his head of the thought.

“You're... not that scary,” he said. His voice echoed in the empty room.

Davis's voice was shaky as he spoke. He didn't even know who he was trying to convince. But as he stared at the lifeless dummy, he felt like he had to reassure himself.

“Y... You're just a big blockhead, aren't you?”

Feeling bold, Davis lifted his hand and knocked his knuckles against the maniac's forehead.

“Nothing going on in there, huh?” Davis was starting to feel more confident.

With a crooked smirk, he said, “Hey, dummy. I'm talking to you.”

He knocked harder on its forehead and heard a tinny TINK with each rasp of his knuckles. His stomach settled and he let out a breath he hadn't noticed he was holding.

Davis moved his hand to the edge of the mask right by the maniac's chin. He yanked, but the mask was tight against the dummy. He frowned and yanked again.

“Come on, you stupid mask. Get off the dummy.”

The mask came free with one last yank and Davis stumbled back with it in his hand. He first glanced down at the mask, then looked back at the face of the dummy. Or, rather, the dummy's LACK of a face.

The dummy had a metallic head with absolutely no detail for any bits hidden behind the mask. The eyes were the only thing stuck in the head. Without the mask, the eyes looked almost more disturbing as they bulged out of the round, metal plate.

Davis's fear crept up on him again as he stared at the robotic face with its bulging, bloodshot eyes. He shook his head and smirked. When he spoke, he tried to keep his voice from shaking again.

“No wonder you wear a mask. You're pretty freaky looking.”

Davis looked down at the piece of plastic. In his hands, it almost looked like a featureless hockey mask with only a few dings and scratches on it.

Davis gripped the mask and held it to his side. He glanced quickly up at the maniac's axe. He could clearly see that both the blade and handle were made of rubber.

He shook his head. “You're creepy, but you can't hurt me.” Davis turned and made his way to the exit. He couldn't resist throwing one more remark toward the maniac. “See you around, you big dummy.”

When Davis was back outside in the empty carnival, he clicked off his phone's flashlight and slipped it into his pocket as he began walking away.

Davis felt uneasy. He couldn't pinpoint what but something about the carnival had changed.

Somehow, the air felt thicker around him. His footsteps sounded muted. The light from the moon seemed dimmer. And yet, everything looked the same. But Davis knew someone was watching him.

The thought made Davis shudder. He felt goosebumps on his arms and every hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

He stopped and looked around, but nobody was in sight. He thought about calling out but was torn between the fear of getting caught and the fear of being alone.

He heard a noise and immediately jumped and looked around frantically. He was sure that he heard the sound of a heavy footstep.

He waited for a while. He stood as still as he could. His eyes darted everywhere

as he searched for the source of the noise. Finally, when he couldn't take the silence anymore, he called out.

“H-Hello?” he said, trying hard to keep his voice from shaking.

His heart was beating like a drum in his chest. His eyes darted and his mind raced.

“Who's there?” he continued.

The only sound that answered him was his own breathing.

Idiot, he thought. It's all in your head. Of course you're hearing things. You're alone in a carnival.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being followed. He thought he could feel eyes staring at the back of his neck and glaring at him.

He turned around and looked toward the Spook House. He tried to watch both the entrance and exit at the same time, but there was nobody there.

You're being stupid. What would Marty and Emmett do if they were here right now? Laugh, I bet. Call you a wimp.

The thought made Davis grit his teeth. *I'm NOT a wimp. And here I am proving it. I've gotten the mask. The toy and the sign are left. Time to get them.*

Davis put the mask under his arm and his hands in his pockets as he started to walk again.

Davis realized that the baseball toss game was closer than Thor's Hammer. He decided to get the toy next.

Davis walked through the carnival as silently as he could. He even tried to keep

his breathing quiet. He listened for the slightest trace of someone coming nearby, but, just like before, he didn't hear anything.

As soon as he made it to the baseball toss booth, Davis took a deep breath, let it out in a puff, and quickly ducked inside.

Davis searched the shelves for a good prize. Eventually, he spotted a stuffed tiger. It looked like it was sneering, ready to pounce and tear out his throat.

The perfect gift for Marty, Davis thought.

As Davis reached for the tiger, he heard it again – the sound of heavy footsteps. This time, they were clear as day. He stood frozen on the tips of his toes with his arm stretching out to the tiger. His breath caught in his throat. His heart was beating a mile a minute and his stomach was in knots.

He listened for the sound again and, as he did, he saw a shadow pass against the shelf in front of him. He jumped and spun around. He gasped for breath at first, then put both hands to his mouth and held his breath.

He didn't want to get caught and sent to jail because he had snuck into the carnival at night over some stupid dare. But he didn't want to lose the dare either.

He stood perfectly still and stared at the thin curtain of the booth. He tried not to breathe, to not even think.

After a few minutes of silence, he figured that whoever it was was gone by now or maybe wasn't even there to begin with. He spotted the mask on the ground.

The darkness is getting to you. You're jumping at shadows. Just grab the toy, pick up the mask, go get the sign, and try to get out of here as fast as you can.

He grabbed the tiger, picked up the mask, and stuffed them both under his arm. Next, he moved quietly to the curtain and listened for any movement. Then, as silently as he could, he lifted the curtain and ducked outside.

He looked around in search of whoever, or whatever, had made the shadow, but all he saw were the empty booths and rides.

One more thing to get. The “Wimp” sign on Thor's Mighty Hammer. Davis chuckled to himself. Once I have all the stuff and show it to the twins, I won't be called a wimp anymore.

Luckily, Davis knew that the hammer game was close by and it didn't take long for him to get there.

He approached the tall board slowly as he stared up at the bell. In the moonlight, it looked silver instead of the gold color it actually was.

He then looked down at the sign he was after: third from the bottom, written in big, bold letters, was the sign that read “Wimp.”

Davis put the other two prizes down, placing them next to the lever at the bottom of the board. He walked up to the board. The sign was right at the level of his stomach.

This should be the easiest thing to get yet. Glad I saved it for last.

Davis reached out and grabbed the sign. He tried pulling on it, but it wouldn't budge. Then, he realized that the sign was actually in a slot and inserted onto the board. He moved the sign sideways and it slipped right out of the slot. The sign was about the size of a sheet of folder paper.

Davis grinned to himself.

I did it! I got all three things! HA! Take THAT, Marty! You're never gonna be able to call me a wimp again! I'm not just smart, I'm brave, too!

