

Kinsey's Quarry

by

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Christopher D. Ochs

Preston stared down into the dark water, shaded by the creeping shadows cast by the mid-afternoon sun. Down he peered into the dappled crystal of the deep water. Down to the river of silt that undulated with the unhurried speed of a boa constrictor with a full stomach—squirming out of an underwater cave, diving into some concealed burrow at the bottom of the slate pit. Sheltered on all sides by towering walls of layered stone, the surface of Kinsey's Quarry glinted from the puffs of the breeze that ruffled Preston's chestnut hair.

He clenched his fists. The slab of slate under his bare soles registered an odd mixture of coolness and heat. Wide veins of clammy moss cushioned his heels, while the flinty edge of the precipice burned into the tendons of his curled toes.

Two dozen feet below, a couple lay on a beach towel spread across the quarry lake's slate beachhead. His head rested on her lap as they shared an oddly shaped cigarette. Two strapping teenaged boys with girls straddling their shoulders marched into the shallows of the slate shelf. They engaged in a game of chicken fight in the lake, their yells and giggles disturbing the peaceful air, and their minor tidal waves racing across the waters. They danced close to the edge of the slate shelf that cantilevered over the clear dark depths.

The girl with long blond tresses toppled into the water with a squeal. A heartbeat later, she shot up, arms clamped against her bikini top, threatening to push their contents out. "Kee-ryst, tha-a-at's c-cold!" she exclaimed through chattering teeth.

The boy stood up and wiped the water off his face. "Don't

complain to me, babe. Only the top few inches are warm, and I got major shrinkage.” He shook his head, raining a shower of droplets over everyone, and squinted at the ledge above. “Hey, Kevin, look up there. It’s Press-down,” he scoffed, pointing at Preston’s pearl-white body.

“Well, whaddya know,” smirked Kevin. He sank to his neck, and his co-victor slid off his shoulders. “The only kid in the whole town who never dove off of Kinsey’s Cliff.” He cupped his hands around his mouth, and in his quarterback’s ear-splitting call he commanded, “C’mon, Press-down! Do it—jump!”

A round of cheers and jeers with chasers of “Chicken!” and taunting clucks sprang up. Their cacophony soon united in a chorus of “Jump... Jump... Jump.”

Ignoring his shoulders crisping in the summer sun, Preston decided. He wasn’t going to do it, no matter how much they ridiculed him for being a coward. Now, if he could only move his legs...

“Hey, Pres!” trumpeted a call from the edge of the clearing behind him.

Preston flinched. One heel slipped on the dank moss. He shot out his arms and regained his balance, taking a giant step away from the ledge. “Dammit, Jorge! I almost fell in.” His breaking voice had trouble deciding on which octave to use. He shot his friend a blazing glower before sitting on a boulder. His mouth flattened with determination, Preston put on his sneakers and a faded blue Hawaiian shirt. A gaggle of “buc-buc-buccaw”’s rose up from the quarry pit.

Jorge clamped his olive-skinned hand over his mouth, trying to conceal the playful snicker that snuck out. “So? Looks to me like you was plannin’ to dive in anyway.” The fickle breeze abandoned Preston to attack Jorge’s raven hair instead.

Picking up a flat scale of broken slate, Preston winged the stone over the deep side of the lake. It spun like a Frisbee, lazily arcing until it landed with a splash that echoed up the walls like Kevin doing a cannonball. Both boys watched the ripples stretch and disturb the water’s mirror.

“No way. Not even Kevin Taggart can make me.”

“That so? Well, I wouldn’t wanna trade places with you.” Jorge followed suit, whipping another ragged disc of slate, but at an awkward angle. He clicked his tongue in disappointment when the stone failed to skip, slicing into the water with barely a splash. “School starts in a week, and Kevin and his compadres’ll rag you about it every day.”

“Yeah, I can hear him now. ‘The only kid in the whole county who’s too scared to dive off of Kinsey’s Cliff.’”

“So what’s holdin’ you back?”

“Y’know my dad was Old Man Kinsey’s attorney?”

Jorge nodded with an inquisitive eyebrow lifted. “Yeah, he defended Kinsey against Kevin’s dad. Somethin’ about evident... eminent...” Jorge’s lips twisted, as though the words hurt his mouth.

“Eminent domain,” said Preston. “It means Mayor Taggart could use the courts to take Kinsey’s land against his will.”

Jorge whistled. “They can really do that?”

