

The Swimming Hole

I'm sitting at a small table in this tiny room – my room - on cellblock thirteen. Behind me is a metal bunk bed, the top level empty. The whisper-thin mattress does little to prevent the hard slab of steel beneath from wreaking havoc on my back (or side or stomach, depending on my position.) At the foot of this wondrous contraption is a lone stainless steel commode that gets so cold in the wintertime I can't bear to sit down on it. To the right is a small sink. Above that, bolted into the concrete wall, is a mirror made of scratched up steel in which my reflection is hazy and blurred.

I'm caged like an animal in the zoo, but, like those animals, I have made this my home. Over time, I have been afforded the luxury of writing materials, books, pictures, and even a radio. The radio came with the stipulation that it can only be on between seven and nine in the evening and at such low volume that even I can barely hear it.

I have been in this prison for the past twenty-seven years. Not long ago, I let go of the last vestiges of hope of ever getting out, of having a chance at a 'normal' life. I finally realized that I am too old; too much time has passed for me to ever think that I will walk the streets a free man, make love to a woman, go to the ballpark, wrap my mouth around a juicy steak or do any of the things most people take for granted.

You may wonder how I've stayed sane all these years. That's assuming I am sane, of course, and what does it matter anyway? I'm locked up after all, so I'm not a threat to the rest of the world, now am I? But I am sane, at least in my own mind. And I've kept that crazy voice at arms length through my writings and my imagination. I can go anywhere I want in my head and that is

something they can never take from me. My physical freedom yes, but my mental and psychological play areas are mine and mine alone.

I'm not asking you to feel sorry for me; I'm not looking for your sympathies here...nope, not at all. I'm just asking for you to listen because, for the first time, I am going to share what really happened that day in 1985, the day I lost my freedom and everything dear to me.

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I finished shaving and splashed on some Brut; I enjoyed the sting of alcohol on my face. It was like a lover's soft slap. I looked at my twenty-two year old face in the mirror, searching for those unsightly blackheads, but that day I was blemish-free.

I attended medical school – thanks to dear ole Dad – at the University of Washington. Because it was early July, I was on summer break and my roomy had gone back to Vermont to stay with his family until classes started up again.

I finished brushing my teeth when there was a knock on the door. I made my way through the debris that littered the small apartment (clothes, fast food wrappers, empty soda cans) and opened the door to see my best friend, Kyle, standing there dressed in shorts and a t-shirt that proclaimed: THERE'S TOO MUCH BLOOD IN MY ALCOHOL SYSTEM.

“Hey Jacob,” he said, pushing his way past me.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, closing the door.

“Isn't summer fucking awesome? I can hardly wait to get the girls alone, if ya know what I'm sayin',” Kyle said with a wink, absently running his finger across the slightly raised, off-white scar tissue that ran from his left earlobe to the middle of his cheek.

“Yes, I know what yer sayin man,” I replied in my best Kyle imitation. “It’s going to be hot today, I think they said around ninety. Perfect for the swimming hole.”

“Are we picking the girls up, or are they meeting us there?” He plopped down on the beaten up sofa, looked up at me expectantly.

“They’ll meet us at the Old Mill turnoff; we can park there and walk the rest of the way in.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far, about twenty minutes the way the crow flies.”

“How long the way a human walks?” he asked with hint of sarcasm mixed with humor.

I flipped him the bird. “Let’s get moving, don’t wanta keep the girls waitin’.”

On the way to the swimming hole (as I lovingly referred to the place), we stopped at the small country store on old Highway 9, which was owned and operated by an old man named Eugene McNamary, but we just called him Pops. He seemed to enjoy the solitude - I often wondered how he stayed in business way out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Hey Pops,” I said with a wave to the old man sitting behind the counter. He looked up, nodded, and then went back to whatever it was he was reading.