Davis felt triumphant as he gathered up all his loot and started to make his way toward the exit of the carnival. As he walked, he tried to keep a hold of all three objects.

As he made his way toward the exit, he felt that subtle feeling again, like something in the carnival was wrong. He looked around and tried to figure out if anything had actually changed, but everything still looked normal. He tried to shrug the feeling off but he couldn't quite shake it.

He walked as swiftly as he could toward the exit of the carnival. He remembered the way from when they had gotten there earlier that night. However, when he reached the point where the gates should have been, he didn't see them.

Instead, he only found more closed game booths.

He thought to himself, *Did I get turned around? I must have. The exit has to be around here somewhere.*

He shrugged and kept walking while he kept a good grip on his prizes. However, the more he kept walking, the more lost he seemed to get.

The carnival seemed endless. Wherever he turned, he couldn't find the exit. He couldn't even find the edge of the carnival.

Somehow, though he wasn't sure how, he had made his way right back to Thor's Mighty Hammer.

Davis was in a panic. He turned in every direction and looked for any hint that would show him the way out. He could hardly breathe.

Where's the exit? WHERE?

Finally, he looked ahead of him to the end of the alley of games and spotted a figure.

Thank goodness, Davis thought. I never thought I'd be so happy to get caught doing something bad. I thought I'd never get out of here.

Davis called to the figure as he walked toward it. "I, uh..." Davis hesitated. He certainly couldn't admit that he had snuck in. Then he remembered the stuff he was carrying. He stuffed the tiger into his pocket and stuck the sign and mask in his pants under his shirt. "I got locked in the carnival," he began. "I can't seem to find the exit. Can you help me?"

As Davis got closer to the figure, he didn't see the figure even twitch a single muscle. He also realized the figure was holding something in one hand, like a stick or a hammer of some sort.

"Excuse me?" Davis called out.

When Davis finally got close enough to the figure, he was able to see that it was a man wearing a plaid shirt and overalls. In his hand, he held what looked like an axe.

Davis looked up at the man's face and saw the blank metal face and bloodshot eyes of the dummy from the Spook House.

Davis stopped in his tracks. His breath caught in his throat.

When he tried to say something, it came out as a rasping cough.

Davis tried again. "That's not possible," he wheezed.

Davis looked around. *A trick. It must be a trick. A security guard trying to screw*

with my head. Marty and Emmett found a way to sneak in and mess with me.

“Okay. Ha ha, very funny. Whoever is doing this, you really got me. Now, please, I can't find the...”

As Davis was speaking, he saw the maniac's axe move. He stopped talking and stared at the dummy. Nothing happened for a long moment. Then, suddenly, the dummy, the lifeless dummy made of metal, rubber, and plastic, started to move. It slowly raised the axe over its head.

Davis took a step back, eyes wide. He stared at the axe. It shone in the moonlight.

Wait. Rubber doesn't shine. Does it?

The dummy took a slow step forward.

Davis let out a yelp, turned and started running, screaming for help. In his hurry to run away, he felt the mask and sign slip out from under his shirt and the tiger fall out of his pocket.

Davis ran as fast as he could, looking for the exit, a security guard, a carny, anything that would save him from the dummy come to life.

However, no matter which way he turned, he couldn't find anything but more closed booths.

Before too long, he had to stop. He leaned over to catch his breath.

His lungs felt like they were on fire. His sides were aching. He felt like he'd been sprinting for hours. And yet, when he looked up, he had somehow looped back to where he had started the chase, not very far from the hammer game.

When he looked down the alley, he saw the dummy heading toward him. It moved slowly and stared straight at him.

With no more energy to run and no hope of help, Davis looked around.

A weapon. Gotta find something. Anything.

Davis searched his pockets, foolishly hoping a gun had materialized like magic.

He found nothing. He tried to think, but his mind was a jumble. All he could think about was how he had gotten into this mess.

The stupid scavenger hunt. The mask, the toy, and the sign. The stupid sign calling him a wimp.

He couldn't shake the word from his thoughts.

Wimp... Wimp...

Davis could hear Marty's words echoing in his head.

"You're a wimp, just like the sign on that Thor's Hammer game said."

With that thought, Davis finally got an idea.

Davis stood straight and looked back. The maniac was still pretty far down the carnival street and was lurching its way along, as if it knew that it would have its hands on Davis soon enough.

If Davis could get to the hammer, he could use it to attack the axe maniac.

Davis started running frantically toward Mighty Thor's Hammer. The hammer was laying right next to the lever as it had been when he played the game a lifetime ago.

He ran to the hammer and immediately tried to pick it up, holding the smooth rubber in his grip again. But the thing was far too heavy to hold for long.

Okay. Fine. I have to make it quick. Wait until he's closer.

Davis looked at the maniac, who continued making its way toward him. Davis could feel his forehead break out in a sweat.

The maniac was getting closer.

Not yet.

Closer.

Don't run, Davis. Stay there. This'll work.

Even closer. The maniac was starting to raise its axe again.

Come on, Davis, don't chicken out. You can do this!

Finally, the maniac was only a few feet away.

With a cry of defiance and a burst of adrenaline, Davis yanked the hammer up and swung it hard.

As the maniac brought his axe down, Davis hit the maniac's head with a loud SMACK. The force of the blow knocked the head clean off and made it fly all the way toward the nearest booths.

The momentum toppled Davis. He dropped the hammer on the lever of the game as he hit the ground and the weight flew up and easily hit the bell.

Davis rolled onto his back, ready to run again, but he saw the body of the maniac fall backwards as it dropped the axe.

Davis took in big gulps of air. His heart thumped harder than it had ever thumped before.

He stared at the maniac and looked for any sign of life left in it. Davis was

worried that the fight was not really over. The maniac was still as a statue on the ground, as limp as it had ever been.

As Davis stood, he heard the sound of someone behind him.

“What have we here?” a familiar voice said.

Davis jumped and turned around. He began to worry that it was another horrible monster trying to kill him. Surely, he was now utterly doomed.

Instead, he saw the barker, Dardano. Up close, Davis saw that he was very tall, at least seven feet.

He had a harsh face. His nose was big and pointed. He had a dark, thick mustache that twirled a little at each end. His eyes were dark and his eyebrows were heavy.

“A little intruder in the carnival?” Dardano said.

