

SEVENS

On a hot day in July of 2018, my son told me he wanted to go on a vacation with me. We probably both needed a little vacation after his mother split on us back in the winter. Both of us looked exhausted, and a vacation sounded like sweet music to my ears. I asked him if he wanted to go to Disney or any other *cool* vacation spot that your typical ten-year-old would beg to go on, but instead he suggested we go to the “U-P”, as we Michiganders refer to the upper peninsula. After hearing all the stories of me going there as a boy, he said he wanted to see for himself if it’s as fun as I made it out to be. A trip to the U-P is a pretty normal vacation for most families living in Michigan, but we never went because his mother said she preferred the city over dirt and bugs. Looking back on it now, I wish I would have said no to my son and stayed in the city.

Otter Lake is a village in the Northwestern portion of the upper peninsula, and about a seven-hour drive from our house in the city. A small cottage that I inherited after my folks passed away sits on the lake and is a twenty-five-minute drive to the closest store, Stop-N-Shop, where one can get gas, groceries and any other necessity you could possibly think of, a one stop shop. It’s just south of a large old church at the intersection of Sherman and Otter Lake Road. The village, according to the last census, only has about 400 residents, most of which are only there during the warmer months or hunting season. A small quiet part of the world where my son and I can relax and forget our worries, at least if we survive each other after a long hot car ride.

We both packed what we wanted to bring up north, even things we probably didn’t need. I brought my usual swimwear and change of clothes, adding only the three books I still wanted finish reading and a couple empty notebooks in case inspiration found me on our trip up north and I can finally start writing again. Mike, my son, who I thought could pack on his own, came out to my truck with a garbage bag filled less than quarter of the way with what he thought he

needed for our two-week long trip. “Tell me that you’re going to bring more than just that?” A quick nonchalant shake of Mike’s head was all I got in response and enough to tell me not to bother even trying to get him to go back in and pack some more. All I kept thinking about was how to make this long trip less miserable, especially after sensing my son’s current mood.

Once all the gear and supplies were loaded into the truck, I told Mike we were all set to head out and start our journey. As I sat behind the wheel, I watched as Mike opened the door to the cab and flung his trash bag suitcase onto the floorboard with an ease that reminded me of watching trash pickup on Friday mornings and witnessing the same motion as trash bags were slung into the back of the garbage truck. The thought of all the money I had invested into private schools, tutors, and camps began tallying up in my head. Most parents will say that they support their children in whatever life decisions they make if it makes them happy. Not me. I want Mike to work hard, achieve his goals and get the most out of what life has to offer. I don’t have anything against the waste and disposal profession, I just want to see my son do more than hurl trash bags. I had to shake the image from my mind and not let myself get too worked up over nothing.

“Let’s hit the road, Jack,” he said as he slammed the door shut and plopped down in the seat.

“You know we have suitcases,” I told him as I eyed the trash bag in the back. “Sure wish you would have packed a little more too.”

There was a moment of silence that carried on to that threshold of it becoming uncomfortable or just plain rude, and I was beginning to wonder what Mike was thinking about. I looked over at him to let him know I was waiting for a response and noticed that his eyes were watering up.

“You okay son?”

“I think mom took my suitcase,” he said as he choked back tears. “I looked, I promise but couldn’t find it.” Mike lifted his hands up and shrugged briefly before letting them fall and slap down into his lap again. “I can go back and grab a couple more things if you want.” His eyes were full of tears but not a one had fallen. So many tears had fallen after his mother left us that at some point Mike had decided himself that he wouldn’t allow anymore to fall. I could tell he was fighting them because he just kept staring out of the window, instead of looking at me when he spoke.

“We can get you another suitcase,” I told him. “Already in the truck, no sense in going back in the house. We’ll pick up whatever else you might need at the Stop-N-Shop.” I drove off slowly trying to think of ways to change the mood that was weighing us both down. “How ‘bout we crank up some music and grab some junk food at the gas station and really get this vacation started the right way!” A quick grin and a nod were all I got from him as he was still fighting with his emotions, but the grin was a good sign.

