

GRAND PRIZE, Grades 9–12

“Skull Lake”
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Back where I grew up in central Alabama, there’s an old rock quarry deep in the piney woods, abandoned long ago by a mining company. Ask a local, and they’ll direct you to an overgrown dirt road just off the highway past the old Reece Service Station. Follow that road till the end, and you’ll wind up at the edge of a deep, jagged crater. At the bottom of that crater is one of the best swimming holes you’re ever likely to see. Clean, deep, blue water, just waiting to cool you off on a hot summer day.

But don’t be fooled. None of the locals would dare swim in it these days, especially at night when there’s a full moon out. Everyone says the lake is cursed.

And the truth is, I’m partly to blame for it.

Back when I was a boy, we all got word one day that the county’s largest employer—the Reynolds Mineral Company—had gone bankrupt and was moving out. This was bad news for our parents, who worked the mines for years and were already struggling to get by. But for us boys, halfway through our high school years, it was the best news we’d ever heard.

You see, in those days we didn’t have video games, the Internet or shopping malls to keep us amused. When you grew up deep in the country, you had to make your own fun. So with that blazing Alabama sun beating down on us every summer, our quest became to find the next great swimming hole. We knew the Reynolds Mineral Company used a huge lake in their quarry for mining operations. So as soon as the last Reynolds truck rolled away from the site on closing day, we quickly made our plans.

We decided to cut the last day of school and head out to the swimming hole. Although the quarry was several miles deep in the woods, we didn’t want the sheriff coming out to the site, which he just might have done if we waited until the weekend.

Eight of us went out to the lake that day. Marty, Jeff and I were best friends and the oldest of the bunch. The rest were a bunch of younger boys we barely knew and didn’t want tagging along. But they threatened to tell on us if we didn’t.

Marty snuck a couple of cases of beer away from his daddy, while Jeff took his brother’s truck. As soon as we were out of our parents’ eyesight, we ditched our schoolbooks and took off—us older boys in the cab, and the five kids in the back.

As we drove toward the old mining company turnoff, we passed back and forth a couple of times, trying not to draw attention from the passing cars. But when the coast was clear,

Jeff gunned his truck down that long wooded road. He laughed and hollered as the truck bounced wildly on the rough road, tossing those brat kids around in the back like a bunch of rag dolls!

After a mile or so the road leveled out, and I gazed out at the endless rows of pine trees zipping past us. I remember the woods seemed to close in on us the deeper we went, enveloping us in a thick blanket of pine branches. Even with all the laughter and the roar of the truck, I remember how still those woods were. Not a single plane could be heard overhead, neither a bird chirping, nor a fly buzzing—no natural sound at all. Just rows and rows of trees, stretching endlessly into the dark forest beyond. I wondered who, or what, must live back there in the darkness...

“...Hey, wake up, space man!” yelled Marty, cramming a cold beer into my hand. I smiled and took a big swig, my anticipation building once again.

The road suddenly ended in a locked gate with an ominous “No Trespassing” sign. But the simple padlock was no match for Jeff. Jeff had learned a thing or two about picking locks from his older brother, who was constantly in and out of jail for petty burglaries of some sort. So Jeff whipped out one of his mother’s hairpins and in no time at all, picked that lock and tossed it in the woods. Jeff rammed his truck through the gate and roared back down the road, howling with laughter.

We then zipped by an old rusted sign that read “Reynolds Mineral.” ‘Bout time, I thought—it seemed like those woods would never end.

“Damn it!” Jeff screamed, slamming on his brakes. Beer splashed all over my shirt. “What’s wrong with you?” I yelled at him.

Then we all looked out the window. Just mere feet from the truck, the earth opened up without warning into a massive crater, yawning up at the open blue sky with a big mouth of jagged, rocky teeth. At the bottom was the deep, cool lake we’d heard about, its glassy surface undisturbed, not a ripple on it—as if waiting all this time just for us.

