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#25

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IN THE MAGNOLIA STATE!

#25: Mississippi Megalodon

BY JOHNATHAN RAND



Megalodon.

When I first saw the word, I didn't know what it meant. I didn't even know how to pronounce it.

Now, of course, I know *exactly* what a megalodon is. So do my friends, Tara and Landon. They know all too well what a megalodon is, and what it can do. They know, because they were with me. They saw it, too.

You see, a megalodon is a giant, prehistoric shark. At school last year, my teacher, Mrs. Biltmore, gave each of us a word to research. We had to find out what the word was, and write a five page report. When she gave me the word *megalodon* on a small piece of

paper, I looked at it and frowned.

“What’s a mega . . . mega . . . however you say it?” I asked her.

Mrs. Biltmore smiled at me. “You’ll have to find out yourself, Robbie,” she said.

Great, I thought. I rolled my eyes and sighed. *Whatever it is, it’s probably not something cool*. I was really jealous of some of my classmates who’d been given their assignments. One was given the word ‘velociraptor,’ which is a fierce, meat-eating dinosaur. In fact, I had just finished reading a book about velociraptors in West Virginia. It was a really freaky book. I wished I’d been given *that* word to research.

But, when I found out what a megalodon actually was, I was really excited. Not only are megalodons giant, prehistoric sharks, but when they existed, they grew to over sixty feet long!

Once I started my research, I couldn’t stop. Normally, I don’t really like homework. But this assignment was super cool! I worked on my research paper for a couple of hours every night. Even on weekends.

The word megalodon means ‘big tooth.’ Megalodons are said to have lived millions of years

ago, and are believed to be the largest shark that ever existed. Megalodons were so big that some scientists think they may have eaten huge whales!

I found out a lot more information about megalodons at the library and on the Internet, and even a few pictures of fossilized teeth, some of which are the size of a football.

Most scientists, however, say megalodons vanished a long, long time ago. But, there are a few scientists and researchers who believe megalodons still exist today, in the deepest parts of the ocean.

Both groups of scientists are wrong. Megalodons *do* exist today . . . but not in the great depths of the ocean.

Megalodons—one of them, at least—lived in the dark, murky depths of Sardis Lake, Mississippi.

How do I know megalodons exist? I know this, because Tara, Landon, and I came face-to-face with the gigantic beast one horrifying day last summer

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Two things you should know about me: I love to fish. We have an old rowboat that Dad and I use to get around the lake. I've been fishing for nine years, ever since I was three. I love to fish more than anything else. We live in a house that's only a block from Sardis Lake, which is a huge, man-made lake in Mississippi. It's great for bass fishing. I've caught a couple of big ones. One of them weighed over five pounds!

Another thing you should know: I'm an excellent swimmer. I can hold my breath and stay under water for a full minute. Mom says I must be part

fish, and I just laugh. That would be cool! I'd love to be part fish, as I could swim around and explore lakes and rivers and not have to come up for air.

But, even though I'm a great swimmer, my mom and dad wouldn't let me take our rowboat out alone, until I turned twelve years old and completed a boater safety course. Well, my twelfth birthday was last May 15th, and you can bet I took the course right away. It's easy to do, because you can take the course on-line. Two of my friends who live nearby—Tara and Landon Phillips—took the test, too. The three of us passed with flying colors, and as soon as we received our certificates, we made plans to take the rowboat out for a day of fishing.

"This is going to be so much fun, Robbie!" Tara said to me as we stood at the water's edge. We each carried our fishing poles, and I had my red tackle box that I got for my birthday. It contained dozens of lures and other things for fishing—spare line, some small tools, nail clippers—things like that. Tara carried the net, which we would use if we caught a big bass.

"Our very first trip together, just the three of us!" Landon said. "I hope we catch some big fish!"

"Even if we don't," I said, "we're still going to

have a great time. Come on . . . let's get our gear loaded into the boat.”