At the gas station we both filled our arms up with an assortment of potato chips, beef jerky, and candy bars. We both pulled the levers to our favorite flavors of frozen Slushies, the popular frozen drink that hurts your head when you drink too fast and filled them to the brim in cups the size of milk jugs. Mike got in to the truck and began rifling through his stash of goodies, his mood already improving as he slurped down a long swig of his frozen drink. I put my Slushie in the cup holder, which barely fit, and dropped all the food onto the driver’s seat so I could pump the gas.

“Jimmy?” A strange voice came from the pumps at the other side of the pumping station. I tried to look around but couldn’t see who was speaking.

“Jimmy King!” I heard this one as a squat man came around the pump. I didn’t recognize him at first. The only notion I had was it was someone who knew me long ago. I haven’t been called “Jimmy” in a long time.

“I knew it was you! How ya been,” the man I couldn’t quite remember seemed excited to see me for some reason. “You remember me, right? It’s Rick Steel, we went to high school together,” and suddenly the memories flooded my mind as the top jock from high school stood before me.

“I’m good. Good to see you again too,” I told him in my best cheerful voice. I blatantly lied to his face. Rick was an asshole in school. The typical jock who picked on everyone and got all the girls. His shit didn’t stink in high school. He was that one guy where the guys wanted to be him, and all the girls wanted to date him. A complete jerk if there ever was one. The last memory I had of Rick was him almost drowning me at the community pool. He had said he was just playing the game ‘Sevens’, where someone held you under water for seven seconds while everyone else swam in all directions. The goal is to catch someone so you can hold them underwater for seven seconds next. It was a made-up game that stuck because kids always wanted to find new ways to take their hormone induced aggression out on each other. After I began to choke on the water and my body flailed about, Rick pulled me out of the water and tried apologizing, only he had a shit eating grin on his face the whole time. Good times.

“Hey, sorry to hear about your old lady. I read about you guys splitting up it in the tabloids,” Rick said with what seemed genuine sympathy. “Me and my girl, Suzanne, been married since right out of school. Three kids and our family’s wonderful.”

“That’s great,” although in my head I was screaming. “Listen, Rick, hate to cut this off but my son and I are in a rush to get on the road, so I’ll see you around,” I told him even though I hoped to never see that guy again.

“Alright, alright. It’s just that I haven’t seen you in almost twenty years, and now that you’re out there being the big famous author and all, I thought I could get a selfie with you for old time’s sake?” Rick already had his phone out before I could even reply. It’s not the attention I get, it’s people like Rick who pop up from my past and act like we’re friends, or that we were friends back then even. “So, how much money do you make writing all those goofy stories?” Rick hadn’t changed at all. Always wanted to size someone up and try to top them in any way possible. Looking at his round belly and balding head I assumed he would stay away from physical features today, unlike when he was in high school and the star football player.

“I do well enough to keep a roof over my head and food on the table.” It’s the same line I feed anyone who asks personal questions about money. I let him take the “selfie”, another annoying gimmick, and told him I had to get going as politely as I could.

“That’s too bad, I always thought you fancy writers made some good dough,” Rick said as he had that smirk on his face again, the same one he wore when he almost drowned me. “Suzanne tends the house, cause I made it to general manager at the car lot and can take care of my family. You make some good money and no woman with any brains would leave you,” he said with an arrogant cockiness that reminded me of high school all over again.

“Good for you, I’ll try to remember that next time,” I told him as I climbed back in my truck. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw that Rick was chuckling and already walking back to his car. “Asshole,” I said under my breath, or at least I thought I did until I saw Mike looking at me

with his eyebrows raised in shock. “Swear jar, I know,” I told him as I plucked a dollar from my wallet and handed it over to him. “Let’s get out of here before I have to give you all my money.”

Watching Mike gulp his Slushie, I wondered when the brain freeze would hit him, but I needed to get out of there, so I began pulling away from the pump. As I turned, I saw Rick wearing that same sadistic smirk and watching me leave as he stood next to his not-so-new car. Something about that smirk drove me to do something I don’t typically do. I rolled down my window as I drove at a snail’s pace. “Hey Rick, don’t forget to put your spare tire back in the car,” I shouted to him. When he looked around and then shrugged his shoulders all confused at what I was talking about I pointed and said, “the one around your waist, fat ass!” I watched as his smirk quickly faded and his face turned red. This remark cause Mike to shoot blue Slushie from his nose. I tossed another dollar to him and we both drove away laughing like a couple of lunatics.

