

# —WHEN THE SKIES TOSS DOWN RAIN HEAVY

*by Eric Grizzle*

It was my final year of grade school, when my brother and I came across the strange puddle. The fall rains had just begun, often coming down in sudden bursts with an angry hiss, and we'd get soaked. The hard pellets would sting my hands and face, but still Charles and I preferred to take our time, exploring the different paths and routes through the woods and fields off route. It was just such a shower that pounded us on a Friday afternoon, when we discovered the puddle in the field not too far behind our house.

That day my mind was on the pretty girl who sat in the corner of my class. Preoccupied, I nearly stepped right into the puddle after topping a small rise and heading down the other side. Charles yelled and grabbed me by the back of my coat.

"Don't," he whispered. "It smells bad."

Charles was the baby of the family, and three years younger than me, but I stopped dead in my tracks at his voice and the unease on his face. The small pool of water was still wide enough to surround two VW Bugs.

"It's just water," I said. There didn't seem to be much odor but it was cloudy and appeared to be dense.

"Let's go around," Charles said, turning and leading the way. I sauntered behind him, carefully avoiding the heavy mud.

"Wait," I said.

I wanted to see how many skips I could manage across such a large puddle. Charles protested, but I ignored him, and bent over, picked up a stone with a smooth surface. I wiped the rain from my eyes and chucked the rock. It skipped twice, but on the third arc down, it sunk unnaturally, seemingly plucked from the air by an invisible hand reaching out of the water.

"Let's go home," Charles whined, working his way around it, but I wasn't through yet. I watched him disappear over the hill, then picked up another rock, a smaller one, and threw it hard. On the third bounce, it disappeared without even causing a ripple. I winged another and another, receiving the same results each time. After my arm and shoulder became tired, and not once had a rock skipped more than twice, I headed on to find Charles.

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I didn't think about the puddle again until we encountered it on our way home the following Monday. Of course, it had grown. All weekend it had rained, and even

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on our walk home the skies continued to drain.

Charles stared at the water, his eyes wide. The surface was dark and oily, rippling with the constant barrage of rain.

"I wonder how deep it is, Charles," I said, as the wheel of imagination began to turn.

He said nothing, unable to take his eyes from it.

I walked up to the edge and stared down into its muddiness. Standing over it, I fell into a dream state. The puddle became deep, full of fish, and I imagined that there was a secret treasure chest at the bottom. I dove in, saturating my mouth and nose into the mud at its bottom. There was no need to breathe, so I swam with the fish, exploring the depths of this new place.

Then, I was interrupted. Something tugged on my shirt hard, and I heard Charles sobbing, calling my name. I stepped back from the water to console him. I asked him to just go home, and told him I would stay for a while.

The heavy downpour couldn't mask the redness in his eyes. I asked him, but he could not tell me how long I had stood on the bank of the puddle, dreaming about filling my cavities with rich mud.

"Hey. It's okay, Charles. Look." I placed my sodden arm around his shoulder and pulled his face close to mine. "I'm fine. See?"

Charles looked back at me, blinking away tears and rain, but I couldn't tell what was going on beneath his dark eyes. They swirled like the water in the puddle. A large rumble of thunder shook the sky, causing us both to jump and tremble. Again, the afternoon had grown dark and night was approaching.

We ran home together without speaking another word. Mother was too exhausted to question us about our late arrival. She had gone to bed early with a migraine and had left dinner cold on the stove. Charles went to his room and I ate alone in the dark, staring out the glass kitchen door and into the rain and the darkness. Out there in the night, not far beyond our back fence, that puddle was sucking moisture from the sky, growing fatter by the raindrop.

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On Tuesday, I waited for Charles in front of the school, near the flagpole, where we always met. He had never been late before. After a half hour, I went back inside to his classroom. Ms. Fellini was still at her desk shuffling papers and became concerned when I asked her about Charles.

"My goodness. He wasn't out there?" she asked.

"I probably just missed him."

"He left class at the same time as all the other students."

"I'm sure that everything's ok, Ms. Fellini. I'll just double check and wait a little longer before going home."

"He did seem anxious to leave class today..."

"I'm sure that everything's fine."

I smiled and then ran out of the classroom. My heart was beating fast. Why did Charles leave without me? Then, I thought about the puddle and my stomach plummeted.

I ran all the way home after checking our meeting place again. I stopped briefly