The small building was slowly falling apart: the wooden floor creaked in protest under our weight, the walls were chipped and faded, and the racks with candy, snacks and junk food looked as if they would topple over at any moment. Two outdated refrigerated coolers (they looked liked they were purchased at a yard sale) stood in the back, proudly displaying soda pop, bottled water, milk and our favorite brands of beer. Kyle made a beeline for the beer while I perused the junk food aisle.

“You with them other guys?” Eugene asked after Kyle set a case of Budweiser on the counter and I dropped two bags of Lay’s Barbeque Potato Chips and two bags of ice next to that.

“What other guys? We didn’t see any other guys,” I said.

“Uh huh. Good. They didn’t look to be nice young fellers like you two. They came in here cussing and a hollerin’ about who they poked and how nobody better mess wit ‘em. I was about to call the cops when they left.”

I thought of the girls and shot a worried glance at my friend. Kyle seemed unfazed, as if he didn’t hear a word the old guy said. “How long ago was that?” I asked.

“Oh, about fifteen minutes ago I reckon,” he said, an unsightly trickle of brown tobacco juice running down his chin.

We paid for our goods, thanked the old guy and, after putting the beer on ice, we climbed in Kyle’s seven-year-old Nova and drove the last thirty minutes of our trip, arriving at the Old Mill turnoff at a few minutes after ten. The morning was heating up, and that sweet smell of summer was resting on the air like an expensive perfume.

The Old Mill turnoff was named after the old lumber mill – overgrown now – that was running full bore in the late 1800’s; it went out of business at the turn of the century when the new mill was built forty minutes north in the town of Adeline.

The road that led to the abandoned mill was barely discernable now, but I had no trouble finding it; I had been coming here since I was a kid.

We turned off the blacktop and onto the near-invisible dirt road, which hadn’t seen any action in at least twenty years. Overgrown bushes and tree branches scraped the metal top of the Nova, which sounded eerily reminiscent of fingernails running across a blackboard; I cringed. We

drove in as far as we could – about two hundred feet – before stopping at the edge of a downed tree, which lay across our path like some dead animal.

“Well buddy, this is as far as we go in the comfort of my Chevy. So now what?” Kyle asked.

“We wait for the girls. When they get here, we walk to the swimming hole. You’ll love it, Kyle, it’s secluded...I don’t think anyone even knows it’s here. The people that did know about it were old mill workers and their families and they’re long gone...”

A blue Ford Sedan nosed slowly through the undergrowth then and came to a halt next to the Nova. The young driver was the first one out; she was wearing blue denim shorts, a red top that was tied in a knot just below her breasts, exposing her perfectly toned and tanned mid-section. Her brown hair hung loose around her shoulders; her lips were painted dark red...almost maroon.

Every time I saw Michelle, I fell in love all over again. Her physical attributes were second to none, but Michelle Fleming was also one of the nicest people I’d ever met in my life. I’d had a crush on her ever since the ninth grade.

Denise Baker, Kyle’s girlfriend, got out of the passenger side of the Ford and, as usual, hardly acknowledged my presence. Smacking her gum like a little kid, she planted a kiss directly on Kyle and ran her forefinger lightly across his scar, giggling.

I turned to Michelle and rolled my eyes. “You look great – really, really great,” I said, wrapping an arm around her waist and kissing her lightly on the cheek. “Did you bring your swimsuit?”

“I thought we were going skinny-dipping,” she said, one-half of her mouth turned up in a sly grin, “or are you chicken?”

“Not me,” I said playfully. I pulled her closer and she wrapped her arms around my neck. This was the woman I would marry and spend the rest of my days with, of that I had no doubt.

But fate had a different plan.

“Come on, let’s get going before it gets any hotter,” Kyle said, opening the trunk of the Nova and pulling out the cooler full of beer. “Jacob, I could use a little help.”

“Of course,” I said, reluctantly extricating myself from Michelle.

We locked up the cars, and Denise grabbed the bag of chips while Michelle carried a basket full of food she had prepared for our lunch. I mentally gave her another plus in the future wife department: she could cook.