Davis was at a loss for words. “The-The...” Davis tried to get the words out, tried to make the barker understand the danger. “The maniac! The...” He pointed behind him and looked. The maniac was still on the ground, but Davis still had the creeping suspicion it was about to get up.

“Don't you know it's wrong to sneak into a carnival after it's closed?”

Dardano took Davis by the arm and started dragging him toward the maniac.

“I don't know who you are, kid, but I have half a mind to call the cops to come and get you.”

“No,” Davis said. “I-I was trying to leave, but I couldn't. The exit... Please, I don't wanna die!”

Davis tried to find the words to explain what had happened. But he realized it all sounded like a messed up fairytale. Disappearing gates? Dummies that came to life and attacked you? It was all too weird.

Dardano, however, looked down at him as they approached the dummy.

“This big lug?” Dardano said. He frowned at the lifeless body of the dummy. He stared at it then shook his head and looked at Davis. “You're scared of him? Well, of course you are. It's his job to scare the living daylights out of unsuspecting victims.”

He stopped talking and looked to the ground further away from the dummy.

“What's this?” Dardano grabbed Davis and took him toward the pile of prizes Davis had dropped. He looked down and saw the mask, the toy, and the sign. “Oh, I see. Some souvenirs for you.” Dardano bent over and picked up the prizes. “I'm sorry, but souvenirs are limited to only the things you actually buy or win.”

Davis was shaking all over. He wanted to flee from both the barker and the maniac, but he wouldn't dare move. Dardano sighed heavily and looked down at Davis.

“The truth is, kid, bringing the cops down here would be a gigantic hassle. It's the middle of the night and the carnival doesn't need that kind of publicity. I bet you'd love to get off scot free, wouldn't you?”

Davis nodded his head quickly and kept his mouth shut.

Dardano glared a little at him. “The carnival can protect itself. You've seen that with our big lummoX over there.” Dardano gestured to the maniac. “Kids like you always try to get in here after hours, but they always come across... Well, never you mind that. You saw a piece of it tonight.”

Davis gulped hard and glanced back at the dummy. Even though it still hadn't moved, Davis felt his stomach tighten and his heart quicken whenever he looked back at it. "I'm... I'm sorry. I won't..."

"Do it again? No, I'm sure you won't. Or you'll face far worse than a scary looking dummy." Dardano shook his head. "That little stunt you pulled could have easily gotten you killed, you know. You got very lucky."

The words left Davis feeling like his stomach was about to crawl up through his throat.

Dardano dragged him down a few streets and, before long, they were at the gate to the park. Davis felt a spark of hope. He wanted to run for freedom but wouldn't move until the barker was done with him. After what felt like an eternity of silence, the barker spoke.

"Get out of here, kid. Don't ever try to sneak back in when we're not up and running."

Dardano opened the door and Davis immediately ran out.

Before Davis had gotten too far away from the carnival, he felt a strong breeze hit his back. He heard Dardano scream something and heard the clattering of something hitting the ground behind him. When Davis looked, he saw the barker's hat sitting in the middle of the road.

Davis stared at the hat and wondered what he should do.

If I don't go back with anything, Davis thought, the guys will never believe that I did the dare. I need to take that hat with me.

Without a second thought, Davis grabbed the hat and stuffed it into his shirt so it he wouldn't drop it as he ran. He started running to the twins' house. And as he ran, Davis vowed never to return to the carnival.

Hat Trick

Emmett woke from his sleep with a start. He had heard the window to his and Marty's room opening. *Intruder! Burglar!* Emmett thought at first. He tried to be quiet as he peered over the bed. Instead of a black clad burglar, Emmett spotted Davis climbing into the room. Emmett immediately calmed down.

Emmett felt his twin brother stir on the bottom bunk bed.

“Davis?” Marty yawned, still mostly asleep.

Emmett was more awake thanks to the burst of fear. He rubbed the blurriness from his eyes and climbed down. The clock by the beds said that it was 3:24 in the morning.

Marty also climbed out of his bunk. They spoke in whispers. The walls in the house were much thinner than they looked.

“Did you get 'em?” Marty asked as he tried and failed not to yawn again.

“Get what?” Emmett said, then remembered. “Oh, right!”

The dare. The scavenger hunt. Davis was supposed to bring them the items Marty had asked for from the carnival.

When Emmett looked at Davis, Davis was more frantic than he had ever been before.

“What's the matter?” Emmett said.

Davis was out of breath as he tried to talk. “There was... I saw... The c-carni...”

“Take it easy, man,” Emmett said. “Do you need water or something?”

Davis shook his head, sat on the ground and tried to catch his breath.

Even as Davis calmed down, Emmett could tell something had spooked Davis bad. His hair was even more of a mess than usual. When Marty snapped on the lights, Davis looked as pale as a sheet and sweat was running down his face.

Finally, Davis was able to calm down enough to look at Marty and Emmett. They watched him and waited for him to speak.

“That carnival...” he said. “There's something seriously messed up about that carnival.”

“What do you mean?” Emmett asked.

Davis hesitated. He bit his lip and fidgeted. “I don't know if you guys are gonna believe me. I mean, I was there myself and I hardly believe it.”

“Wait a sec, slow down,” Marty said. “Where's the stuff you were supposed to collect?”

Davis frowned and looked away. He fidgeted again and scooted back on the floor.

Marty grinned in triumph. “HA! I knew it. You totally chickened out of the dare!”

“But I didn't!” Davis said. “The barker took all the stuff! But even before that, the carnival was—”

“You got caught?” Emmett asked with a frown. “Did you get in trouble? What happened?”

Marty lost his smugness in a heartbeat. He leaned forward and glared at Davis. “You didn't get us all in trouble, did you?”

“No, no!” Davis said. “Well, the guy didn't call my parents or anything at least. He just kinda told me not to do it again and let me go.”

Marty let out a sigh of relief. “Good.”

It was then that Emmett noticed a bulge underneath Davis's shirt. “Hey, if you didn't get any of the stuff, what's under your shirt?”

Davis looked confused. “Huh?” He patted at his chest. “Oh, right!” He reached underneath his shirt and pulled out a white, straw hat with a red bandana. It looked like the kind of thing worn by barbershop quartets. “It's the barker's hat.”

Marty's jaw dropped. “You swiped the barker's hat? Did you take it right off his head?”

Davis shook his head quickly. “Nothing like that. It kind of blew off his head while I was

running away.”

