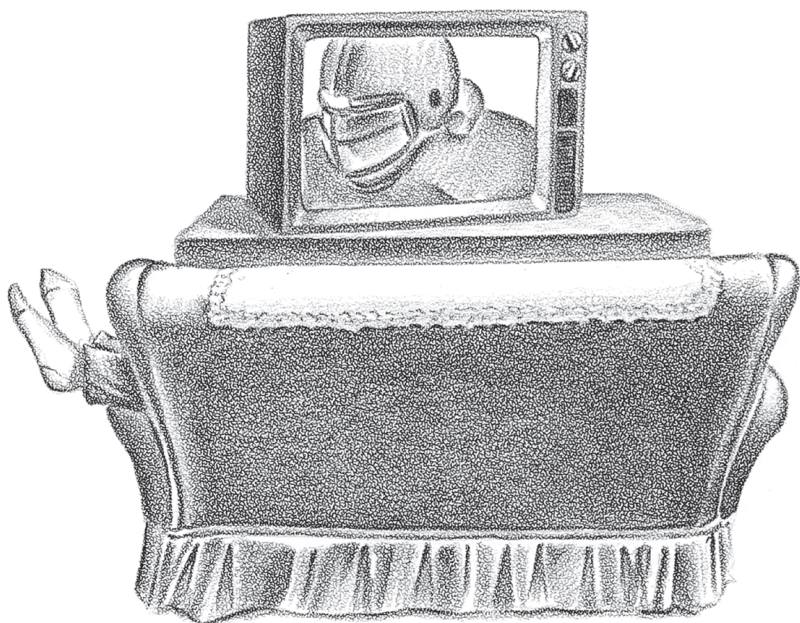




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1

Not Again

“Wasn’t Lawrence in trouble again at school this week?” Calvin’s mother asked.

How does she know? Calvin wondered. Why was she always checking up on him and his friends? So what if some of his friends got into trouble? Calvin never did.

“Oh, Mom, that was nothing,” Calvin lied. “He just had to stay after school. The math teacher hates him—for no reason. It was no big deal.”

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Calvin leaned forward on the sofa. He quickly flipped channels on the TV. He turned up the volume. Mom has to get off this subject, he thought.

Football players filled the screen. The stadium crowd yelled in the background.

“And it’s a 13-yard rush for Donnie Warwick. First and goal for the Vikings!” the announcer shouted.

“Calvin, I’m talking to you,” his mother said. She put her hands on her hips.

How could he get her to leave him alone? He hadn’t done anything, had he?

“Mom! The Vikings are playing!” Calvin frowned.

“Calvin!” Mom stepped between Calvin and the T.V. She turned down the volume. The she turned to face Calvin.

Calvin sighed. He slumped back against the cushions.

“Tell me about Lawrence. I need to know what’s going on with your friends.”

“Aw, Mom, I told you it’s no big deal. Anyway, I have other friends, you know. Like Rob.”

Calvin’s mother shook her head. But she was smiling. “Crazy Rob! You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t get you into a real mess some day!”

“Aw, Mom, come on!” Calvin grinned back. “Rob just likes to have a good time.”

“You watch him, though,” his mother warned. “He likes to rush off without thinking.”

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That's true, Calvin admitted to himself. But that made Rob fun to be around. Rob was a good guy. He never did anything bad—just stupid. Calvin hid a smile. It was fun to have a friend like Rob. Calvin always thought things out. He planned things carefully. Rob sure didn't.

Besides, why was his mom always so worried about his friends? None of his friends would end up in real trouble—like with the cops. His mom didn't even know what she was talking about. His friends get into real trouble? No way!

“You know Rob's okay,” Calvin said. “He's almost like a brother to me.”

“You've got plenty of brothers already,” his mother said. “Uh-oh! The potatoes!” She rushed back into the kitchen.

Sure, he had plenty of brothers—and sisters too. But his four brothers and two sisters were all a lot older. Most of them were married and had kids.

His mother returned from the kitchen. “We almost lost the potatoes,” she said, brushing off her apron. “Calvin, I'm talking to you. Look at me, please.”

Calvin sighed and looked at his mom.

“Honestly, when your father is away on a long haul, I think you send me your evil twin.”

“Aw, Mom,” he complained. “What did I do? Nothin'!”

His mother sighed. “Listen, Calvin, we're going to

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Melveen's this weekend," she said. "I want to help your sister with the new baby."

"Again? But Mom," Calvin began.

"There's no reason for us to stay in the city this weekend," his mother interrupted. "Your father is a thousand miles away from here, and he won't be home until next week."

She sighed. "Besides, the crime makes me nervous these days. I like to get away from the city whenever we can."

