

Missing



by Jeff Chiniewicz

*Beware! If you are going to explore the campground,
you may not like what you find.*

Stopping in front of the Twin Swamp Campground, Hayden stayed in the backseat while his parents went inside the office to check in. Melanie and Cole Anderson loved the campground, and had been coming here since Hayden was a newborn.

Walking up the grey weathered steps that led to a porch, Melanie noticed a small white sign pinned to the bulletin board. It was almost invisible amidst the small "Firewood for sale" and "Used Trailer - like new" postings.

"Oh, his poor mother," she moaned sadly, pointing to the missing child poster.

"Yeah," Cole agreed. "Losing a child is a horrible thing."

Melanie stopped, grabbed his arm and turned him towards her,

"But, the child is missing," she said. "And I think that is worse than losing a child." Her eyes took on a glazed look and Cole smiled sympathetically.

"C'mon sweetie, let's go check in." He said. Melanie nodded, and let herself be escorted inside the camp office.

They checked in at the front desk and received camp rules and a map from the elderly woman behind the counter.

"Thank you," Cole said and they turned to leave.

The bell tinkled overhead when he opened the door and held it for his wife. Melanie stopped in the doorway. Cole furrowed his brow with concern; she had that far away look in her eyes again. She turned back to the elderly woman,

"I noticed the missing child poster outside," she said, and Cole winced. The elderly woman nodded,

"Yes, it was very tragic," she replied. "Happened last year - about this time too," the elderly woman added, looking towards the ceiling as if remembering. Melanie took a step towards the desk,

"Yes, go on."

"Well, like I said, it happened last year. I wasn't working here then, but it was all over the news," she quipped. "The family only had one child." The elderly woman stared at the ceiling again. "Ten, yes, I think the boy was about ten years old." "Anyway," she continued. "He had wandered off into the woods." Lowering her voice, and looking over her bifocals, she added, "There are a lot of caves and swamps around here you know." Melanie nodded, and took another step closer. The elderly woman adjusted her blouse and pushed up her glasses.

"They had called out Search and Rescue, the State Police and the FBI looking for that child, but—." She looked down at her hands, which she wrung like a dishtowel. "They never did find him - the poor thing." Melanie stared at the elderly woman for a long moment.

"Thank you," she finally said, and walked out the front door.

The Anderson's set up camp in lot 13 in record time, and Hayden dropped an armload of wood next to the

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cold circle of stones that was topped with a rusted metal ring. His mother was setting up the camp stove, and his father was setting up his favorite lawn chair. They were discussing her strange behavior and how he felt that she should see a doctor. Hayden also thought she had been acting strangely for the last year or so, and had heard this conversation before.

"Mom, Dad, I'm gonna check out the campground," Hayden announced. This drifted through them, ignored as campfire smoke, and he shrugged and walked away.

Cutting through the woods, Hayden figured he would go to the recreation room and play some pinball. He traipsed under the leafy forest, broken by fingers of early evening sunlight. The ferns were plentiful, and he found an assortment of strange mushrooms. Stooping down to look, his mother's warning seeped up into his thoughts, "Don't eat wild mushrooms, - they're poisonous." He wondered if they really were, but was too afraid to find out.

"You're not thinking about eating that - are you?" a voice said. It came from above, and Hayden fell over onto his backside, he was suddenly scared. It was a boy about his age, and his panic quickly abated.

"Huh," Hayden stammered, and glanced around. "Oh," he replied, and laughed nervously.

"The name's Josh," the boy said, and offered his hand. Hayden took it, and the boy pulled him to his feet.

"Thanks," Hayden said. "And no, I wasn't going to eat it." The boy laughed. It was a rich, happy laugh, and Hayden felt himself start to laugh as well.

"Hey, so what ya doing?" the boy asked.

"Nothing, I was gonna go play pinball."

"Hmmm," the boy said, scratching his head. Then he glanced around the woods, took a step closer, and whispered,

"Wanna see a dead body?"

"What?"

"Do you wanna see a dead body?" the boy repeated. "I know where one is." Hayden took a step back, and looked at the boy incredulous.

"Are you kidding me?" he exclaimed.

"No, c'mon - I'll show ya," the boy said, and took off down the trail. Hayden glanced back at his campsite, shrugged, and then took off after his new friend.

Hayden followed the boy up the side of the mountain. The terrain grew steeper, and they had to scramble over large boulders.

"So, how did you find it?" Hayden asked, placing his walking stick carefully on the ground.

"I had heard about the missing boy and just started exploring one day."

"What missing boy?"

"Some kid, he wandered off last year, got lost, and they never could find him," Josh answered grabbing Hayden's hand, and helping him over a large boulder. "They figured he got lost in one of the caves, because they dredged the swamps."

"Oh," Hayden said.

"The problem is," the boy continued. "the kid crawled into a small hole where grown-ups can't fit."

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"So, you're saying you found the missing kid's body?" Hayden asked, suddenly feeling very afraid.

"Yeah, the cave is just up ahead - hurry."

They scampered up several more boulders, and the ground leveled. Staring at them, black and ominous, loomed a large cave entrance. Cold air puffed from the opening, giving Hayden a shiver that crawled up his spine like small spiders.

"C'mon," the boy said, and walked right in - disappearing into the murk. Hayden's eyes widened in horror, and he frantically dug for his penlight. Finding it, he twisted it on, and stepped cautiously into the cave.

"This way," the voice said. Hayden waved his light following the voice, until he found the boy.

"How can you see?" Hayden asked.

"I know the way really good," the boy answered, and pointed towards a small tube - too big for a man. "He went down there," he added. Then he lowered himself to the ground and began to crawl into the tube. Hayden shook his head and followed, silently cursing himself for not going to the recreation center.

The tube narrowed, and he had to lie on his belly - just to fit. Pushing with his toes and pulling with his fingers was the only way to move forward. His head banged against the jagged rock several times before he eventually popped out into a small room with a very low ceiling.

"He fell down that hole. That's why he couldn't get out." Hayden stared at the small hole in the floor of the room, and wondered again how the boy knew so much. A rope had been lashed to a rock and hung down inside of it.

"C'mon let's go," the boy said, and quickly slithered down the rope - swallowed by the black. Hayden wondered again how the boy could see in the dark. He peered over the edge waiting - until he heard the boy yell, "Ok, your turn."

Hayden stuck the penlight in his mouth. He inched his body down into the hole on his belly, gripping the rope with white knuckles. Twenty feet of slimy rock slipped past until he landed inside another room, this one was very large.

"There it is."

Hayden waved the small penlight around, trying to see. The light found the ground, and he moved it slowly over the rock-strewn floor. Hayden did not think he would be scared when he saw it. In fact, he did not think about it at all - until now. The light, once small and insignificant, suddenly became bright as it played over the skeleton. Disintegrated clothing hung in strips over the ribcage. Hayden's mouth was open and he licked his lips nervously. He could tell that the pants were blue jeans, and what remained of the shirt was a red plaid flannel - the same thing he was wearing.

"What was his name?" Hayden asked, still staring at the skeleton of a child about his size.

"His name was Hayden."

Hayden spun around abruptly, and shone the penlight at the boy. The boy smiled,

"I have been waiting for you."

Hayden stumbled back, scared. Suddenly, he noticed that he was fading.

"You can go home now," the boy continued sadly. Hayden shined the penlight on his shirt. The beam was

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going through his body, and shining on the wall behind him.

"I'll tell them where I found you," the boy smiled.

