

Honorable Mention
Reed Snakes
by Jeffrey T. Duda

“When the sun goes down.”

So it was decided. Ghost in the graveyard would start then. Jay was the one who made most of the decisions about games we’d play, which yard we’d play in, stuff like that. We listened to Jay not because he was the toughest or the smartest, but because he cared about the details the rest of us couldn’t be bothered with.

“Eddie and Ronnie’s yard?” Ghost in the graveyard was almost always at their place because of the woods at the back of their yard.

“Yep.”

I was afraid of the woods and of Eddie and Ronnie’s mom. She loved to wait in the dark on her back deck and yell at us, “Get quiet.” The only warning was the quick creak the boards made when she stood from her lawn chair. Sometimes the aluminum would scrape if she stood up too fast. It was a chilling sound.

The woods and the creek that moated the back circle of the Reeds’ property were the darkest part of our neighborhood. We played back there quite a bit during the daytime. But those paths, the creek, the trees themselves, they were all haunted once the sun set. If anyone was back there after dark—well, it was unthinkable to be in the woods after dark.

Ghost in the graveyard was my favorite game, but it horrified me. We almost never played it because I think we all felt the same way about it. None of us came out of it unscathed: Jay crashed into the creek, cutting his arm deeply enough to require stitches. Eddie, the oldest and meanest, was shot by a BB from a still-unknown assailant. Matty hid so well in a tree that he got stuck and refused to climb down until the fire department came. Ronnie had a raccoon crawl onto his back as he hid on his belly. Danny, in his first time playing, found the ghost first, yelled the warning, and promptly pooped his pants.

Danny’s mom rounded us up and scolded us about how dangerous it is to scare people while shining a flashlight in our faces. She did this *before* taking Danny in the house to clean him up.

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“Everyone here?” Jay was dressed completely in black, head to toe. It was still 80 degrees and humid. I was wearing a dark-blue shirt, gray shorts, tube socks, and tennis shoes, which, of course, were white. There was camouflage, even a couple of ski masks. I didn’t hate getting caught because I was fast enough to catch anyone in the group. I hated hiding by myself. Dark clothes might keep me in the dark too long.

“Where’s base tonight?” It was usually Ronnie who asked about base.

“The tree.” Jay always claimed the tree by the driveway was the most central and therefore the fairest.

“It’s always the tree, Jay. Can’t it be something else?” When Eddie complained about base, he seemed less tough.

“Fine. Where do you want it to be?”

Eddie had no idea for base.

“How about our truck’s bumper?”

“Can’t cross the street, Matty. You know the rules.”

Matty nodded.

Danny snickered. “You’re so dumb. Dad would beat your ass if we messed up the truck.”

“He’d kick yours if he knew you swore like that.”

“How about the woodpile?” I suggested. “It’s big enough we can all have a place to touch.”

“That okay with you, Eddie?”

“Yep. Just don’t mess up my dad’s stack. We just put more wood there on Sunday.”

For the next hour, our street was covered in a darkness punctuated with shouts of “ghost in the graveyard,” laughter, and screams. The woodpile proved to be the PERFECT spot: central, easy to see in the dark, and big enough for everyone to touch at the same time. For a long time, I was the only one who hadn’t been the ghost.

I crept back by the creek because I was cocky and I thought Eddie, finally the ghost, would never hide back there. If he did, I knew I could outrun him back to base. I knew Eddie’s favorite spots. And he knew that I knew. So this time he hid where he hated to hide—in the bushes near the creek—practically in the woods. It was his mission- to catch me and make me the ghost.

“GHOST IN THE GRAVEYARD!”

Full sprint. The two fastest kids in the neighborhood. Eddie was two years older, 13 to my 11. I could hear him catching up, which was impossible until I remembered that he *always* wore cleats to play. Every stride I took was a little slippery and he was gaining with every step. I was laughing because I was so scared, anticipating getting caught while hoping to trick him with slashes and jukes, bobs and weaves.

He reacted perfectly to every move I made. I could see the woodpile. What I couldn't see was the dog chain from the deck to the spike in the yard. Nor could I see Rufus attached to the end of it, taking a dump at the end of the chain.

I was sliding on my belly before I realized I'd tripped. I was careening towards the woodpile without any way of slowing down. All I could think to do was fold myself up and turn my back to the wood, smashing into it back first. A log fell and hit me on the forehead. When his spotlight hit the backyard, I knew—we knew—Eddie's dad was about to kill us.

It's hard to describe the sound of even one rattlesnake rattle, let alone six. At first, all I could hear was the rattle hiss and something moving on the wood. But when that spotlight hit the backyard, all of us could see them: six rattlesnakes, slithering, coiled, rattles shaking. I peed my shorts.

Author Bio: Jeffrey T. Duda is a 47-year-old high school English teacher blessed with a wonderful wife and three inspiring children. He says, “I've been writing off and on since high school, and this contest caught me during an "on" period. I love movies, rock 'n' roll, bass guitar, literature, and summer.”