"But Mom, I gotta see my friends," Calvin said. "I go to school all week. I have to do homework after school. Or I have football practice. There's never any time to do stuff with my friends." He slumped down into the cushions.

His mother pursed her lips. "Maybe that's just as well," she said.

"What do you mean?" Calvin asked. He sat up straighter. Did his mom think he shouldn't hang out with his buddies? "Hey, I'm responsible. And my friends are too—pretty much. Why can't I just stay home by myself?"

Mom chuckled. "Not likely," she said. "That's out. Well, we're going. You'll have fun," she said. "You'll see."

"Sure, baby-sitting CeeCee while you and Melveen talk for hours," Calvin muttered.

"How about a hike?" his mother said. "You've gone

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on some nice ones before. They have all those trails practically right behind their house in that little city park.”

“Those are baby hikes,” Calvin said. He made a face. “I even saw a Brownie troop there last weekend.”

Suddenly, a new thought popped into his head. “Hey, maybe a hike’s not such a bad idea after all!” Calvin exclaimed. “I could go up to the big park—the national park. I can hike a long way there. Harold has been telling me to do that. He says they’ve got some great trails.”

His mother looked worried. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’d feel better if you stayed in the city park. There are things about hiking that city boys don’t know.”

Calvin sunk back down into the sofa.

“It can be dangerous,” Mom said. “I think they’ve had some problems up there with mountain lions too. I just saw on a TV program that they’re starting to attack people.”

“Mountain lions? Oh, Mom, come on!” Calvin protested. “No mountain lion’s gonna get me! The park rangers wouldn’t let people hike up there if it wasn’t safe. You know that!

“Can’t I have a little fun? Think about me stuck all weekend with Harold, Melveen, and all those diapers! Besides, you know I’m responsible,” Calvin finished.

His mother smiled at him. “Well, there is the park ranger station right there.” She paused. “I guess it would probably be okay. But you need to take a friend—the right kind of friend. I don’t want you hiking alone.” She

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frowned. “You never know what might happen on a hike. It could be dangerous.”

“I know that, Mom,” Calvin sighed. “I’ve read a lot about hiking and stuff like that. I’ll be careful.” He enjoyed books about outdoor survival. He really liked Gary Paulsen’s books.

His mother smiled. “All right. You can go.”

“Yeah!” he said. Suddenly, the weekend was looking better. If he couldn’t stay home with his friends, at least he could take a friend with him.

“Why don’t you ask Phillip?” his mother continued. “He’s a nice boy.”

“Come on, Mom! Phillip’s weird,” Calvin said. “I want to have a good time. I don’t want to feel like I’m in the library. All Phillip likes to do is study.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that,” his mother said. She untied her apron. “Dinner’s ready.”

“I’ll ask Rob,” Calvin said. “He’s gone hiking before.”

Rob would be fun. He’d be a great friend for an adventure. He would try anything.

After dinner, Calvin washed the dishes. “I’m gonna call Rob, Mom,” he said as he finished. He wiped the last plate and put it away.

“Don’t make it too long,” his mother said. “It’s just about time for your father to call. I don’t want the phone busy.”

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Calvin reached for the phone. He quickly punched in Rob's number.

"Hello?" Rob's voice came through the phone.

"Rob? Calvin. Hey man, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Thought I'd practice for the NCAA Final Four," Rob joked. He played basketball. He was the school's top scorer.

"How about coming with me to my sister's?"

"What?" Rob asked. "You gotta be kidding."

"No! Just wait. Hear me out. You know how she and her husband got this new house in San Miguel?"

"I know," Rob said. "You complain every time you have to go there."

"Yeah, but listen." Calvin's words tumbled out. "They live in this new subdivision. It's way out of town. But it's right next to a national park. My mom says I can go on a long hike. But I need to take a friend. How 'bout it? It'll be great!"

"Hey!" Rob said. He began to sound excited. "Okay! Let me ask my mom."

Clunk! Rob dropped the phone.

"Ouch!" Calvin said. He rubbed his ear. Rob always did that. Calvin strained to listen. He could hear Rob's mother's voice. She sounded mad. Then he heard Rob. Then Rob's mom said something again.