About twenty-five minutes later, after tripping over downed trees, pushing through brambles and climbing over rocks the size of small houses, we reached the swimming hole. When she stepped out of the woods and into the clearing, Michelle gasped. Before her was a pristine lake surrounded by summer flowers, untouched by the ravages of man and the tides of progress. She looked at me with a huge grin on her face that, once again, made me melt.

We walked out on a huge rock that beveled its way down into the water. It was smooth and warm. “This is where I sun myself when I come out here,” I said, dropping my end of the cooler.

“Hey! You ‘bout ripped my arm off man,” Kyle said, dropping his end of the cooler onto the rock. “You could’ve at least given me a warning, shithead.”

Michelle giggled and Denise shot me a look of contempt. There wasn’t any love lost between us; I never liked the girl and wondered why Michelle hung out with her.

And then I heard voices; they were getting closer, louder. “I thought you said nobody knew about this place,” Kyle said.

Before I could reply, two men came out of the woods. I guessed their age at around thirty, but it was hard to tell. One of the guys was tall – I'd say at least six foot six or better – while his companion was at least eight inches shorter.

They looked as if they'd been running awhile. Their jeans were covered with dried dirt, their hair was greasy and stringy, and they smelled of perspiration and booze.

"What the hell you doin' in these parts, huh?" the short guy asked, looking at Michelle but speaking to all of us.

"We just came out for a swim," I said. "I've been coming here for years, didn't think anyone else even knew about the place."

"Well, I guess you were wrong about that, huh?" he said in a cold voice.

I looked sheepishly at him, not knowing what to do or what to say. My mind was going in a million different directions, playing out many scenarios, none of which ended well.

"Can we help you with something?" Michelle asked, stepping past me.

The big guy smiled wide and took a step toward her. His friend stopped him, shaking his head. "Not yet."

"What do you mean 'not yet'? Not yet what?" Kyle said. I noticed Denise had hidden behind him and was now peering over his shoulder at the two men, fear in her eyes.

"Gimme the keys to your car," the short man demanded, holding out his hand, palm up.

"Fuck you," Kyle said stepping toward them.

Most of what happened next was a blur. It was so quick, so instinctive, and so terrible that I shudder when I think about it, even now.

The tall guy was on Kyle in two quick steps. The open palm of the big man's large hand met Kyle's face with such force it immediately shattered his nose: blood squirted as if someone had just turned on a faucet.

Kyle made a funny nasal sound and fell to the ground.

Denise screamed. She turned and ran for the woods.

I watched transfixed in horror as the short guy reached around to the small of his back; he produced a small handgun from his waistband and, without hesitation, shot Denise three times in the back and then turned and put a slug in Kyle's forehead.

I heard myself yelling...screaming... as I watched Michelle wrestling with the large man. He made a funny gurgling sound and fell to the ground clutching his throat. Bright red blood ran through his fingers, which were clamped around his throat like a vise. His jugular had been cut.

She went for the short guy next. He saw her coming, but a few seconds too late – he had been watching me. As he raised the gun, Michelle swung the knife in a large arc, coming down on the back of the man's hand. The razor sharp blade cut deep into the man's wrist, burying itself almost to the bone.

He screamed; the handgun dropped in the dry summer grass.

In one swift motion Michelle dropped the knife and picked up the gun. Without any forethought, she pointed the barrel of the pistol at the man's face and pulled the trigger.

I dropped to my knees then and retched. When there was nothing left in my stomach and the dry heaves had subsided to slow, small spasms, I looked over at Michelle.

She now lay in the bloodstained grass with her hands covering her face. I could hear her soft sobs and moans.

She was in shock.

At least that's what I thought at the time.

I don't know how much time passed, but the sky had taken on a different hue as if a storm was coming. But the real storm had come and gone, taking my good friend with it in a fury of senseless violence.