Emmett frowned. “So you just took it? Doesn't seem like something you'd do.”

Marty chuckled a little. “No kidding. I would have thought you'd take it back to him immediately.”

Davis sighed, irritated. “I had to bring *something* to you guys to prove that I did the dare. I didn't want to come here completely empty handed.”

Davis was fidgeting with the hat as he spoke, looking at it and turning it over in his hands. He looked into the hat. At first, he seemed curious about the hat and stared at it in slight awe. He started to lift it closer to his head, but then sighed and tossed the hat across the room.

“I shouldn't have picked it up,” Davis said. “I should have just run away and come back here.” Davis looked at the hat. “I should just take it back.”

“No, wait!” Marty said as he grabbed the hat off the floor. “You don't have to do that. I think we should keep it.” Marty inspected the hat. “I think it looks kind of neat. Besides, if you take it back, you might get into trouble, which means all three of us get into trouble.”

Davis frowned. “But if we keep it, we might get into even *more* trouble.” Davis looked at Emmett and silently begged Emmett to talk sense into his brother.

Emmett thought about it. “I don't know,” Emmett finally said. “Marty has a point. Better to just keep it.”

Davis frowned and crossed his arms. Marty grinned and kept playing with the hat. He tossed it between his hands.

“So tell us how you got caught,” Marty said. “Did you just get scared and go looking for someone to let you out?”

Davis gave a frustrated huff. “Like I was trying to say, the carnival is weird at night.”

Emmett tilted his head. “Weird how?”

Davis rubbed his arms, looking away. “The maniac guy was chasing me.”

“Which maniac guy?” Marty said.

“The one from the Spook House,” Davis responded. “The maniac dummy somehow came to life and was after me.”

Marty stared at Davis, then started to laugh so hard that tears came to his eyes. He fell to the floor as he held his sides and laughed. Emmett couldn't help but laugh a little as well, though from the look on Davis's face, Emmett could tell he was being serious.

“Shh,” Emmett said. “Do you want to wake up Mom and Dad? Shut up, Marty!” Emmett grabbed a nearby pillow and swatted it as hard as he could on Marty's head.

Marty batted the pillow away with his hand and calmed down. “I'm sorry, it's just... That's the funniest thing you've ever said, dude!”

Davis frowned. “I'm serious! That maniac was trying to kill me.”

Emmett looked at Davis. “Why don't you tell us what happened after we saw you leave?”

Davis then told them the whole story.

When Davis was finished, the twins sat there staring at him.

Marty scoffed. “Look, if you got caught, you got caught. You don't have to make up stories—”

“What Marty is trying to say,” Emmett said, “is that maybe whatever you saw wasn't really the maniac thing. Maybe it was just a carny trying to mess with you.”

“Maybe it wasn't anything,” Marty said. “It was dark in the carnival. Maybe you were just scared of your own shadow.”

“I was not!” Davis said.

Marty waved his hand a little. “Look,” Marty said. “It's fine if you didn't get all the stuff from the dare. I guess it's still pretty cool that you actually stayed in the carnival after hours. And you didn't come back empty handed.” Marty held up the hat. “As far as I'm concerned, you sort of passed the

dare.”

Marty grinned and went up to the mirror in their room. He inspected the inside of the hat. He turned it over and patted the top to get rid of any stray bits of dust or hair left in it. Finally, he slapped the hat onto his head.

Marty blinked and looked around blankly. Then, he got a big, goofy grin on his face, his eyes wide and somewhat vacant.

Emmett laughed a little. “You look like Grandpa Joseph in those old photos we found.”

Marty looked at Emmett as he puffed out his chest. “This hat is a trophy and should be shown to the world!”

“What? Come on, man. We can't show that hat to anyone. If our parents find out we took it—”

“Everyone needs to know about it!” At this, Marty started to shout, as if trying to talk to an entire crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen—”

Emmett got up and smacked Marty on the side of the head. Marty, startled, stumbled and the hat fell off. In a flash, Emmett grabbed the hat and shoved it under the bed. Emmett held his breath as he waited for any sign that his parents were coming to the room. After a minute of silence, he let out a breath and glared at Marty.

“What are you doing?” Emmett said in a hoarse whisper. “Are you trying to get us grounded for life?”

Marty seemed dazed as he looked around. “What?”

Davis asked, “Why were you trying to get the attention of everyone on the block?”

Marty looked confused for a second. “I don't know. I just felt like I just needed to get everyone's attention. Like, right now.”

“Well, stop that!” Emmett said. “I'd rather not get Mom and Dad to kill us.”

“Sorry,” Marty said. “You're right. I don't know what happened there.”

The twins eventually went back to bed and Davis fell asleep slumped against the wall. Around 9 am, Davis and the twins were jolted awake by Davis's parents calling his cell to say they were outside. Davis climbed out the window and left the barker's hat behind.

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After Davis left, Emmett and Marty spent the rest of the day playing video games. Marty loved video games even more than Emmett did. Whenever Marty had a spare minute, he'd either be in their room with a controller in his hand or at the arcade with a pocket full of quarters. Emmett felt that Marty was a bit obsessed with games and would often put aside homework in order to play them.

However, between every round, Emmett would catch Marty glancing at where they had hidden the hat under the bed. Emmett tried not to think anything of it and instead used Marty's distraction to his advantage as they were playing their favorite racing game.

"I'm right on your tail!" Emmett said as he hit a button to boost his car's speed. His car zoomed forward and crashed into the back of Marty's. As Marty's car spun out, Emmett seized the opportunity and raced past, easily gaining first place.

Emmett laughed. "Oh, is the Race of Death champion about to lose his crown?" he said, grinning and throwing a glance at his brother.

Marty had a look of pure determination on his face. He was gritting his teeth and holding the controller closer to his chest. Marty said nothing in return, keeping his eyes on the game.

Emmett chuckled. "Aww, is the champion a sore loser? Is he upset that he's about to be dethroned?" Emmett waited for his brother to return the playful banter. They always tried to insult each other while they played the game. It was all part of the fun. This time, however, Marty didn't return the insults.

As they entered the final lap with Emmett still far in the lead, Marty paused the game and let

out a frustrated sigh.

“What's eating you?” Emmett said. “My insults have never bothered you this much before.”

Marty sighed. “I know. I guess I'm just distracted.”

“By what?”