The almost seven-hour trip went by a lot better than I had originally expected. The painful memories and feelings of remembering that his mother was out of the picture didn’t last after the gas station debacle with Rick, so the ride to the U-P was a pleasant one. It was as pleasant as a seven-hour ride can go with a ten-year-old at least. Exiting, Highway 24 and merging on to Otter Lake Road, I knew we were about forty-five minutes away from the cabin. The excitement of returning to the place where I had so many fond memories as a kid made me jittery and jumpy as the anticipation grew with each mile that passed.

“Mikey,” I said as I poked him in the arm trying to wake him. He had fallen asleep about an hour and a half ago when the sugar wore off and he finally crashed. There was little movement, so I jabbed him a little harder.

“Ouch! I’m up, I’m up.”

“We’re here,” I told him as if I was taking the blindfold off a contestant who was about to see the unveiling of a grand prize they had just won. I think I built it up too much and didn’t take it in to consideration that Mike has never been here before, so there is no sentimental attachment to this cabin like there is for me.

“This is the ‘cabin’?” There was a note of disappointment in his voice. “Well, at least the lake looks pretty awesome!” Mike stretched and then shot out of the truck and straight down to the small sandy shore.

“Be careful, I’m going to start unloading the truck. Come back and give me a hand soon,” I yelled but didn’t really think Mike heard me, or at least that would be his excuse, like most young kids proclaim when tasks or chores are being requested to get done.

The cabin, sentimentality aside, wasn’t large or even one of those fancier homes on the lake that seem to replace the older cabins like this one. The driveway, all compacted dirt, led up to the side of the cabin. The front of the cabin faced the water, which was only about thirty feet away, and had a long-covered porch that went the length of the house. The dense woods began five feet behind the cabin. Three bedrooms, two on one side of the cabin, the master on the other, and a living area and open kitchen took up the middle. Nothing too fancy. It was a cozy and old-fashioned log cabin. It did have the modern updates such as new electrical wiring, heat, air conditioning, but it still used well water, and everyone needed a landline phone because cell phone service hadn’t quite reached this part of the wilderness yet.

Before my parents passed, one of the last summers I was able to come here with my father, he and I replaced all the old traditional chinking between the logs with new synthetic chinking, so I

knew the cabin was in good shape. The softwood Cedar combined with the new synthetic chinking, updated plumbing and electrical, this cabin would probably last longer than the house I had in the city.

I stopped midway between the cabin and my truck, took a long look at the cabin. “Dang, cabin does look a little spooky,” I thought to myself as I watched the casted shadows from the tall trees above dance all over. There was an eerie feeling that came over me at that moment, like an errant cool breeze just before a storm comes on a hot day that gives you goose bumps. I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Maybe it was seeing the old abandoned church down the road on the way here and how it had a sinister appearance. The old church was engulfed in shadows from the forest that had grown closer. Something about how the church just sat there in the shade with weeds, tall grass and vines wrapping around it and covering pathways and steps. It looked like nature was trying to pull the church back into ground. The roof was partially collapsed and all I could think of was how something didn’t feel right about the place. The sight of it made me shiver and so I sped up to get past as quickly as I could. When I was last here it was alive, and used by the locals, now it was a spooky boarded up building that kids probably told horror stories about to scare their friends, or to frighten the *baggerys*, a name the locals all used to call people from out of town who only came up to the U-P for vacation.

Everything finally unloaded from the truck and I was making my rounds around the cabin to make sure there were no uninvited animal guests in any of the rooms that might have been squatting in the cabin over the years rent free.

“Dad, this place is pretty sweet!” Mike was flashing a big smile and looked excited. He made his grand entrance just as all the work of unpacking was done.

“Glad you approve. Don’t worry, I already unloaded the truck, but thanks for offering to help,” I added with a little more sarcasm than I intended.

“I would’ve helped if you asked or waited.” Mike threw a little attitude in with his response as he stretched his arms out, palms up and raised an eyebrow at me.

“I’m sure you would have,” I couldn’t think of anything nice to say as I felt my blood pressure go up. “How do you like the lake?” I had to try and change the subject.

“Freakin’ cool!” Mike shouted and did a strange dance that looked like he was trying to hit his face in the crook of his elbow. Some new trendy dance I guess he picked up at school. “I met some cool local kids. Said they wanted to hang tomorrow,” he said as he flopped down onto the sofa. “It’s alright if I go, right?”