I picked up the knife lying in the grass; I realized then that it had belonged to the tall man. He had dropped it when he first hit Kyle and in all the ensuing confusion, Michelle must have picked it up. Now it was covered in her prints.

I was disoriented. I couldn't think straight. Numbly, I picked the knife out of the summer grass and wiped the handle down on the tail of my shirt.

I turned Michelle around to face me; she was catatonic. I placed my hands on her shoulders and gently shook her: "Michelle...Michelle!" I snapped my fingers repeatedly: nothing, no recognition whatsoever.

She still held the gun in her right hand. I pried her fingers loose, wiped the gun down on my shirt like I did with the knife and then threw it as far as I could.

What a guy won't do for love, I thought.

I slid my arms underneath Michelle's and lifted her to a standing position. Together we half-walked, half-stumbled our way back through the woods. When we reached the cars and the entrance to Old Mill Road, I managed to get Michelle in the passenger seat of the Nova. She rolled against the door as if she didn't have a skeletal system. I drove as fast as I dared to the nearest police station.

Michelle ended up in the local hospital's psyche ward.

I ended up in prison.

Life is funny sometimes.

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They found my fingerprints all over the knife and the gun, of course. I readily admitted to the investigating officer that I had shot the short guy and cut the tall guy's jugular in self-defense.

But I didn't murder my own friends.

A jury of my peers didn't believe my story, or me. The prosecutor painted me as a manipulative, angry, mentally disturbed young man who had lured Denise (Kyle's girlfriend) out to the lake so I could dispose of her. He drummed up witnesses who testified they had seen me and Denise fighting and threatening each other on many separate occasions, and convinced the twelve-person panel that I hated this woman so much it drove me to kill.

And then, according to that smug little prick of a prosecutor, Kyle stepped in to protect his girlfriend and I shot him – point blank - in the head.

The only one who knew what really happened that day was Michelle and she wasn't talking. There weren't any other witnesses, only the physical evidence. Evidence that pointed its ugly finger at yours truly.

And what about the two other dead bodies? According to Mr. Prosecutor, they were just a couple of guys in the wrong place at the wrong time. The gun was stolen and virtually untraceable; the knife could've been culled from any kitchen in America.

The truth was simple: The prosecutor and the town needed to hang somebody for this brutal crime and, since there were no other suspects, I was the logical scapegoat.

Although Michelle was out of the hospital and had returned home prior to the trial, she was excused because of her medical condition. She suffered – conveniently in my opinion – from

what the psychologists called ‘Dissociative Amnesia’ and couldn’t remember the events of that day. When asked about what happened, she would become sullen, frightened and ultimately unresponsive.

Her parents had never liked me much and latched onto the opportunity to drag me down and get me away from their only child. Their testimony certainly didn’t help my case.

The only people left who still believed I didn’t do it were my own parents, but the court system doesn’t rely much on testimony from family members.

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So here I am, sitting in a concrete room with a see-through front door made of steel. My neighbors are arsonists, rapists, murders and robbers. But I’ve made friends – it was either that or die of loneliness.

After work this afternoon (I am a trustee and work in the kitchen) the head jailer came to my cell and informed me I had a visitor. Someone named Michelle, he’d said as he walked away. At first, I thought I’d heard him wrong.

When I got to the visitor area I sat down on the hard, small chair in front of the rectangular window. I looked disbelievingly at the woman on the other side of the glass.

“M-Michelle?” I stuttered like some elementary school kid. She couldn’t hear me but she could read the incredulity on my face.

She was in her late forties now. Her lips were painted bright red and her hair was cropped short with hints of gray. She’d put on a few pounds over the years and added a few extra lines on her face but she still looked great.

Michelle picked up the phone on her right and nodded at me to do the same. I lifted the phone out of its cradle and tentatively put the earpiece to my ear.

“Oh Jacob,” she sighed, “it is so great to see you after all these years. You look better than I thought you would.”

I was at a loss for words. I mean, I hadn’t seen this woman in twenty-seven years and suddenly she was in front of me like some apparition. I just stared, my eyes big and round, my jaw hanging down as if it had come unhinged from my face.