Marty didn't say a word and glanced back at where the hat was hidden. Emmett looked and nodded.

“Typical Marty. Always distracted by your newest toy, even if the toy is just some dumb hat.”

Marty sighed and went over to the bed, reached under and grabbed the hat. “Maybe it'll give me good luck or something.”

Emmett grinned at him. “Hey, try whatever you want. But you're way behind. I doubt you'll actually catch up.”

Marty ignored him and put on the hat. Emmett again saw that flicker of a blank stare come to Marty's face before he shook his head. Marty looked at the TV, a cold and calm look on his face. Then, he grinned wide at Emmett, picked up the controller and resumed playing the game.

In almost no time at all, Marty's car was able to catch up with Emmett's. Normally, Marty would just pass Emmett with a quick move and zoom ahead. This time, Marty maneuvered his car and crashed violently against Emmett's. After the first crash, Marty started to run Emmett off the road.

“Hey!” Emmett shouted. “So not fair! I thought we weren't supposed to destroy each other's cars!”

Marty didn't respond. He just repeatedly crashed his car into Emmett's until, finally, Emmett's car exploded and Emmett's part of the screen went dark. Marty raced his car to the finish line and was declared the victor.

As soon as he won, Marty dropped the controller and jumped up, whooping and cheering.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Marty said. “We have our winner! The king of all driving and forever

champion, ME!”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I would have beat you if you hadn't started playing dirty.”

“And over here,” Marty said, gesturing to Emmett, “we have the biggest loser in history! The biggest cry baby in the world, Emmett! Come watch as he cries his eyes out over losing a simple racing game!”

At this, Emmett picked up a nearby pillow and threw it at Marty. When the pillow hit Marty, the hat fell off his head. Marty immediately stopped talking, shook his head and rubbed his eyes.

Marty looked at Emmett. “What happened?”

Emmett shot him an annoyed look. “You don't have to boast so loudly. Do you want Mom and Dad to come up and see the hat?”

Marty tilted his head. “I was boasting?”

“Yeah, and you were kind of mean about it. I'm not trying to be a sore loser, but do you have to be such a jerk?”

Marty blinked. “I won? But weren't you winning?”

Emmett stared at his brother. “Yeah, but then you got that stupid hat and suddenly got really nasty in the game.”

Marty frowned. “Huh.” Then he grinned. “But I won? Man, I guess this hat really IS my good luck charm.”

Emmett shrugged. “Whatever. Just don't act so nasty next time.”

Marty had picked up the hat and was staring at it. “Hm? Sorry, what?”

Emmett sighed. “Nothing. Never mind. Put the hat away before Mom and Dad catch us with it.”

Marty shook his head, moved over to his book bag, and stuffed the hat inside.

Emmett stared at him. “What are you doing?”

Marty looked at Emmett. “I'm taking this thing to school. If it gave me good luck here, imagine the luck it could give me at school.”

“No way! What if you get caught with it?”

“Oh, relax. It'll be fine. I won't show it to anybody. Now, let's play another round. I can still beat you even without a lucky hat.”

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Emmett was a bit groggy when he woke up the next day. He hadn't slept very well. First, he was worried about his brother acting like so much of a jerk before and almost immediately forgetting about it. Second, he was worried that his brother would get caught with the hat and get them all in trouble.

Emmett knew he couldn't let Marty take the hat to school. So, while Marty was in the bathroom before they left, Emmett took the hat out of Marty's backpack and stuffed it into their closet. They were running late, so Marty didn't bother to check his bag.

The rest of the day was normal, and Marty didn't bring up the missing hat once.

After school, the twins met up with Davis at their favorite spot to hang out, the Game Grotto Arcade. The twins had already been there for a while when Davis arrived. Marty was on the fourth level of a cop simulation shooter when Davis came over. Emmett never could figure out how Marty could play the game so well with his backpack still on.

Davis greeted the twins and Marty only responded with a grunt.

“So,” Davis said. “How'd you guys do on the history test we got back?”

At the mention of the test, Marty's shooting faltered and he was hit by a brick tossed by a criminal. He grunted in annoyance.

“That bad?” Davis said.

“Marty doesn't want to talk about it,” Emmett said. “He's been sore all day. He won't even tell ME what he got on it.”

“Well, what did YOU get?” Davis said.

Emmett shrugged. “I got a C+. Not too bad, really. I didn't study that much. Marty, on the other hand...” Emmett glanced at Marty who was glaring hard at the screen and concentrating on the game.

Davis smiled. “That's not bad at all, Emmett. I did pretty well on it, too.”

Emmett could see the eager look on Davis's face. Davis loved talking about his grades.

“Alright,” Emmett said. “I know you're dying to show us your score. Just bring it out already.”

Davis grinned and took his test out of his backpack. Right on the top written in bright, bold, red ink was a giant 100.

Marty glanced at the paper for a second, but the distraction caused him to get hit again in the game. Marty practically growled as he refocused on his shooting efforts.

Emmett smiled at Davis. “Congratulations. Not that this is that big of a deal for you. I don't think I've seen you ever get lower than a B.”

Davis beamed and put the test away. “Well, you know. I study all the time. And despite what you guys may think, it really helps.”

“Hey, at least I try,” Emmett said. “Marty hardly ever cracks open his books outside of school.”

“If you guys needed help studying,” Davis said, “I can help. This history stuff isn't that hard if you just know the facts.”

Marty was hit once more in the game and lost his final health point. The screen flashed with the words “Game Over!” He harshly slammed the gun back into its place on the game's console. He turned and glared at Davis.

“Yes, Brainiac,” Marty said, “everyone knows you're very smart and everything at school comes so easy for you. We're all idiots compared to you.”

Davis frowned a little and backed up. “I didn't mean it that way.”

Emmett held up a hand to his brother. “Hey, back off a bit. He's just trying to help.”

Marty stormed off to the tables at the back of the arcade. “No, he's just trying to flaunt his perfect score in front of us. Not everyone has brains as big as yours, Brainiac.”

Davis sighed as he and Emmett followed Marty.

“Okay, I'm sorry,” Davis said. “I just thought I'd offer some help.”

They all sat at the table and set their backpacks next to their chairs.

“I mean,” Davis said, “Mrs. Patrick is a tough teacher anyway. Especially to Marty, for some reason. I thought maybe if I helped you study—”

As Davis spoke, Marty reached into his backpack and took out a familiar object: the barker's hat. When Emmett saw Marty holding it, Emmett stared at it in shock.