“Of course,” I could see that he really wanted to go. “Just make sure you let me know where you’re going to be and be safe.” It dawned on me that those are another set of words that fall on deaf ears of kids when they come from a parent.

Looking back on that whole trip, if I could stop one thing from happening or change one decision, it would be allowing Mike to go hangout with those other local kids. If I couldn’t change going on the trip entirely but could change one decision, it would be that one. It’s always easier to look back and wish we could have done things differently, made different decisions or choices, and the worst of it is that no one ever mentions how painful that clarity can be.

After telling his dad that he was going down to the old bait shop to meet up with the local kids he had met earlier, Mike slowly walked to the edge of the lake. He walked the shoreline slowly, skipping rocks into the water and swatting at the occasional mosquito that landed on him. It was ten o’clock in the morning so there was still a little dew on the grass and the heat that

would come baring down later in the day had not quite arrived. The walk to the bait shop was quiet and peaceful, the surface of the water was smooth as a sheet of glass, and there wasn't a breeze in the air to be felt. The only sounds were from the birds in flight crying out to the other birds. Mike watched as they swooped around in circles, sometimes splashing down to the water's surface to snatch a bug but mostly flying around collecting their food. Everything was still, except the rocks rippling the water as they skipped across and an occasional splash from a bird that dive bombed from above to an unsuspecting bug or small fish.

The old bait shop was nothing more than a tiny shack that the previous owners had built at the end of their boat dock. The old wooden bait shop was no more than the size of a closet, just enough room to hold a small fridge for the night crawlers and a little tank for any live minnow. The once white paint exterior was long faded leaving mostly old rotted wood planks showing with a few small patches of the original white paint waiting for a strong wind to blow them away. Mike could see why the bait shop was abandoned as he got closer. The house on the property was nothing more than a few charred support beams from what looked like an old house fire.

Mike walked down the old wooden dock carefully as the boards creaked, taking light steps and testing his weight on a couple that looked ready to break. He didn't know what there was to do besides swim, hunt for frogs, or explore some of the woods around here, but he guessed that if there was anything fun and exciting to do that the local boys would know. Sitting on the end with his feet dangling just above the water he looked out on the lake and waited for the other kids to arrive.

"Hey, the new kid is already there," a voice shouted not too far away and got Mike's attention. When he turned, he saw one of the local kids he had met yesterday, Chase.

Chase was fifteen and tall for his age with a military haircut on top of a thin lanky body. Jeremy and Brett, the other two kids that followed close behind Chase, were both twelve and not much bigger than Mike. Jeremy and Brett looked like they could be brothers with their shaggy brown hair and pudgy bodies. The only real difference between the two, that Mike needed to tell them apart, was that Jeremy had a dark mole right below one of his eyes. Chase turned and led the way with Brett and Jeremy going back and forth trying to be the next in line to Chase.

“Wassup dude?” Chase walked up to Mike and they bumped knuckles. “Gonna be a damn hot day today, hope you brought some swimming trunks cause we got a kick ass spot to swim that only us locals knows about.” Jeremy and Brett both nodded with approval with toothy grins and bumped knuckles with Mike.

“I’m wearing my swim trunks,” Mike was starting to get excited about hanging out with some cool local kids. “How far away is the swimming spot?”

“Why? You got to get approval from daddy or sumthin’?” Jeremy laughed and looked to Chase like he wanted to show off for him. Chase laughed and slapped the back of Jeremy which produced an even larger smile from him. Brett just smirked and Mike could tell that he didn’t like Jeremy that much.

“No, I don’t I have to... well, I’m supposed to,” Mike said as he tried to back peddle and save face with the local kids. He didn’t want to miss out on seeing all the cool things that only they would be able to show him either. “Nah, I can do what I want,” he tried to say as nonchalantly as possible.

“Okay then, cool.” Chase put his arm around Mike and led him away from the water and dock with Brett and Jeremy close behind. “Before we go to our secret swimming spot, we have to

show you the haunted church.” Mike craned his neck to look up at Chase to see if he was serious. “You’re not going to get scared and run back to daddy, are you?” This produced laughs from behind.

“I’m not scared of anything!” Mike protested a little too loudly and even shocked himself at the seriousness in his voice.