“What does that mean?” I finally managed, swallowing hard. I still couldn’t believe what I was looking at – it was all so surreal. “What are you doing here?”

She looked down at her hands, which were resting on her lap, palms up. After a few minutes of silence, she looked up and said, “I just needed to tell you that I appreciate what you did for me. I know that you didn’t think it would come to this, but what--”

“I sure as hell didn’t think I would be spending my life in a place like this,” I interrupted.

“Jake I--”

“Wait a minute!” I yelled into the phone. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the guard put his hand over the butt of his holstered gun, watching me carefully. “When did you remember what happened? When did it all come back to you?” I said leaning forward, my face almost touching the glass.

She grinned. “Why I always knew what happened that day, Jake. The amnesia wasn’t real, of course – I faked it. You must admit that I was convincing. I had you fooled, didn’t I? Not to mention those doctors with their degrees and the courts and the lawyers and even my own parents.”

She tilted her head slightly then, like an animal sizing up its prey. I looked into those eyes and for the first time I noticed emptiness - where a soul should have been there was nothing but darkness.

“I don’t understand,” I said, shaking my head. “I mean...why? What would be--”

“When I slit that guy's throat it was such a rush. And the smell...oh, the smell of fresh blood, the powerful feeling of taking someone’s life is indescribable. It’s better than food, better than sex, better than anything!”

I stood up then, the phone clutched in my left hand, my face a twisted, contorted mess of confusion, anger and hatred. Before I lost complete control, Michelle pointed to the guard walking towards me. I sat back down, the blood draining from my face.

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? Why I just wanted to see you again and tell you the truth. You deserve it after what you did for me. And to tell you I’m done killing, I’m tired.”

“Done killing? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Mostly homeless people. I would travel to different cities so as not to attract attention. And I tried my best to spread the killings out over time, I really did, but sometimes...sometimes the need was so great I could hardly stand it and I would give in to the urge. It was like being on the most powerful drug...

“How many, Michelle? How many people have you murdered?”

“Nineteen,” she said matter-of-fact like, as if she was giving me her newest recipe for crumb cake.

“And what’s to keep me from telling everyone what you just told me?”

She smiled again, which was a bit disconcerting, and said, “Nobody would believe a person on death row – it would be considered a last ditch effort by a condemned man and it wouldn’t carry any weight. Too much time has passed; everyone who was involved in the case is retired or dead.”

“Yeah, okay. But I could tell them about the people you’ve murdered, tell them--”

“Tell them what? You know what happened to some homeless people in different cities you can’t even name? People that probably have never even been reported missing, probably don’t have any families? And do you really think for one second that I left bodies just lying around for the cops to find? Give me a little credit, Jake!”

And suddenly I knew. “This is a confession, isn’t it? You needed to tell someone, to cleanse your soul. You couldn’t keep it inside any longer. You had to tell another human being and you figured because of our past and what happened, I was the best choice.”

“Perhaps you’re not as dumb as I thought,” she said.

Before I could reply, she stood up. “Now you know and I must be on my way.” She blew me a kiss and left.

Just like that.

I stood up and noticed that my hand, holding the phone, was shaking – violently. I glanced over at the guard who was still eyeing me cautiously. I turned and hung up the phone. I went directly back to my cell and my little table and wrote all this down.

Tomorrow I’m going to mail it out to the newspapers - if nothing else it will make a good story for someone to read, now won’t it? But if God and a little luck are on my side, Michelle Fleming might possibly be investigated. And perhaps some cold case files on some unsolved missing persons will be reexamined.

Do I really think so? No, I really don't, but you never can tell. I didn't think Michelle was a murderer either now, did I?

So an innocent man stays in prison while an insane psychopath walks free among the masses. But who said life was going to be fair?

Well, at least tonight is Friday...movie night.

American Psycho is playing.

How apropos.