But I thought I'd taken it out. There's no way he had time to fish it out of the closet. How did he get it back?

Davis kept talking but neither Emmett nor Marty was paying attention. Davis finally stopped when he noticed Marty putting the hat on and standing up from his chair. Both Emmett and Davis watched in confusion as Marty climbed up onto the table. Marty stumbled at first, then stood up straight and smiled around the arcade.

“Boys and girls of all ages!” Marty shouted. He had to shout pretty loud to be heard over the beeps and noises of the arcade, but somehow a few people nearby were able to hear him. A handful of kids walked over to the table.

“Step right up!” Marty said, holding his hands out and gesturing around him. “Don't be shy! The show is about to begin!”

More people had seen Marty by now and were coming over to see what the ruckus was about.

Marty grinned at the crowd and called for them to settle down.

“Come see the brilliant Brainiac!” Marty said as he pointed at Davis.

“Yes, it's the Brainiac!” Marty continued. “The boy so smart that he can read an entire library in three seconds flat! His brain is so massive that it can hardly fit into the building!”

Davis's face immediately turned a deep shade of red as all the attention turned to him. He stared at Marty and frowned in confusion.

Emmett got up from his chair and glared at Marty.

“That's enough, Marty!” Emmett said. “Stop being such a jerk and get down from there!”

However, the crowd was laughing along with Marty. Emmett noticed that Marty was staring at a chubby kid who was munching on a candy bar while he watched Marty.

“But that's not all!” Marty said. “Come on down and see the fattest boy in the world!”

Emmett saw the boy stop chewing instantly and his face began turning red.

“Hey!” the kid said. “I'm not fat!”

Marty ignored him. “Yes, ladies and gentlemen! He can eat a pile of burgers a mile high without ever getting hungry! His stomach is as deep and vast as the entirety of the Grand Canyon!”

The boy's face got so red that Emmett thought he was going to explode. Instead, the boy turned and ran away from the table. The rest of the crowd laughed at the spectacle.

Emmett yelled at his brother to stop, but Marty ignored him and instead pointed at a teenaged boy with a face full of acne. Emmett knew what was coming.

“Come see the amazing Pizza Faced Pete,” Marty called to the crowd, “the most disfigured teen—”

Emmett swiftly climbed up onto the table and grabbed his brother from behind. He put a hand over Marty's mouth and held him tight. Emmett struggled to keep his brother under control. As they

fought, the hat fell off of Marty's head. In that moment, Marty blinked and stopped struggling.

Emmett addressed the crowd. "Sorry about that, guys. My brother here was just being stupid. Go back to playing your games!"

The crowd gave a bit of a disappointed groan and broke apart as the kids went back to the games. From his new vantage point, Emmett could see a few employees of the arcade making their way to the table. He quickly got his brother down from their perch and packed away the hat. Davis, Emmett, and a slightly dazed Marty grabbed their bags and made their way as fast as they could out of the arcade.

Emmett hit his brother hard on the side of his head. "What's the matter with you? Why did you do that?"

"Ow!" Marty said. "What? What did I do?"

"You were standing on the table and insulting people!" Emmett said. "I know you insult people to get a laugh sometimes, but this was ridiculously mean even for you!"

"I was?" Marty said. "All I remember is Davis bragging about his big brain and then I was..." Marty stared at nothing as he spoke. He had a blissful smile on his face as he continued. "Everyone was looking at me and I was making them laugh. It felt good." The smile disappeared as Marty glanced at the hat in Emmett's hand. "Can I have the hat back?"

"What?" Emmett said. "No, you can't have it back! What's wrong with you?"

Davis stared at Marty. "Dude, you were acting really weird. Like you were the head of a freak show or something."

Marty looked confused. "What are you talking about? I don't remember any of that."

Emmett rolled his eyes. "This isn't some joke, Marty. Just stop it already."

Marty was still staring at the hat. "Please, can I have it back?"

"I already said no," Emmett insisted. He looked at the time and groaned a little. He stuffed the

hat into his backpack and pushed Marty toward their bikes. "C'mon, we have to get back home."

The twins climbed onto their bikes and left Davis behind. Emmett knew that Marty was thinking about the hat for most of the ride home.

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The next day at lunch, Emmett complained to Davis. "He's just been acting weird." Emmett pushed the mac and cheese around his plate with a fork.

"You mean like that stuff at the arcade yesterday?" Davis said as he took a bite of his sandwich.

Marty was still in the cafeteria line picking out his food. Davis and Emmett used the momentary privacy to discuss the problem with Marty.

"Yeah," Emmett said, finally picking up a forkful of food. "But on top of that, he's been really twitchy. I mean, obviously, he didn't pay attention very well in class before, but it's worse now. He can't even focus on video games. He lost every single round of Race of Death yesterday and he kept asking for the hat because he thought it was his good luck charm."

"Where did you hide it?"

Emmett patted his backpack. "I had hidden it in the attic at first, but I didn't trust him not to check there. I try to keep it on me now so I know where it is." Emmett shook his head and took a bite. "I don't know, it's like the hat makes him act stupid. I think he's just doing it to mess with people."

"Have you tried going to your parents about it?"

"Do you have any idea what they'll do to us if I told them we technically stole something?" Emmett said. "We'd be grounded for eternity. Besides, what would I tell them? 'Marty's acting like an idiot whenever he wears a hat.' For some reason, I don't think that would go over very well."

"I can take it off your hands. I can take it back to the barker if you want."

Emmett knew this was a terrible idea. If Davis took the hat and tried to give it to the barker,

he'd probably break down and tell the barker about the dare. The barker would then probably tell their parents.

“Nah, I can handle it,” Emmett said. “I think I'll sneak behind the school after lunch and toss it in the dumpster. That way, Marty won't ever get his hands on it again.”

Emmett saw Marty heading toward their table and quickly changed the conversation.

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Five minutes before lunch was over, Emmett left the table early, using a trip to the bathroom as his excuse.

The back of the school wasn't exactly a restricted area, but students were discouraged from hanging out back there. Thankfully, when Emmett got there, nobody else was around. He took the hat out of his backpack and looked at it.

He couldn't see what was so special about it. To him, it was just a simple, old fashioned hat. He turned it over in his hands and peered inside it.