Rob came back on the phone. "She says it's okay. She says it can be dangerous. Especially for us 'city

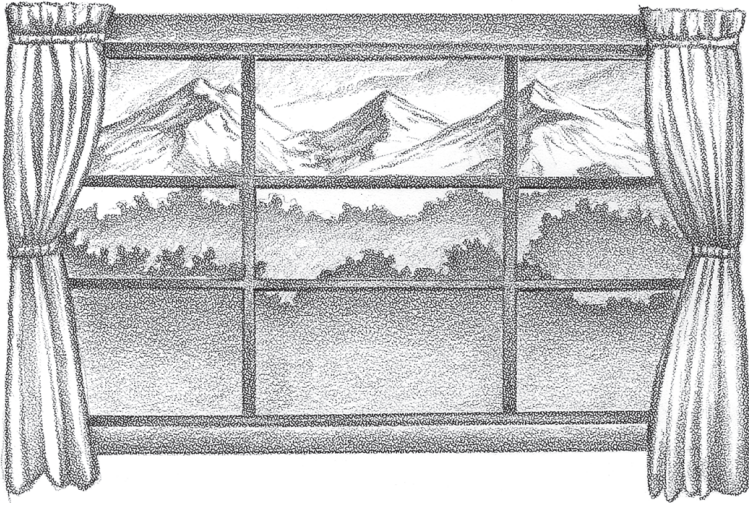
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boys.’ ” Rob sounded disgusted. “Like we’re babies or something! But she finally said all right. ‘After all, Calvin is such a responsible boy,’ she said!” Rob laughed. “Still foolin’ them, aren’t you?” he joked.

“Great!” Calvin said happily. “We’ll pick you up after school tomorrow.”

They said good-bye and hung up. Great is right, Calvin thought. He smiled. The weekend was looking up. He and Rob would have fun on a long hike.

He couldn’t understand why his mom was concerned. How could hiking be dangerous? It’s just walking in the woods!



2

They've Escaped!

His mother turned off the car engine. The sun was setting. The lights were already on in Melveen and Harold's little house. It looked just like the others on the entire street, Calvin thought. No, it looked like all the others in the entire subdivision. The subdivision was way out of town. It was right next to the mountains. But that made it kind of cool.

At least Melveen and Harold could buy a house, he admitted. They were excited, even though it was small. It was their very own.

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Calvin looked at the mountains looming up in the twilight. Somehow in the darkness, they almost looked scary. He felt a little shiver run down his spine.

“There’s Grandma!” Melveen’s voice broke into Calvin’s thoughts. He looked through the window to see Melveen holding his niece, CeeCee. She was bouncing CeeCee up and down in her arms. CeeCee’s chubby cheeks were jiggling.

“Gammah!” CeeCee cried. She held out a sticky hand to Calvin’s mom.

“Look, Jacob, there’s Grandma!” Harold walked up holding a tiny blue bundle in his big arms.

Hugs and greetings over, they all trooped into the house. Calvin lugged in his suitcase and sleeping bag. Rob carried his duffel bag and sleeping bag. They dropped everything down in the front room.

Calvin’s mom took the baby into the kitchen. Calvin could hear his mom cooing, “That’s Grandma’s little sweetie. Yes it is!” Why was it that people always talked to babies in high little voices? he wondered.

Rob and Calvin walked to the big picture window. “Hey, how would you two city boys like to sleep outside?” Harold asked. “It’s not that cold out at night yet.” He sat down on the couch. “That way, there’ll be more room in here. And it’ll be more of an adventure for you indoor kids.” He grinned.

Melveen looked sharply at him. “Harold,” she said. “I told you that wasn’t a good idea.”

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Calvin and Rob looked at each other. What's going on? Calvin wondered.

"Come on, honey," Harold said. He shook his head. "These guys are big boys. Why don't you go on in and talk to your mother?" He smiled.

Melveen frowned. "All right, I'll leave it up to your best judgment. But you know how I feel about that mountain lion stuff. The Johnsons are sure a mountain lion got their cat just last week. And we don't let CeeCee play outside alone," Melveen reminded him. She picked up a baby rattle and walked into the kitchen.

"What's she talking about?" Calvin asked. If there was something going on about mountain lions, he wanted to know.

"Mountain lions?" Rob said excitedly.

"No mountain lion is going to come down and attack you!" Harold grinned at them. "We're a ways from the national park. Besides, the rangers are pretty sure they already shot the only mountain lion around."

"So, how come mountain lions were around the houses? Don't they just stay in the forest?" Calvin asked.

"It's because this subdivision is so close to the mountains. The park rangers think that the new houses crowded them out. So it's possible that the lions still come back here. They think it's still their territory."

"Have you seen one?" Rob asked excitedly.

"No," Harold said. He grinned. "But Melveen's friend Sue from a few blocks away thought she saw one

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through the brush behind her house. And then there's the Johnsons' cat. She's missing, and Melveen is sure a mountain lion got her."

Harold shook his head. "You see, boys? It's just hearsay."

