

Grades 5–6: Grand Prize  
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### The Not So Great Outdoors

“This is going to be the worst vacation ever!” thought Jenny to herself as they traveled down the road. Her parents’ words echoed in her mind. “Jenny, it’s good to get away from it all,” they had said. At 12 years of age, Jenny did not even know what ‘IT’ was! At least her cousin Rachel would be coming later to join them.

“We’re here!” yelled her father. But where was ‘here’? As far as Jenny could tell, ‘here’ was nowhere! The sign at the entrance read “Quagmire Campgrounds.”

“Quagmire!” Jenny screamed. “Why would you ever stay at a place called Quagmire?”

“Now Jenny, I’m sure that is the owner’s last name, and I don’t think that you should insult them. It sounds Scottish to me,” Mom said with a smile.

“Mom, you studied this with me, remember? It was one of my vocabulary words in the last unit. Quagmire means swamp!” Jenny hissed.

A tubby man in an olive green ranger uniform waddled up their car. “Y’all must be the Richmanners! I’m Ranger Rob. Now don’t pay no never mind to bein’ in campsite thirteen. The legend of the Swamp Monster is just local talk. Follow this here road till you get to the largest Weepin’ Willow ya ever saw. If y’all need anything, just holler!”

They found their site and in under an hour the camper was set up. Jenny’s parents decided that they should go on a hike as a family.

“No way!” Jenny pouted, “You made me go on this awful trip and set up a cramped trailer. There is no possible way that you are going to get me to hike through swamps!”

Five minutes later, all three of them were walking along a narrow trail surrounded by ferns and bushes. They were just walking past a moss-covered tree when suddenly Jenny heard a ‘sploosh’! She stopped dead in her tracks and looked down. Her brand new chocolate brown boots were covered in sticky green goo!

“Ahhhh!” Jenny screeched. “My boots are ruined! What is that green stuff?”

“Honey, stop being such a drama queen,” her father laughed. “Your boots have absolutely nothing on them.”

“Dad!” Jenny snapped. “What about all that gross green goo?”

“Jenny,” Dad answered, “I honestly don’t see anything. But it’s funny that you mention green goo, because that’s exactly what the swamp monster is made of.”

“What swamp monster?”

“Well, an old legend about it says that there was once a little boy named Giovanni. He loved the outdoors, but his family felt that nature was dirty and best observed from inside their house. One day, he worked up the courage to ask his parents to go camping. They both laughed loudly and said, ‘Why would you ever want to go outside when you can stay in and play video games?’

“Giovanni decided to run away into the woods. When he got there, he saw a bright seaweed green vision in the distance. He started to walk towards it, mesmerized. Soon he was running. When he got close, Giovanni slipped and fell into a swampy pond. He had been under for 5 minutes, when suddenly there was a bubbling on the surface. This slimy, oozing, mass of green goo came out of the water. It was Giovanni, but he had morphed into a swamp monster! He still roams the campgrounds at midnight making sure that all is well in the nature area that he loves. If you don’t like nature, you’d better watch out!”

“Yeah-right Dad! Like you’re going to scare me into liking nature,” said Jenny sarcastically. “I’m taking a nap! Don’t wake me till we’re ready to leave this wasteland!”

That night, Jenny opened her eyes to total darkness. Her portable alarm clock read 11:45 p.m. She decided to find the outhouse. She got out of bed and walked towards a light that she thought was the bathrooms. As Jenny got closer, she entered a clearing next to the swamp. There was a small campfire glowing. There was a tree stump next to the fire-pit with graham crackers, chocolate and marshmallows.

“Hello! Is anybody here?” Jenny called softly. When no one answered, she crept up to the fire.

“I think I remember how to do this,” she said, putting a marshmallow on a stick. Cooking it to a golden brown, she put the white gooey blob and chocolate between two crackers. “Mmmm,” she sighed, with her mouth full. “I forgot how good s’mores are! I think that this was the one part of camping that I liked last time.” After she finished her midnight snack, Jenny started back to her trailer. ‘Sploosh!’ Her foot once again was covered in goo! Scared by her dad’s story, Jenny ran back to the camper and fell asleep.

