

Early Tory

Mark, Jim and
Spencer have
heard it all before –
or have they?

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Well, no one knows quite what happened to the three boys,” began Uncle Ted. “But they do know that the last any of them were seen was right around here.”

The campfire crackled. My cheeks felt chilled from the night air, but overall, with my thermals and gloves, I was warm and well wrapped.

A million stars sparkled in the sky.

“Supposedly,” said Uncle Ted. “The boys were right about your age when it happened.”

“This is stupid!” said Mark.

“Yeah,” said Jim. “We’ve heard stories like this a thousand times before. You’re just trying to spook us.”

“Spook you?” said Uncle Ted, acting as if he had no idea in the world what Mark and Jim were talking about.

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“and the one about the ghosts ... the werewolves ... the manbear!”



“Yeah, spook us,” replied Mark. “By telling us a scary story.”

“Scary story, my butt!” exclaimed Jim.

The three of us, me and Mark and Jim, laughed. My uncle was one of those old guys who believed you couldn't really have a great night of camping without telling a real humdinger of a scary story before you climbed into your sleeping bag and zipped up for the night. Mark and Jim, however, weren't buying it.

“We've heard 'em all before,” said Jim.

“Yeah,” added Mark. “Like the one about the guy with the bloody ax.”

“Heard it,” said Jim.

“And the one about the escaped psycho guy from the insane asylum,” said Mark.

“Heard it,” said Jim.

“And the one about the ghosts, the one about the werewolves, the one about the manbear ...”

“The one about the manbear?” I said.

“You've heard that one, Spence,” Mark said to me. “It's about the half-man, half-bear creature who likes to rip open the belly of campers and pour honey on their guts before he eats out their stomach lining.”

“Oh,” I said. “The one where the father has a heart attack and the kids have to hike all alone back to town but the manbear sets a trap?” I asked.

“Exactly,” said Jim.

“Yeah,” I said. “I heard that.”

“See?” said Mark to Uncle Ted. Both of my friends, Mark and Jim, had been out camping with my family so many times over the years that my uncles were like their uncles, too. “We've heard 'em all.”

“Kidneys being barbecued in the middle of the night.”

“Scorpions in your ear hole.”

“Getting buried alive and having red ants eat out your eyeballs so you could watch yourself go blind.”

“Ooh, that was a good one,” I said.

“That's not the point,” said Jim.

“Yeah, the point is,” explained Mark, “that there is no point to hearing a scary story right now, Uncle Ted. We don't want it and

we're not buying it.”

“Nope,” said Jim. “Not at all.”

Uncle Ted rubbed his chin and thought about it for a moment.

“You don't want to hear my story?” asked Uncle Ted.

“Nope, we don't want it,” answered Jim.

“And you're not buying it?” asked Uncle Ted for clarification.

“Nope, we're not buying it,” replied Mark.

Uncle Ted looked at me. I shrugged.

“OK, forget it,” said Uncle Ted. “Forget I even mentioned it.”

Uncle Ted then reached for a stick, put a marshmallow on the end of it and plopped it into the fire.

My uncle could make the best s'mores this side of the Mississippi.

“You're right, you know,” said Uncle Ted as he rotated the marshmallow over the flame. “Who wants to hear a scary story anyway? Tell me, how's math class going, Jimmy?”

“Math class?” said Jim. “Who wants to talk about math class when they're camping out?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don't want to talk about math class, Uncle Ted.”

“OK, fine,” said my Uncle Ted as he turned his marshmallow over once

again. “Let's talk about soup. I've been thinking maybe we should take some lessons on how to make good soup for the next time we go camping.”

“Make good soup?” Mark asked.

“Yeah,” said Uncle Ted. “We could use lentils and barley and even butternut squash. Hey, Jimmy, when we get back, do you wanna take some soup-making lessons with me and the boys?”

“Soup-making lessons?” exclaimed Jimmy. “Why would I ever want to do that?”

“Why are we even talking about soup?” I asked, getting frustrated. “This is a camping trip. Men don't talk about soup when they're camping.”

“What's the matter?” my uncle asked. “You don't like soup, Spencer?”

“Yeah, sure, soup's OK,” I answered. “But I just don't want to talk about it.”

“Hey, I've got an idea,” said Uncle Ted. “How cool would it be if we all knit our own camping hat our next time out?”

“It wouldn't be cool at all, Uncle Ted,” said Jim, shaking his head.

“Wait, stay with me here,” continued my uncle. “See, we could each do a cross-stitch pattern and then, when we returned to civilization, we'd all have matching beanies! I'll bring the yarn.”

“This is a camping trip, Uncle Ted!” I exclaimed. “Stop talking about knitting. It's not allowed.”

“It's not?” said Uncle Ted.

“Of course not,” said Mark. “No knitting. No soup. No math class. You got it?” He paused.

“Oh,” said Uncle Ted. “My apologies.”

Uncle Ted quietly pulled his marshmallow out of the fire. Satisfied that it was perfectly roasted, he reached for a graham cracker and a piece of milk chocolate. A moment later there was a small crunch.

Then another crunch.

A stick crackled from the heat of the fire. Uncle Ted then crunched a third bite. An owl hooted in the distance.

I looked at Jim. Jim looked at Mark. Mark looked at me.

Uncle Ted took a final bite of his s'more and chewed.

And chewed.



And swallowed.

Another stick crackled in the campfire. Quiet filled the woods.

“Ya know,” said Jim. “I was thinking. Those stories you tell, well, maybe they could be true?”

“Yeah,” said Mark. “I mean, maybe the kids really did disappear in the middle of the night.”

“Uh-huh,” said Jim. “And like maybe there really was a psycho who escaped from the insane asylum,” he added.

“Yeah,” I said. “And maybe there really is a ghost of a 12-year-old kid who walks the woods at night, looking for somebody to join him so he won't be all alone out here.”

I looked up.

“Tell us a story, Uncle Ted,” I said. “Please.”

“Yeah, please tell us a story,” said Mark.

“Please,” said Jim.

We all waited.

Uncle Ted reached over and took a long, slow sip from his water bottle. Then, he stoked the fire, making sure it was nice and hot.

A moment later, he looked up with eyes that twinkled in the moonlight.

“Well, no one knows quite what happened to the three boys,” began Uncle Ted. “But they do know that the last any of them were seen was right around here.”

Uncle Ted paused for dramatic effect. We all leaned in close.

“Supposedly,” said Uncle Ted. “The boys were right about your age when it happened.” ♣