Chase stopped with his arm still around Mike’s shoulders, “oh really? I’ve never seen nobody that isn’t scared of something.” Chase held a serious look on his face and had a certain look in his eyes. The look in his eyes had a crazed look to them, like a switch was almost flipped and Chase could snap at any moment. The stone like features of Chase’s face relaxed and a small grin appeared as he looked down at Mike. The grin didn’t reach Chase’s eyes or seem genuine, but anything was better than how he had looked at Mike a minute before. “C’mon slow pokes let’s head out to the church,” Chase gave Mike a quick slap on the back and signaled with his arms to the direction we needed to go.

To drive to the church would take about ten minutes through some backroads that wound around property lines but because the boys were on foot and could cut through the woods and backyards, they were able to get there in a short time. There was a narrow dirt path that snaked its way through the dense woods that backed up to the old church, and when they arrived each of them had to spend time picking prickly burrs off their shirts and shorts. By this time, the sun was starting to warm the cool morning air and Mike could tell that even with the shade from the trees that it was going to be a scorcher of a day.

In the back of the church was a boarded-up door that must have been an emergency exit at one point but was now just a sub-par barrier to detract any animals seeking refuge inside. The

piece of plywood covering the door looked as old as the church itself with shades of different mold covering it and vines twisting over the edges. It had the appearance of a wet sponge and with a decent kick of your foot one could punch a hole right through it.

Chase led the way with Mike next, and Brett and Jeremy pulling up the rear. Mike glanced over his shoulder and saw the other two boys glaring at him because he was in front of them and closer to Chase. Turning to Chase, “think we can get in?” Mike wanted to sound confident and not scared so he tried to act as brave as he could even though deep down there was a storm of nerves brewing.

Chase scoffed at Mike’s question and without turning around went up to the back and pulled at the bottom corner of the piece of moldy plywood. The whole piece of plywood that was meant to secure the abandoned church and keep people or animals out did anything but that as Chase lifted the corner away from the door frame. There was only a small opening, and from the looks of it no actual door, just black emptiness that led into the church. It looked like Chase had peeled the top layer of something decrepit and scary away and revealed a black hole into something even more terrifying. The cold empty darkness that looked like a hole that went into another evil dimension was not helping Mike as he attempted to steel his nerves.

“After you,” Chase mockingly said as he held the plywood with one arm and signaled to the rest of the boys like he was a doorman at a fancy restaurant you see in the big cities.

Mike didn’t turn to look at Jeremy or Brett because he knew that they jumped at the chance to appease Chase and would be moving already to get inside. He bent down and went in to the old church through the dark opening, and into what looked and felt like another world all together. The darkness contrasted with the light from outside and it took Mike a few moments for his eyes

to adjust, but the first thing he did notice was that the temperature was much cooler as his skin prickled with goose bumps. As his eyes adjusted, Mike noticed all the cobwebs and dust that hadn't been disturbed in years except for a footpath that he followed to the area that used to be where the altar sat on the raised dais for church services. The voices of Chase and the other two not far behind him, he stood on the dais and he looked around. The church pews were all in their organized and neat rows blanketed with dust, the windows were boarded up, probably with the same old plywood that had covered the back door. Cracks where the windows weren't covered completely was the only source of light that allowed slim beams of sunlight through. As Mike stood there listening to the other kids' voices coming closer, he noticed a weird circle sketched onto the floor of the dais where he now stood. There were some weird markings and symbols that decorated the circle at spots and Mike felt another wave of nervousness flood his body.

Coming around the corner Chase carried a metal cage, "I told you hotdogs would work better than peanut butter." He was smiling and looked as happy as a hunter who had just taken down a prized buck.

"Whatcha got there, Chase?" Mike saw something furry in the cage he carried but couldn't make out what it was. It wasn't until Chase placed the metal cage down, right in the center of that circle on the floor of the dais did Mike notice the small raccoon trapped inside.

"We have the final pieces to our secret ceremony, Mike." Chase walked around to the side of the dais and retrieved a long stick that used like a cane as he walked back. Jeremy and Brett had stopped and stood around the circle design on the floor, each by one of those unique symbols.

"This is going to be so awesome," Jeremy giggled as he looked to Chase and then to Brett, who also looked eager and excited about whatever was going on. "Mike, you're going to love

this, it's totally cool." Mike stared at Jeremy, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet and rubbing his hands together and wondered what was going on.