“When you’re the mayor, you can get away with most anything around here.”

“Wow, that sucks.” Jorge folded his arms, and cocked his head at his friend. “So what does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything.” Preston replied, followed by a grumble. He ambled up the woody path back to Kinsey Lane with Jorge plodding behind him. “Dad bitched about both Kinsey and Taggart over dinner most every night last spring. Kinsey was a sour old coot to begin with. He treated everyone rotten, even my dad. And if you crossed him, he wouldn’t rest until Hell’s own fury rained down on your head. So when Taggart threatened Kinsey with that eminent domain land grab, he went nuclear. For months, Taggart put the screws to him, trying to get him to sell for a tenth of what the land was worth—which wasn’t much to begin with.”

“So why’d the mayor want this crummy place anyway?” asked Jorge half-heartedly, distracted by the bird calls above their heads.

“Taggart was sitting on some big plan for the quarry. Real hush-hush. But Kinsey let it slip he was complaining to the state attorney general, and... Poof! He disappears.” Preston picked up a small branch crossing the path, and flung it into the trees. “A week later Taggart shows

up with the deed transfer, signed by Kinsey and notarized, all sweet and legal. Once he got his claws on the land, Taggart bamboozled the Feds to remove the quarry's Superfund designation."

"That's a lotta big words," Jorge tried to interject, but Preston was on a roll.

"The next month he announced his super-secret plans. He was gonna plug the quarry's caves, and build a recreation resort around the lake that would fill the quarry."

Jorge poked Preston from behind. "But it still doesn't tell me why you won't take the dive challenge. I've done it a bunch of times. It ain't a big deal."

Preston wheeled around. "Didn't you hear me? The place was a Superfund site."

Jorge gazed back with incomprehension.

Preston rolled his eyes and sighed with impatience. "It means the quarry is unhealthy. It still is, regardless what the EPA says now. What do you think that black crud on the bottom of Kinsey's Quarry is... licorice?! It's tailings from the slate mine, or something worse. Whatever it is, it's toxic."

Jorge blew a raspberry. "That's loco. Me and everyone I know swum in Kinsey's Quarry, and none of 'em's sick."

"Yet." Preston exhaled long and loud, and his shoulders slumped. He lowered his gaze, his eyes flickering with twinges of fear. "And don't you remember what happened two years ago?"

Jorge shrugged, his face twisting with concern at a side of Preston he'd never seen.

"Butch Malone dove too close to the wall and broke his neck when he plowed into the beach-side shelf. I'm telling ya, Jorge, if the toxic sludge doesn't kill you, the dive will."

"Aw c'mon, Pres. You're usually not such a drama queen."

"Nah, par for the course for Pussy Press-down," bellowed a familiar voice, punctuated by a cavernous belch.

Preston spun around to gape at Kevin in the beefy flesh. He loomed a head taller than Preston. Behind him stood Kevin's friends, one

taking the last toke from his pinched stub, the other carrying a half-consumed six-pack of the local micro-brew. Kevin swilled the last of his beer, crushed the can and tossed it into the woods.

“I think someone needs to cool off.” Kevin dropped to a crouch, and pounced. He plowed in with his right shoulder and clamped his arms around his target’s skinny waist. The air was hammered out of Preston’s lungs, and he folded like a napkin.

Instead of following through with his textbook tackle, Kevin hefted Preston over his shoulder and trotted down the path. His cohorts laughed with impish glee at Preston’s feeble shouts between racking coughs. They gave chase, bowling Jorge into a patch of poison ivy.

Kevin lurched to a stop near the edge of the cliff. He heaved Preston up and over, into the waiting arms of his two goons. Over Preston’s paltry whimpers and pleads for mercy, the three of them swung him back and forth by his arms and legs, chanting in unison, “One... two... three!”

Preston peered at the sky above him, as the weightlessness of free fall swamped all his other senses. For what seemed an eternity, he tumbled into a feet-first position, moments before the inevitable splash. Thankful for the warm surface water that first soaked his clothes and skin, he shivered once the icy embrace of the crystal-clear depths froze the last trace of warmth out of his bones.

The bubbles cleared, and his eyes boggled at the sight of his sneakers inches above the undulating black slurry snaking along the bottom of the lake. Without thinking, Preston kicked for his life, stirring up a cloud of silt around his legs, until he broke through the surface. He sputtered and coughed a mouthful of water, spitting out the last traces of what tasted like asphalt and smelled like cigarettes.