Our dark green aluminum rowboat was tied to a dock. It's old, and a little beat up. Chunks of paint have been chipping off for a long time. Dad said he bought it before I was born, but it floats great and it doesn't leak. It has a small electric motor mounted on the back. The motor doesn't make the boat go very fast, but it's quiet and doesn't scare the fish. Of course, the boat has two oars, and I'll use them if the motor's battery runs low, or if we want to be extra quiet.

The morning was cloudy and gray, and a little cool, too. It was late June, and Mississippi can get really hot during the summer months. This morning, however, the temperature hovered around sixty five degrees, and it wasn't supposed to get too much warmer during the day. A thunderstorm had rolled through the night before, bringing colder temperatures and leaving an iron-colored sky and a hazy fog over the lake.

Which was fine with us. Some of the best bass fishing is on cloudy days. And we wouldn't have to worry about applying any sun screen. We had a cooler filled with sandwiches and snacks, so we wouldn't

have to worry about going hungry. And Mom gave me her phone, just in case we had an emergency, so we wouldn't have to worry about contacting someone for help.

What we *would* have to worry about, however was a fish.

Not a bass, bluegill, crappie, or other harmless freshwater fish, but an enormous monster that was lurking in the depths . . . watching and waiting.

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“I hope the fish are biting today,” Landon said as we walked along the old dock. The wood creaked beneath our feet, and the dock shifted and bounced under our weight.

“I hope so, too,” I said. “It should be a good day, even if it’s a little cold.”

“There probably won’t be many other people fishing, either,” Tara said, “because it’s cloudy and foggy.”

I looked out over the lake. The water was dark, and a veil of thick, soupy fog hung heavy and low. I

could actually feel it on my face, all cool and wet.

We loaded my tackle box, fishing poles, net, and cooler into the boat. I noticed that, because of the dark clouds above, the water beneath the dock was so dark I couldn't see the bottom. I knew the water was only about six feet deep, but it looked as black as night. It was eerie.

I stepped into the boat, picked up a yellow life vest, and tossed it to Landon on the dock. While he slipped into it and fastened the buckles, I tossed another one—a red life vest—to Tara. Problem was, my aim was a little off, and Tara had to lunge to the side to catch it.

Unfortunately, that was all it took. Her foot slipped off the edge of the dock and she tumbled backward, flailing her arms wildly as she plunged into the dark water.

“Oh, no!” I said, as I scrambled out of the boat and onto the dock. I felt terrible. It had been my fault that Tara had fallen. Mostly my fault, anyway.

I knelt at the edge of the dock, ready to reach down and help her back up. Nearby, the red life vest floated in the water . . . but there was no sign of Tara. She had vanished in the dark water. I wasn't worried,

however, because Tara was a good swimmer. Still, I felt bad because she'd fallen in.

My eyes scanned the water, but I couldn't see her. With every passing second, I grew more and more worried. Landon did, too. We both knelt at the edge of the dock, worrying and waiting.

"Where did she go?" Landon asked. His voice trembled a tiny bit.

"Maybe she hurt herself and sank to the bottom!" I said.

Without another word, Landon slipped out of his life vest, dropped it to the dock, and jumped into the water. My heart was really pounding, and I wondered if I should use the phone Mom gave me to call for help.

She'll be okay, I told myself. She'll have to go home and get into some dry clothing, but she'll be fine. She's a great swimmer.

A movement far out in the lake caught my eye, and I turned. At first, I thought I was looking at a boat, because it was hard to see through the fog.

No, that's not a boat, I thought. That's not a boat at all. That's a fin, and it's gigantic!

In the next instant, the fin disappeared in the

fog.

What in the world was that? I wondered, as I took turns glancing at the dark water below and out into the lake. *It almost looked like a shark's fin . . . but that's impossible. Sharks don't live in fresh water. And besides: the fin was enormous. There was no shark in the world that could have a fin that big.*

Suddenly, the water beneath me exploded, and Landon's head popped up. His eyes were wide. He looked frantic.