As he did, he almost felt a pull to put it on – a nagging feeling at the back of his mind, like the hat wanted him to wear it. He started to bring the hat closer to his head; however, at the last second, he blinked and moved the hat away.

He went over to the dumpster and held his breath. In one quick movement, he lifted the lid, threw the hat inside, and slammed the lid shut.

Emmett picked up his backpack and quickly made his way to the next class. He felt a lot better now that he had thrown the hat away. He thought that his troubles were finally over.

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Later that day, Emmett was sitting there doodling as Mrs. Patrick gave a speech about the

American Civil War.

He noticed that Marty was reaching into his backpack. Normally, this wouldn't be that big of a deal to Emmett, but with all the weird stuff happening, he was worried about what Marty would find.

While Emmett was distracted with Marty, he failed to notice that Mrs. Patrick had apparently asked him a question until he realized that the other students were all looking at him.

“Uh, sorry,” Emmett said. “What was that?”

“I said, Emmett, is looking at whatever your brother is doing more entertaining than my lecture?” Mrs. Patrick had her arms crossed and was glaring at Emmett over her glasses

“Yes, Mrs. Patrick,” Emmett said then paused. “I mean, no! No, Mrs. Patrick!”

“Then, please, pay attention while I'm trying to teach you something. Now, who can tell me the results of the Battle of Fort Sumter?” Mrs. Patrick looked around the room and settled on Marty.

“Martin, why don't you answer the question?”

Martin sat up in his seat while keeping his hand by his backpack. “Uh... What?”

Mrs. Patrick heaved a heavy sigh. “The Battle of Fort Sumter, Martin. Did you read the chapter at all last night?”

Emmett saw Marty struggling for an answer, but Emmett knew Marty hadn't read a single word of the homework.

The next moment, Emmett saw Marty reach into the backpack and bring out... the hat.

Emmett's jaw dropped and his head started spinning.

*How had Marty gotten the hat back? Did he climb into the dumpster to get it? Was it a different hat? How was that possible?*

All these questions twirled in Emmett's head as he saw Marty put on the hat.

“Oh, no,” Emmett muttered under his breath.

He watched Marty get up from his desk and start walking to the front of the room with a wide

grin on his face.

“Martin?” Mrs. Patrick said, looking surprised. “Do you need to go to the bathroom or—”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Marty said as he got to the front of the room. He grabbed a yardstick that had been sitting on Mrs. Patrick's desk. He twirled it in the air like a baton, catching it in his other hand, then used it to point at Mrs. Patrick. “Come one, come all! Come see the incredible Loud-Mouthed Lady!”

“Martin Black!” Mrs. Patrick said as her face turned pink. “Get back to your seat this instant or I will send you right to the principal's office!”

“She's so loud and shrill,” Marty said, “that some say she has a voice only dogs can hear! Others say that she is older than ancient! She's so old that the dinosaurs had to learn history from her! She's the Loud-Mouthed Lady!”

Mrs. Patrick was shaking with fury now. She sputtered as she shouted at Marty. “Why I never! Martin Black! To the principal's office! Right this instant!”

Mrs. Patrick grabbed Marty by the arm, snatched off his hat and put it on her table.

Marty stumbled and looked around in confusion.

She left one of the other students in charge as she took Marty out of the classroom.

The class was in chaos after what happened as people talked about the incident and asked Emmett what had gotten into his brother.

Emmett didn't say a word. All he did was stare at the hat sitting on the teacher's desk.

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After school, Emmett went to Mrs. Patrick's classroom. Despite her foul mood, it didn't take long for Emmett to get her to hand over the hat. He convinced her that it was a gift given to them by their grandfather.

Emmett learned from Mrs. Patrick that Marty was given detention for the next three weeks and the principal had called their parents.

Emmett was at the bike rack unlocking his bike when he felt someone approach. It was Davis.

“Is it true?” Davis said. “Did Marty lose his mind and start beating up Mrs. Patrick with a yardstick?”

“What?” Emmett said. “No, he just insulted her.”

“Oh.” Davis frowned. “Why?”

Emmett hesitated, then took out the hat. “At first, I thought Marty was acting like an idiot with the hat because he thought it was funny. But now, I think... I think it's actually the hat's fault. It's like it changes his brain whenever he puts it on.” Emmett sighed, stood up and leaned on his bike. “I can't prove it, okay? But it's the only thing I can think of. He never would have insulted her to her face like that before, no matter how much he hates her.”

Davis tilted his head. “After what happened to me in the carnival, I'll believe anything. But didn't you get rid of that thing?”

Emmett huffed. “I thought I did! I threw it in the dumpster. But somehow Marty seems to keep getting his hands on it.”

Davis frowned. “That's really strange. How does it keep showing back up?”

Emmett shrugged. “I don't know. At this point, I don't think it matters.”

Davis nodded. “So what are you going to do?”

“I've got to make sure this thing doesn't come back.”

“How are you gonna get rid of it? Throw it into the forest or something?”

Emmett shook his head. “I get the feeling if I did something like that it would just show up again. No, I need to destroy this thing.”

“I wish you would just take it back, Emmett. It's caused us nothing but trouble.”

Emmett sighed. “We've been over this. If I take it back, we'll all get into trouble. Do you want our parents to see us as criminals?”

“I don't care at this point. I just want the weirdness to end.” Davis went quiet for a second. Then he cleared his throat and said, “If... If you want me to come with you to take it back, I'm willing to help.”

Emmett looked at Davis. He knew Davis was still scared of the carnival, even if he joked about it. But Davis was still offering to come with him and help.

Emmett shook his head. He knew it would be better for Davis to stay out of it. Besides, it was his and Marty's fault that Davis took the hat in the first place. “No, man. Thanks, but I think I have to do this alone. If I destroy it, get rid of the evidence, maybe everything will go back to normal.”

Davis nodded. “Okay, fine. You win. Destroy the thing.” Davis stared at the hat, barely able to suppress a shudder. Then, he looked at Emmett. “Good luck.”

Emmett thanked him and stuffed the hat back into his backpack. He rode off for home as fast as he could.

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As soon as Emmett got home, he abandoned his bike on the driveway and went straight to the kitchen to gather supplies.

In the summer, Emmett would sometimes watch as his dad got the grill ready for barbecue lunches. So, Emmett vaguely knew how to work a grill.

He could still remember the small fireballs Dad would accidentally make when trying to run the grill. It was this effect that Emmett was trying to duplicate. He didn't need charcoal or any of that other stuff. All he needed was lighter fluid and some matches.

