

**The Gravel Pit**  
by  
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**3/29/07**

Michael raced home from the school bus stop at breakneck speed. Careless with abandon for safety, he and some of the gang were going to the gravel pit after dinner to go “mountain sledding”- as they called it. Michael loved the action of careening down the sides of the gravel pit at high speed. It was the nearest thing to snow sledding that a kid could get in the summer time. Sometimes, they would even stay past sundown and slide in the dark. It was a lot more exciting at night than in broad daylight. The wind in their faces and the grinding sound of the stones beneath their sleds seemed louder because of the stillness of the night. Of course, the parents didn’t know about that part. They thought that everyone was at Joe’s house playing X-Box. But hey, most of the gang were at least thirteen years old already so it was no big deal to come home a little later.

Looking down the slope of the pit, Michael could see a slight hump in the gravel where he was planning to go on his first slide. Hmm, Michael thought- the hump may be high enough to act as a ramp! It was about five feet long and gently rising. That could be way cool if he could actually get a little airborne as his sled met the hump. It was far enough down the side to get up a bunch of speed before hitting the hump at a good clip.

Michael maneuvered his sled to lineup with the hump using the trail that was already visible in the gravel which headed straight for the hump. Making a running leap with his sled held out in front of him, Michael belly-whopped onto the sled as it hit the gravel hillside. He was the first one to arrive at the gravel pit today so he didn’t see who made the groove in the stones which was guiding his sled toward the mound in the gravel. Joe lived very close to the gravel pit. He only had to go through his back yard and an open field to get there. He should have been here by now. Joe was the scrawniest boy in school and not really cool but he had one thing going for him- his parents bought him an X box and the latest games for his birthday last month. This meant that there was always an excuse for getting home a little late. Joe didn’t make it to school today either but that was not unusual. He often missed class periods to go to doctor’s visits for allergies and other things that were wrong with him. Joe complained often about the dust at the gravel pit. It made him sneeze, wheeze and his eyes water. Sometimes, he would wheeze a little when he was really excited going down the slope. Of course, this became the golden opportunity to rib him about crying sounding like a little girl. Michael admittedly was the worst offender when it came to this. He just couldn’t resist ribbing Joe in that condition.

Already picking up speed rapidly, he knew that it would be a big-air moment if he could hit the hump squarely with his sled. He took a moment to look behind and back up the hill side. The gravel he had disturbed was rolling and sliding down the hill a few yards

behind him. He imagined that if he stopped suddenly, the stones would follow him down the hill and cover him where he stopped. It was only a fleeting thought as he turned his attention back to the thrill before him- that mound was his!

As he focused on the leading edge of the hump several yards down the hill, the gravel seemed to stir a little. Not enough time to really think about it, though. It wasn't anything to see the gravel sides of the pit shift occasionally anyway. In the next moment, Michael was shouting, "Yeah!!!!" as his sled hit the mound squarely on and became momentarily airborne. Returning to Earth several yards down the hillside, Michael kept the sled on course and traveled all the way to the bottom of the pit. He was breathing heavily with excitement and felt like the king of the pit in that moment.

As he turned to begin the trek back to the top, Michael noticed the scraped up board nearby. There was a huge gouge in the board from something that it must have hit. That board was familiar to him. It was the snow board that Joe used for sledding or 'snow boarding' down the gravel bit. It was really crazy to watch him go on that board. He was pretty light and could glide on top of the stone slope. Joe must have left it here yesterday evening, he thought. "Humph!" Michael grunted. Maybe that's why Joe isn't here yet. He's at home looking for his precious snow board. Michael was slightly jealous that Joe could go way fast down the gravel slope compared to everyone else using sleds. Maybe it was the board that made Joe move on the gravel so well! He had to try it out before anyone could see him. Up the slope Michael carried the snow board and his own sled. As he passed the mound of gravel that put him airborne only minutes ago, he glanced at it curiously. Did it look a little bigger now than before he had run over it? His passage over it probably made more gravel pile over it or something. Shrugging his shoulders, Michael continued the trek to the top of the gravel pit. As he made it half way back up along the path in the gravel that he had used to go down, he noticed a piece of formed steel pole sticking out of the gravel a couple of inches. It was an old street sign pole, maybe. It was still grayish but beginning to rust. He would not have noticed it if he were not so close to it. If it were the proverbial snake, it would have bit him before he saw it. "Hugh! I'd hate to hit that on the way down!" he thought. It was very close to the path in the gravel but could be avoided as long as he knew where it was.

Derek was just showing up when Michael made it to the top. Derek's sled was older and in pretty sorry shape. Never the less, Derek dashed over the edge and began to slide down the gravel pit a little to the left of the path and the mound in the gravel below. Suddenly, Derek's sled turned harshly to the right just as he passed the mound of gravel. Derek lost control of his sled and went rolling down the hill like a log in one of those old 'Nickelodeon' cartoons. His knees and elbows were scraped up a bit but Derek was no worse for wear from the tumble. Michael, still at the top, laughed hysterically at his friend's misfortune. "Let me show you how it's done! Watch this!" he exclaimed dropping Joe's snow board. With that, Michael repeated his belly-whop maneuver onto his sled and again headed straight for the mound which would make him heroically airborne in front of Derek. Brushing himself off, Derek watched Michael make his run.