“Was it just a dream?” she wondered the next morning. Jenny set off on a hike to find the campfire. She wandered away from their site in many directions, but never found the clearing with the s’mores and fire. Confused, Jenny went back to her trailer.

The next night, Jenny awoke just before midnight, to the sound of owls hooting. She felt grimy and regretted not taking a shower before bed.

“Mom and Dad won’t miss me if I take a quick shower,” Jenny thought as she slipped out of the trailer. Once again she followed the light to the bathhouse. After she rinsed off, Jenny followed the trail back to their camper. She entered the clearing by the swamp and again saw a campfire. There were no s’mores this time, but there was a bow and some arrows on the lonely tree stump and a target by the edge of the clearing. Jenny took aim and fired. Bulls-eye!

“Wow!” she thought as she continued taking aim, “This is kind of fun too.” Jenny kept it up until she was so tired, she couldn’t even pull back the string. As she walked back she once heard ‘sploosh.’ She looked down and saw the same icky green goo, but it wasn’t as bright as before. She was getting pretty freaked out, but she was not going to lose this amazing clearing again. Jenny started to walk back cautiously, jamming long sticks into the ground as markers.

The next morning, Jenny's parents were very surprised to find out that their daughter wanted to go on a hike.

"Look!" Jenny exclaimed, "I even made a trail." They followed the stick-lined path but it ended abruptly at a giant pine tree.

"Wait! This is wrong!" Jenny cried. "Last night I practiced archery out here and the night before that I roasted marshmallows. Where did the clearing go?" Jenny's parents looked at each other and then at Jenny. They were confused.

"Jenny," said Dad, "We're glad that you are enjoying the outdoors a bit more, but maybe you've had too much sun. Maybe you should lie down."

Jenny stayed close to the campsite reading a book. By bedtime, she was itching with anticipation. Jenny had figured it out! Both nights she had visited the clearing around midnight. She was going back tonight. At 11:45 p.m., she was sure her parents were asleep. She got out of her bunk ever-so-quietly and tip-toed out of the trailer. This time there was no light so she followed her stick path into the darkness. As she got closer, Jenny could smell the murky water of the swamp. When she got to the edge of the clearing, it was 11:55 p.m. Jenny hid behind a tree and waited.

She was not disappointed. At exactly midnight, she heard a bubbling on the surface of the swamp. First an arm stretched out, then a head appeared. The rest of the body soon followed, covered in the green goo that Jenny had been stepping in! The creature walked to the middle of the clearing and began to make a fire.

"I should be scared half to death," Jenny thought. But instead a strange calm had washed over her. She felt safe. She stepped into the clearing and the creature looked up. For a full minute, they just stood, staring at each other, until Jenny asked, "Why? Why did you come out here? Why are you being so nice to me?"

She wasn't sure what to expect in answer and was surprised that his voice sounded like a normal boy. "My name is Giovanni. I wanted to help you to see that camping can be fun."

"But why couldn't my parents see what I saw?"

"Only people who don't like nature can see me and the green goo," replied Giovanni.

"Camping is okay," said Jenny.

"Now that you are beginning to see that, you won't need my help anymore." Giovanni started to fade.

"Wait! You can't go!" shouted Jenny. "Am I ever going to see you again?"

"I'll always be there, you just won't see me," said Giovanni.

Jenny could barely see Giovanni now. "Thank you. Thank you so much," said Jenny, starting to cry. "Because of you I will always know the joy and the beauty of the outdoors."

"You're welcome...and good-bye," whispered Giovanni. And just like that, he was gone.

The next morning Jenny's cousin Rachel came to stay with them at the campsite. They all went on a hike.

"I can't believe my parents made me visit you at this dump!" said Rachel. "Trees and bugs and plants: yuck!"

"Oh, it's not so bad once you get used to it," replied Jenny.

"Ahh! There is slimy green goo all over my new flip-flops!" yelled Rachel.

"Don't worry," said Jenny, "I'll take you to the showers at midnight. That's the best time to wash up."

"Midnight?! Why midnight?!" cried Rachel.

Jenny just smiled.