"She's gone!" he shouted in a panic. *"I don't see her anywhere!"*

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My mind spun at light speed. I felt dizzy and really, really scared. I didn't know what had happened to Tara, but I knew we needed to get help, and fast.

I jammed my hand into my front pocket and yanked out the phone Mom gave me. My fingers were trembling as I punched in our home phone number.

Meanwhile, Landon had dived down again and had vanished beneath the surface in a desperate search for Tara.

And what was that thing I saw way out in the lake? I wondered. There was no way—*no way*—it

could have been a shark. Yet, that's what it had looked like: the fin of a giant shark.

No matter. I had other things to worry about, like—

What if it was some kind of shark? What if it got Tara?

I was about to punch in the last digit of our phone number when I heard a splash from behind me. I turned . . . and saw Tara. Her head had popped up a few feet on the other side of the rowboat, on the opposite side from where we had been looking for her. Her blonde hair stuck to the sides of her face, and she was smiling, and I now knew she had only been playing a joke.

Then, Landon popped up in front of me.

"I still can't find her!" he shrieked.

"She's over there," I said, pointing. "On the other side of the rowboat. She was only trying to scare us into thinking something had happened to her."

"Had you going, didn't I?" Tara called out as she began swimming, arm over arm, back to the dock.

"You totally freaked us out!" I said, holding up the small phone. "I almost called my mom and dad for help!"

“Yeah, well, you deserved it,” Tara said. “If your aim with the life vest hadn’t been so bad, I wouldn’t have fallen in.”

Landon reached the dock, and I helped him out of the water. Tara, too, reached the dock, and I grabbed both of her hands and pulled her up. The red life vest I’d tossed was floating next to the rowboat, and I reached down and plucked it out of the water.

“This is just great,” Landon said angrily. Water dripped from his drenched clothing. He spread his arms wide. “Now, we’re *both* soaked.”

“Oh, quit being a crybaby,” Tara said. “It’s just a little water. It’s not going to kill you. Let’s go home and get changed.”

Tara was right. A little bit of water wasn’t going to hurt us. It was the gigantic beast lurking *in* the water that we would have to worry about—and we’d be seeing *that* creature soon enough.

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While Landon and Tara went home to change their clothes, I picked up my fishing pole and made a few casts into the lake. Last year, I caught a nice sized bass while fishing from the dock.

All the while, I thought about the strange thing I'd seen far out in the lake. Of course, it was foggy, and I didn't get a good look at it. But it looked like a fin, although I knew that was impossible. It *must* have been a boat. Or my imagination. Maybe I just *thought* I saw something.

Whatever it was, I didn't see it again. And,

although I made a few dozen casts while waiting for Landon and Tara, I didn't catch any fish.

Fifteen minutes later, Landon and Tara came back wearing fresh, dry clothing.

"Try to stay out of the water this time," Landon said to his sister as they walked along the dock.

I had already put on my life vest, and I handed one to Landon and one to Tara.

"You guys ready?" I asked.

"We are now," Landon said.

I knelt down and held the boat steady while Tara and Landon got in and sat. Then, I untied the two lines securing it to the dock and got in myself. I sat in the back, near the motor, and Landon sat in the middle. Tara was seated at the front.

There was about an inch of rain water in the bottom of the boat, left there by the overnight storm. I picked up a large red coffee can and handed it to Landon.

"Bail out the water," I said, "and I'll get us on our way."

Landon began scooping up water and dumping it over the side of the boat. I pressed the start button on the electric motor, and it instantly hummed to life.

The boat slowly began to move forward.

“The lake looks creepy with all this fog,” Tara said as the boat slipped through the water.

“I think it looks sort of cool,” Landon said as he scooped up some water with the coffee can and dumped it over the side of the boat. “It looks like the beginning of a scary movie.”

We had no idea how right Landon would turn out to be.

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