Emmett grabbed the lighter fluid and a box of matches from the kitchen and headed out to the

grill. He reached into his backpack and took out the hat.

He stared at the hat, searching it, trying to figure out why it was affecting his brother so much. But to Emmett, just like every other time he looked at it, it was just a hat.

Emmett threw the hat onto the grill and poured a more than generous helping of lighter fluid all over it. He struggled with the matches for a bit and broke two of them before finally lighting one. He looked at the small flicker of flame dance in the air. Emmett held the match over the hat and dropped it.

A fireball at least twice as big as any his father ever made erupted on the grill, covering the hat in a bright blaze. Emmett flinched away from the fire, then stared at it. He looked for any notion that the hat was burning away in the flames.

But as Emmett watched the flames start to die down, he saw that the hat didn't have a single mark on it.

It wasn't burned. It didn't even give off any smoke. It looked as clean and white as it had ever looked.

“Hey!” Emmett heard a voice behind him shout. “What do you think you're doing?”

Emmett didn't need to turn around to know that Marty had finally gotten home. Emmett must have been trying to burn the hat for longer than he thought.

Emmett stood in front of the grill and made sure the hat was behind him.

“Is that...” Marty said as he came forward and pushed Emmett to the side. Marty gasped as he saw what was on the grill. “Are you crazy? Why are you trying to cook the hat?”

Marty reached into the grill. Emmett shouted and tried to grab his brother's hand, but Marty was too quick. He grabbed the hat and pulled it off the grill. Marty screamed in pain as a stray bit of flame licked at his hand.

Marty held his hand close to his body and inspected the burn. However, he held the hat close to

him as well.

Emmett was furious. “Are you absolutely mental? You could have just set yourself on fire!”

“I had to save the hat! What the heck were you trying to do, anyway? Make yourself a hat burger?”

“I was trying to save you. Look at what it's doing to you, man! You've been acting like a lunatic ever since we got that hat. And now, you just reached into a fire to save it!”

Marty gazed at the hat. “Dude, you don't understand. This hat... It makes me feel important. Like I'm not just some dumb kid who's good at video games. I just... I need it.”

Emmett screamed in frustration. “Listen to yourself! You sound like that guy from the King of the Rings movie.” Emmett looked down at the hat. “Davis was right. This hat has got to go back to where it came from.”

“No! I need it!”

Emmett grabbed for the hat and tackled his brother to the ground in the process. They punched, scratched and bit at each other and rolled around on the ground.

Finally, Emmett was able to latch onto the hat and yank at it. His brother had an iron grip on it, but Emmett thought quick and aimed a quick punch at his brother's gut. Marty yelped as the air was forced out of him. As Marty panted, his grip loosened and Emmett pulled the hat free. He got up and immediately ran for his bike. He heard Marty getting up behind him.

“Get back here, Emmett! Give me the hat!”

“No!” Emmett shouted back. “I'm taking this thing back where it belongs!”

Emmett reached his bike and picked it up quickly. He could hear Marty running around the house after him.

Emmett hopped on his bike and started pedaling as hard as he could in the direction of the carnival. He held the hat between his teeth. The bitter taste of the straw didn't bother him. Not long

after, he heard his brother in hot pursuit.

As they raced to the carnival, Emmett heard Marty crash somewhere behind him. Emmett heard Marty's yells fade into the distance as he sped forward.

Minutes later, Emmett reached the carnival, stumbled off his bike and threw it to the ground. He dodged the people waiting in line and spotted the barker in front of the gates.

The barker was hunched over. His eyes were darting quickly around the area. His hands fidgeted nervously. Every time he tried to twirl his cane, he dropped it with a loud clatter. "C-Come one, come all," he said as he gestured with a shaky hand at the carnival gates.

Emmett ran up to the barker. He was out of breath from the race to the carnival. He leaned over to catch his breath as he glanced behind him to search for his brother. When Emmett didn't find him, he looked back at the barker. "Mr. Barker, sir. I—"

The barker looked Emmett over and gave him a shaky smile. "Oh, please. Dardano is fine. W-Welcome." His voice was weak and shaky with each word out of his mouth.

Emmett shook his head. "Fine, whatever. Listen, you have to take this back!" Emmett held up the hat and thrust it at Dardano.

Dardano leaped back and yelped in surprise. Then, he finally saw what Emmett was holding. Dardano's jaw dropped.

"My-My..." Dardano said, gazing at the hat in awe.

"I'm sorry we kept it," Emmett said. "I'm sorry my friend ever took the stupid thing. We don't want it anymore. Take it back, please!"

Dardano quickly grabbed at the hat. He seemed to inspect it for any flaws before carefully putting it on.

The change was instantaneous. As soon as Dardano had the hat on, he stood up straighter and his smile looked natural on his face. He twirled his cane easily, threw it in the air and caught it quick as

a flash. He grinned at Emmett.

“Thank you very much,” Dardano said. “I’m not quite myself without my hat on. The clothes make the man, as they say.”

Emmett heard movement behind him and saw Marty stomping toward them. Marty had a look of pure rage on his face. When Marty looked up at the barker and saw him wearing the hat, he stopped in his tracks a few feet from Emmett.

Marty sputtered a few times, then finally yelled at Emmett. “Why did you give it back? It was mine!”

“Because it was making you act like a freak!” Emmett said. “It’s not yours, it’s the—”

The twins jumped when they heard the hard smack of Dardano’s cane on the ground. They both looked at him and he grinned at them.

“You know that magic you feel when you first get to a carnival?” Dardano said. “The fun and excitement, the roller coaster of emotions. Well, there’s another side to that magic. Magic that keeps the carnival safe, including its workers. Especially me. This magic sometimes follows you home. And sometimes it can cause you trouble.”

Emmett stepped forward. “Sir,” he said, “we’re really sorry.”

Marty stepped up. “Th-The hat... Is it... Can I...” His questions died in his throat as he kept staring up at the hat.

Dardano adjusted the hat, glared at Marty, and said, “Run along. I think you’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

Emmett and Marty looked at each other. Marty shrugged and started walking back toward his bike. He continuously looked back at the barker and his hat. Emmett looked at Dardano once more.

“Will my brother be okay?”

“You have nothing to worry about. At least not for now.” Dardano smiled mysteriously and

leaned on his cane.

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