Blasting a grimace of pure menace at Kevin, who clutched his stomach and doubled over in laughter, Preston swam toward the shelf and its makeshift underwater steps of slate that climbed to shore. He muttered oaths under his breath as he took off his shirt and wrung it out. Halfway up the path to higher ground, Preston paused to snarl again at his nemesis.

Bare-chested Kevin sneered back, then curled his hands forming a

megaphone. “Here’s how you do it right, Press-down!” he taunted thunderously. He held his arms in front of himself, and after a moment of concentration, launched into a flawless reverse tuck dive. He split the water, disturbing the surface barely more than a skipping stone.

Preston’s eyes followed the rippling image of Kevin as he streaked down to the black river below. He swatted the sludge with a playful pat, then tucked his knees to roll and face upwards. He spread out and thrust down his arms and scissored his legs, kicking up a billowing cloud of silt and muck.

Kevin rocketed upward a few feet, but halted with a jerk before his calves could clear the effluence. Through the wavering lens of the lake surface, Preston gaped at Kevin. Their bulging eyes met, and Preston shivered at the panic that gripped Kevin’s face.

A bubble of precious air escaped Kevin’s lips, before he reached down with both hands into the expanding dark cloud. He struck at something hidden in the scud. Again he pounded and scratched at his knees sinking into the blackness.

He was tugged down, now his waist engulfed by the spreading cloud of murk. One final sudden yank from the unseen force, and Kevin was gone. A final cascade of air bubbles boiled out of the settling ooze.



“Preston,” a woman’s voice rolled up the stairwell, with all the warmth of a harpy. “You’re not telling another one of your scary stories to Junior again? Don’t you know he’ll be up half the night?”

Preston adjusted his bifocals and winked at the boy curled up in his bed, its quilt covering his face up to the bridge of his nose. Even under layers of sheet, blanket and quilt, Preston could tell his son was hiding a mischievous smile.

He held up an index finger to his lips, and twisted on the bed’s edge toward the bedroom doorway. “No dear, just checking Junior’s homework before bedtime.” He aimed a wry grin and waggled his eyebrows at his son.

The boy uncovered his mouth and whispered, “Then what

happened, Dad?"

Preston leaned close, periodically glancing at the door to make sure Mom wasn't eavesdropping. "One of Kevin's friends dove in after him. But he stirred up so much silt, that he barely found his way back up out of the water. The other kid went white as a sheet before he ran away. He never did tell me or anyone else what he saw from the cliff."

Preston allowed himself a small smirk when he spied the wide-eyed anticipation in his son's eyes. "Jorge and I tried calling for help, but getting a phone signal that deep in the middle of nowhere was impossible. We couldn't call 911 until we were a mile from town on Kinsey's Lane. Fifteen minutes later, the town brought out everything to bear. Lights flashing, horns blaring, all to rescue the mayor's kid. Divers, inflatable rafts, miles of rope and nets—the whole Fire Department and Rescue team. But after an hour, we all knew it wasn't a rescue anymore, but a recovery mission. They brought out the hazmat suits, dredges, and anything with a motor—digging and pumping out silt until they found him."

"Was he dead?"

"Sure as I'm alive. But the funny thing was, he wasn't alone."

Junior shivered and kicked his legs with nervous energy, sending waves down the blanket. "Whaddya mean?"

"When they brought poor Kevin up out of the muck and mire, there was another body. A water-swollen hand gripped Kevin's ankle, and another bloated arm wrapped around his waist. They pulled up the whole mess—Kevin's limp body entangled in that rotting corpse. But when they laid eyes on the corpse's open-socketed snarl of naked hatred at Kevin's lifeless body, everyone just about pissed themselves.

"Mayor Taggart fainted on the spot. Flat on the ground he was, sweating like a pig while the police revived him. He jabbered away, whimpering over and over, 'He's dead, I saw him die, I made sure!'" It was the worst-kept secret in the county that the police chief was in Taggart's pocket. And for a moment, he wasn't quite sure what to do. But with all the witnesses around, he had no choice. They hauled the mayor away—on suspicion of murder."

“But,” Junior cried, before sliding his mouth under the covers again. “Who was it? Who dragged Kevin down?”

“Why, Old Man Kinsey, of course. I told you he had one hellacious mean streak.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs' foray into writing began with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVS*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: two sci-fi/horror novels *Sentinel of Eternity* and *No Place Like Home*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON, it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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