Chase came over to Mike and positioned him by one of the other symbols on the ground. "Stand there and don't move. Nothing bad is going to happen, we are just going to do a little ceremony and ask for protection." Chase saw the unease and confusion on Mike's face when he added, "I read about it in this book, so I know what I'm doing."

"I don't know about all this, guys. I think I'd rather go swim instead or wait for you outside." Mike knew he wanted to be anywhere but where he was at that moment, but when he saw the angry looks from Chase and the other two, he stopped his protests and stood in his designated spot saying his own prayer in his head that this wouldn't take too long. Peer pressure had won again.

"Now, close your eyes as I perform the ceremony." Chase stared at Mike until he closed his eyes. "Oh, great and powerful spirit, we seek your protection. We open ourselves to you!" Chase's voice grew louder with each word. "Give us your strength!"

Mike felt very uncomfortable with this situation and peeked through slit eyelids to see if everyone was closing their eyes too, or if this was a prank. Everyone had their eyes closed, all except Chase who was staring at the raccoon. What he witnessed next almost made him vomit.

"We sacrifice this life in your honor. We are your servants," Chase said as he raised his hands above his head. Before Mike could protest, Chase, with both hands gripping the wooden stick, impaled the raccoon that was trapped in the cage. Blood seeped from the body as it twitched and convulsed. Blood pooled in the center of the circle, Mike's stomach flipped, and his mouth began to water as his morning breakfast prepared to exit.

There was a moment of silence where everyone was looking around at each other, when suddenly an invisible force knocked Mike off his feet. Mike, in a moment of shock looked up at Chase's face, who was standing over him and asked, "what happened, did one of you push me down?" There was a touch of anger in his voice but the shaky words he spoke were clearly filled with fright.

"Hell no, no one pushed you," Jeremy stated as he too made his way over to Mike. "That was crazy."

"Are you okay?" Brett asked Mike with what seemed like genuine concern.

"He's fine. C'mon Mike lets get you to your feet." Chase extended a hand and helped Mike up off the ground.

With a look of concern on his face, Mike asked, "no one pushed me, and no one else got knocked down?" He spoke as if he was trying to figure out just exactly what happened when out of nowhere strange noises rose from the shadows.

The boys all stopped and looked around, staring in one direction and then another as they followed the noises. The tension in the room was rising and each of them moved closer to one another.

"Whoever is tryin' to scare us better just knock it off!" Jeremy tried to sound tough, but his words came out as a whimper. Brett stood still as a statue and looked as scared as Jeremy.

"I think our ceremony worked! I think we finally did it right and now we are protected by the spirit!" Chase was anything but scared. He turned with each noise and wore a devilish smile on his face the whole time.

“I don’t think I like this anymore. Can we leave now, maybe go swimming?” Mike pleaded to Chase, he was the ring leader after all, and didn’t care what they thought about him anymore, he just wanted out of there.

“Hell no, we aren’t...” Chase was saying but was cut off as the plywood boards that covered the windows began flapping against the building and window frames. It wasn’t just one board, it was all of them, and all at once. The noise was deafening. “Let’s get out of here before this place buries us alive!” That was all Chase had to say and everyone was sprinting to the backdoor as fast as they could.

They all made it out of the old church and didn’t stop running until each of them was completely out of breath, except Chase who still had that wicked grin on his face and kept looking at Mike in a strange way. They were all too far down the wooded trail to see the church any longer, and more importantly to hear any creepy noises like they had heard while inside it.

Walking down the trail Mike couldn’t help the strange feeling he was having in his body. He noticed how he felt like he was in his own skin, it just felt like his body was tingly on the inside. The feeling was like when your leg falls asleep and you can move it, knowing that it is your leg, but the feeling that your leg isn’t completely working the way it should was how Mike felt but in his entire body.

“We’re here,” Chase proclaimed loudly, and Mike lost in his observation of himself walked right in to the back of Jeremy.

“Hey! Watch it Mike,” Jeremy barked at him.