Faster than you can say “abandon ship,” we jumped out of that truck, scurried to the bottom of the crater, stripped down to our skivvies and dove into the cool water. We laughed, yelled and splashed around, our voices bouncing off the towering rock walls around us. We knew there wasn’t a soul around who could hear us.

As the blazing sun passed overhead, the beers we’d been drinking all day got to our heads. We wobbled around the lake’s edge on jell-o legs, barely staying upright on the slick rocks. I can’t say I remember much about that afternoon, so it goes without saying I didn’t notice when one of the younger boys named Logan suddenly wandered off.

“Hey! Help, I need help!” screamed one of the younger boys. I looked over at him jumping frantically up and down on a pile of rocks near the shoals. This must be a trap, I thought. Soon as I came over there, he and his brat friends are going to push me in the water. But then I saw the fear in his eyes and knew this was no joke.

“Get over here, quick!” he screamed. “Logan’s hurt!”

We rushed over to the rocks and peered down to the shoals. There crumpled up on the rocks lay Logan, unconscious and pale as a sheet, blood streaming from his forehead. He had never touched the water, slipping on his way down. None of us knew a thing about CPR or any kind of medical training. All Jeff could think to do was pick up Logan, shake him and scream over and over again, “Wake up! Wake up!”

But Logan didn’t wake up, and we didn’t feel him breathing. None of us really knew what to do. So Jeff laid him back on the ground and we all stood there, staring in silent disbelief at little Logan’s lifeless body. Then panic slowly started to creep in.

Now, there’s a world of difference between fear and panic. Fear you can sometimes think your way out of logically, but panic is a different story. And if you’re a panicked, drunk and naïve teenage boy, you got a real good chance right then and there of making some stupid life decisions.

“We’re gonna get in a lot of trouble,” Jeff finally muttered after what seemed like hours. “We go for help, they’re gonna know we’re trespassing. And we’ve been drinkin’ too. They’re gonna think we helped kill this kid, givin’ him beer and all.”

“So what do we do?” I heard myself ask.

Jeff didn’t hesitate: “We’re gonna have to hide his body. For all we know, he ran away from home and we haven’t seen him since. That’s what we’ll say if anyone asks.”

Some of the younger kids began to sniffle and cry. Jeff looked in their eyes and knew they might not go along with his plan. He glared at them and said, “You kids say anything about it, I’ll tell your parents or the sheriff or whoever that you pushed him off them rocks. You’ll be in jail the rest of your lives, or maybe the Army. It’ll be my word against yours. Understand?”

One by one, the young boys nodded their heads. “We’re gonna have to make a pact,” Jeff said to all of us. “We do this, nobody can ever say anything about it. For the rest of our lives.”

We never signed any binding contract that day, but our scared glances at one another were agreement enough. So Jeff fetched a long chain from the truck and wrapped it around Logan’s body. We carried his body into the water and dove in as deep as we could go, dragging him down with us. We found a large rock underwater and tied Logan tightly to it. I remember Logan’s eyes stayed shut as we buried him in his watery tomb, no expression on his face whatsoever. Maybe he was as at peace, I thought to myself, and he could care less what we were doing to him.

We emerged from the water gasping for breath, and marched quickly back to the truck, grabbing Logan's clothes along with our own. Then we made the long, silent journey back home, leaving that swimming hole of death far behind.

As the next few days passed, I can't say I was racked with guilt over what happened to Logan. Maybe it was the beer, or just plain denial, but it was if the whole thing was just one bad dream. Even if it wasn't, the kid did it to himself, I reckoned.

Soon afterwards, we got a huge summer rainstorm—one of those storms the South is famous for, when days of humid, unbearable heat are blasted away by a real frog-strangler of a storm. I knew that storm was filling up the swimming hole and washing away every trace of us—our footprints, tire tracks, whatever else we carelessly left behind. I'll be damned, I thought, we're actually going to get away with this!

Then one day, my father walked into my room with a dead serious look on his face. He asked if I knew Logan. I didn't lie—I told him he went to my school, but was younger than me so I didn't give him the time of day. Then Dad told me the police had been out to the old Reynolds quarry. How they ended up out there, I never found out.