Michael's aim for the mound was good and he hit it squarely as before. As he felt the impact of the sled against the mound, it felt different somehow. It was higher than he remembered but a little...squishy- like a bag of trash or a rug, were buried beneath the stony slope. Whoosh! Michael was again airborne and taking the astonished look on Derek's face for all it was worth. As soon as he made it to the bottom of the pit, He immediately began to charge back up the slope, passing Derek who was making his own way to the top.

Dropping his own sled and again taking hold of Joe's abandoned snow board, Michael, ever the showoff, pressed his feet into the board's footholds and again aimed for the mound below. The feel of the gravel on this board was way different than that of the sled. Riding the board, Michael felt more like he was flying down hill on small wheels than on grinding rocks. His speed was incredible! He was approaching the mound again and building speed every second. This was going to be an awesome stunt! Man! If the other guys could only see this jump! He hoped Derek was watching him but Michael was too busy to turn and look back up the slope for the other boy. His target was only a couple of feet in front of him now and darn if it didn't look like mound was moving or heaving! Was something beneath the gravel? Too late! The mound disappeared beneath the snow board as his mind tried to make sense of mound's appearance. Just as Michael was becoming airborne, he felt something wrap around his right ankle. It anchored him to the mound like a rope anchors a boat tied to the dock. He slapped the earth hard as the board came to an abrupt stop just below the mound. Michael, stunned from the jerk to his leg and the harsh impact on the gravel, lay on his back, facing the dimming grey sky above him. He had landed with his head toward the bottom of the gravel pit, his legs above him on the slope. His head was ringing slightly from hitting the gravel so hard but he could hear someone frantically shouting his name. Michael began to regain his senses and tried to locate the owner of the voice that was shouting at him. It was Derek, still at the top of the gravel pit and practically screaming and pointing at Michael. "I know where I am, stupid!" Michael thought to himself. No, wait! It became clearer in the next moment that Derek wasn't exactly pointing at Michael. As he attempted to sit up and regain his composure, Michael realized that his ankle was still caught on something. "I must have caught my pants on that piece of steel sticking out of the gravel somehow" he thought. Maybe it shifted closer to the mound or something he reasoned. He angled his head to see what had snagged him on his triumphal jump. Partially unburied from the gravel, the body of a small boy, his head and upper torso covered in grey dust and grit lay face down on the slope just above Michael. The skin of the exposed, outstretched arm and neck were also grey with dirt and lifeless. The dark, short hair was caked with dust that had solidified in chunks mixed with blood. The head and neck were twisted oddly like there were no bones in the neck. The arm! The small hand attached to the arm was still holding onto Michael's right ankle. The fingers, which were no more alive than the body which they belonged to, were firmly wrapped iron-like in a ghoulish grip. Panic and fear rose up in Michael at the realization of the moment. He began kicking and tugging with his anchored leg and using his left leg, he attempted to propel himself away from the corpse which clung to him. More of the young and very lifeless body came unearthed as Michael's efforts to free himself only caused the body to be drawn further from its over-night grave. The force of the gravel slope against the small body being

drawn to the surface began to cause the head to cock oddly and impossibly backwards. Joe's face, covered with more blood and dust but as lifeless as the gravel which had entombed him was now completely exposed to Michael's panicked gaze of horror. The hand finally loosed its grip on Michael's ankle. It remained open as though reaching out to Michael- or pleading with him. The frantic and shuddering Michael skittered further down the hill. He couldn't look away from the face of the boy who came out of the gravel. Joe's eyes remained thankfully closed but his mouth was slightly open as if he were about to say something. Dust covered his teeth and what tongue was exposed to Michael's sight was heavily covered with dust and blood. No words were coming out of the dead boy's mouth. No words could ever be spoken by it again. The boy who was the brunt of so much cruel humor and taunting by others was beyond taunting now. He was safe from snickers and laughter behind his back. No longer would the boy wish for friends or friendship from Michael and the other children. His life had ended in a split second of ignorance. He could not have been aware of the steal thing hiding below the gravel and only coming to the surface as he plowed the stones away under his snowboard. His parents would have told him of such dangers- if they had known the gravel pit was there and that their son played on the slopes. He may have listened to them instead of waiting until the other boys were gone at night to practice in the dark. Joe wanted to do something that would make him acceptable and 'cool' to the other boys. All that may have been- but not now. Joe was dead.

Michael's mind was trying to understand but his instinctive fear of dead people was only amplified by the fact that one had just grasped his ankle as he passed over it unknowingly. How could a dead person reach out of the stones and grab someone like that? How could the cold, lifeless hand, so dull and gray in death hold such a firm grip as Michael kicked and scrambled backwards away from the corpse? How did a scrawny and very dead arm pull Joe's body from his shallow grave?

Joe wasn't mad at Michael for thinking him as "scrawny" and he wasn't angry at him and the other guys for picking on his illnesses or coming over his house just to play X-Box. Joe wasn't even mad at Michael for running over him with his sled earlier and using his own snowboard only moments ago. Joe just wanted to be found.

The End