"The little girl who was attacked up in the national park wasn't hearsay!" Melveen interrupted. She had walked back into the room for the baby's bottle. She frowned at Harold.

"Someone got attacked?" Calvin asked. This did sound a little scary. Maybe they shouldn't go on a long hike in the national park after all.

"She was picking flowers by herself off the trail. A mountain lion attacked her. Luckily, her father came up. He hit the lion with a baseball bat. She had to have surgery on her face." Melveen shuddered. "That's why we are so careful with CeeCee."

"Could we get attacked too?" Calvin wondered aloud.

"Nah," Harold said with a wide grin. "The rangers already tracked the lion and shot it. They'd close the park if they thought it was dangerous.

"Besides," Harold continued, "the girl was off the trail. You're never supposed to get off a trail. And she was only three years old. She was really small. You turkeys are too big and ugly for a mountain lion to attack." He grinned at them.

"Cool!" Rob said, grinning. "I'd like to see one! How

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big are they?"

"Now, Harold, aren't you forgetting about that woman jogger who was killed by a mountain lion?"

Melveen asked.

"Melveen! What's wrong with your geography? That was way up north. Plus, it wasn't in a park. She was jogging in the woods. These guys will be fine. Let 'em sleep outside."

"I'll sleep with my flashlight," Rob said. "If a mountain lion wakes me up, I'll shine it in his eyes!" Rob's eyes gleamed with mischief. "He'll freeze! Then I'll whack him on the head with the flashlight! A mountain-lion rug would look cool in my room!"

Calvin laughed. Melveen and Harold began to laugh too. "You are crazy, Rob!" Calvin said.

"You can't go around being afraid of everything," Rob said. "We'll be fine sleeping outside. I'll watch for mountain lions!"

"Melveen! Come and see this!" Calvin's mother called from the kitchen.

Melveen walked back into the kitchen.

Harold turned up the TV.

"It's USC on UCLA's 40-yard line," the announcer said. "Time out, UCLA."

"All right!" Rob said.

"No way! UCLA's the team, man!" Calvin joked.

Commercials blared from the TV.

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We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin from your local station. Two juvenile prisoners from the Carlson Forestry Detention Camp near the San Miguel National Forest escaped this afternoon. They may be armed. They are considered dangerous. Residents in the area should be on the lookout. Keep your doors locked.

“San Miguel! That’s right up here in the mountains, isn’t it?” Calvin asked. He didn’t like the sound of escaped prisoners!

“We don’t have anything to worry about. That forestry camp is ten miles away. The escapees wouldn’t come to a little development like this. They’ll want to get to the city as quickly as possible. And besides, the cops will find them pretty fast. Those city boys don’t do too well in the forest,” Harold said.

Calvin felt his stomach turn a flip. Escapees? From the detention camp? Guys who had blown other guys away were sent to those camps. He had even seen some of the guys from that camp once. They had been on a work detail in the city park.

He had been on one of his short hikes. He had come around a bend and there they were—ten tough-looking guys dressed in orange jumpsuits. They were picking up trash from the side of the trail. They weren’t much older than he was. Two guards stood near them, watching. A couple of the prisoners stopped working. They turned to

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stare at him. Calvin shivered, remembering. He could still remember how mean they looked.

Now, two of them had escaped. What had the two escapees done to get themselves sent to camp? Had they stolen cars? Had they shot someone? Sure, he knew some guys who got into big trouble at school. But none of his friends got into any real trouble with cops.

“This is great!” Rob said. “The mountain lion can take care of the guys from the camp!” He grinned widely.

Harold spoke up. “Those guys won’t have time to tangle with a mountain lion. They won’t last long in the mountains,” he said again. “These mountains are tougher than they look. Especially for street boys.”

Whew, Calvin thought. Lucky his mother wasn’t in the room to hear this!

“This is really gonna be great tomorrow!” Rob said excitedly. “Maybe we could catch those guys! Then we could be on the evening news! We could get medals!”

Calvin thought about Rob’s comments. Yeah, it would be great to be heroes. But messing with criminals didn’t seem like a good idea. Those guys would be pretty desperate. They’d have to be desperate to want to escape. They probably wouldn’t stop at anything, Calvin thought. He flinched.

Why doesn’t Rob ever seem to be afraid? wondered Calvin. He decided he’d try to be more like Rob. Just don’t worry about it till it happens.

“So, we’ll sleep outside tonight. We’ll get used to the

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outdoors. And maybe we'll even bag us a mountain lion—or an escaped convict!" Rob went on. He grinned at Calvin.

Calvin smiled back, weakly.

Mountain lions? Escaped convicts? Maybe this hike tomorrow wasn't such a great idea after all.