“Sorry,” he replied and shook his head clearing his thoughts. As he looked around, he finally saw where he was at. How long had he been walking in that daze? He saw the jutting rock that

protruded out of the woods and that hung over the lake and he knew that they must be at the secret swimming spot that they had told him about. Swimming wasn't something he felt like doing anymore, not after the frightening scene back at the church, and not now that he had those strange feelings inside of him. Mike had to admit though, the secret swimming spot was awesome and looked like it could be a lot of fun jumping off the rock ledge.

"C'mon boys, last one in is *it!*" Chase declared as he peeled his shoes and shirt off quickly prompting everyone to follow suit.

At that age anytime someone challenges you to a race, of any sorts, it's an automatic instinct to not be last. They all began pulling shirts, shoes, and socks off as fast as they could. Chase was the first one to jump off the rock and into the water, with Brett only seconds behind. It came down to Jeremy and Mike. Mike caught a glimpse of Jeremy out of the corner of his eye and saw that he only had one more shoe to take off, just as he had. The race was on! Mike was pulling on his shoe, not trying to untie it, when the strange feeling in his body made his hands go numb and weak. He couldn't find the strength to grip or pull on his shoe. There was a splash and Mike looked to see three piles of clothes. He had lost. He used his heel on his other foot and pried the other shoe off and slipped his foot out. He threw his sock onto the ground and walked over to the edge of the rock, looking down into the water where three boys swam and shouted at Mike for coming in last.

"You're *it*, Mike," Chase yelled and was echoed by Brett and Jeremy who were all splashing water and laughing at each other.

Mike threw up his hands in defeat and jumped feet first into the water that was about five feet below. The cold water sent a jolt through his body at first, but his body quickly got used to the

temperature and it became a relief against the summer heat. *This is a cool swimming spot. Wish we could have come here instead of stopping at the church.* The water wasn't clear, but you could see a couple feet down before the sediment from the seaweed and dirt below clouded the water. The sun was now at its peak and was turning this day in to an unbearably hot day, luckily Mike got to enjoy the nice cool water.

Chase swam over to Mike, "we're going to play a game called 'Sevens', and you have to start since you lost the race." Chase spoke to everyone in a loud voice so that everyone could hear the rules of the game. "Mike, I'm going to push you underwater where you have to stay for seven seconds. Once you count to seven you can come up and must tag one of us. Whoever you tag is it next." Jeremy and Brett hooted and hollered their excitement, boasting about how they wouldn't get tagged.

"Chase, I don't know if I'm feeling up to playing just yet," Mike said as he could still sense those strange feelings coursing through his body.

"I don't think you understand," Chase spoke softly to Mike with that evil grin blossoming on his face. "The first sacrifice was to call the spirit. It chose you. The second sacrifice is to conjure it into a vessel."

"A what?" Mike was barely able to get out before Chase pushed him underwater. Mike struggled to get free but was being held underwater by someone larger and stronger, and with the sudden surprise hadn't had time to hold his breath. Water was filling his lungs as he looked up at Chase's face. Chase had shouted to the others that the game had started so Jeremy and Brett were swimming away as fast as they could so as not to be caught and tagged. Mike was losing the fight to live as he swallowed more lake water. His body began to twitch and in that serene

moment of silence just before death he heard a voice in his mind, *let me help you live*. Death was approaching and all Mike wanted was to live. That quiet voice, he knew, was the reason behind his body's strange sensations. In what Mike knew were his last seconds he succumbed and allowed the voice control.

Chase held his smirk and looked down into the water when he felt Mike quit struggling. A sudden sense of dread wiped the smirk off Chase's face as he looked down into the water and saw the eye sockets of Mike completely black with two fiery red eyes staring back at him. Mike, or who he thought was Mike, violently gripped his forearms and pulled him underwater.

It was the around four o'clock when someone began banging on the screen door to the cabin. I wasn't happy about being disturbed in the middle of writing my next novel but anyone banging on your door like that usually meant it was an emergency. I ran to the door and saw a young boy, about Mike's age, standing there with a pale face and shaking.

"Mr. King, we did somethin' bad," Brett squeaked out before running into my arms. I didn't know what to say and could tell that the boy was terrified. "Mike took Jeremy and Chase, and um... I think he would've got me too."

"Wait, Mike?" I felt a sudden rush of fear. If this kid was terrified this way, then it must be serious. "Is Mike okay? Where is he? Did he have an accident in the lake?"

"The red eyes! Don't go in the lake," he sobbed into my chest.