But they had found Logan's body.

I played it cool, asking Dad how this kid Logan died. "He drowned," Dad answered. "Somebody chained his body underwater."

I could only stare back at my dad in silent disbelief. He gave me a tight hug, thinking I was in shock—and I was, but not for the reasons he thought. It was then I knew the awful truth. Logan was alive when he fell on the shoals. We had all drowned him.

We were all officially murderers.

From that day forward, none of us who went out to the swimming hole that day spoke to one another. We always thought the police would ask questions, but they never did. The discovery of Logan's body had made our silent pact even stronger. Our classmates treated us the same as always, no suspicion in their eyes.

After graduation a couple of years later, I moved away to Memphis, Tennessee, landing a job at a local manufacturing plant. I married and had two kids of my own. As far as I was concerned, those bad memories were buried with my old life back in Podunk, Alabama.

That is, until I would fall asleep at night. Then I would find myself standing on that familiar dirt road deep in the piney woods, the trees silent, all life sucked out of the air. Not a bird, not an airplane, not a fly buzzing, just silence. And those dark woods would beckon me forward, though I knew exactly what was waiting for me at the end. I would reach the swimming hole, wade slowly into the water, and then dive into the murky depths. There at the bottom, Logan waited for me, still chained to that rock, still a young boy. But this time his eyes were open, staring coldly into mine. His mouth didn't move,

but I could hear a voice coming from him, and it was always the same sinister whisper: "I'm coming for you. I'm coming for you."

One morning, my wife woke me from this daily nightmare to tell me I had a phone call. Even after having the same dream for so long, I would still wake up a frightened man, my eyes bloodshot, skin clammy, and bed sheets soaked with sweat. With shaking hands, I took the receiver.

I was shocked at the voice I heard on the other end. It was Jeff, calling me for the first time in 15 years. But he wasn't calling to talk about the good old days. He quickly asked me if I had been in touch with any of the boys from that night. "Strange things are going on," he said. Turns out the other boys who were with us that night had gone missing. Everyone had moved to different towns, but the story was the same. They each woke up one day, went to work or some other place, and never came back. Police were called, missing person cases filed, but no one ever returned. It was as if they had just been snatched off the face of the earth.

But Jeff wasn't buying it. He told me about the dreams he was having, of young Logan staring at him with impassive eyes in his watery grave, whispering the same mantra: "I'm coming for you. I'm coming for you." I didn't have the heart to tell Jeff I was having the same dream. I managed some weak words of encouragement, but panic was beginning to creep in.

That was the last time I ever spoke to Jeff. Several days later, he left his Birmingham home to grab a beer with friends, and disappeared. His car was never found, nor his body. Like the others, he had simply vanished.

I knew then that I was the last on the list, and Logan was coming for me. There was only one place I knew where I might be safe. So one morning, I hugged my wife and kids and told them I was going to visit my parents back in Alabama. But I had no intention of going home. I went straight to the county police station and confessed everything.

But even this many years later, as I write you this story behind bars, deep within the bowels of a high security prison, I still don't feel safe. Logan still visits me in my dreams, and I listen for his tiny, wet footsteps to come walking down the hall one night, to drag me deep into those dark woods, back to the waters of the Reynolds Mineral quarry, to face judgment that no earthly law can provide.

Oh, and what about the old swimming hole? After news got out about Logan's death, the county built tough new security fences around the crater to discourage any future would-be swimmers. But they could have saved their tax dollars, for the locals were too scared to venture out there.

But every once in a while, you'll hear about a ghost hunter, a thrill seeker or some other crazy person who makes the long journey out there to see where our notorious crime took place. They come back describing an odd and terrifying sight. When the moon is full,

they swear that they see a reflection in that still, black water below—in the shape of a skull, near the spot where Logan died.

That's why that notorious swimming hole now carries the name, "Skull Lake."