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## The Squeeze

Six pairs of eyes looked down into the gloom of the gaping hole in the earth. The late winter midday sun cast enough light to barely discern the floor of these Florida caverns twenty five feet below. Mark, Jay, me, and three other friends were going to experience the thrill of spelunking for the first time. One of the young men was going to be our guide as he had been to these caverns previously. We were at Paynes Prairie, twenty miles south of the University of Florida and had met as freshman. Now we were sophomores.

It was 1964. University of Florida was ranked by Playboy magazine as one of the top ten party schools in the nation. We could attest to that as our off-campus parties were almost legendary. Because of that, and the tough academic standards that the university enjoyed, many of our fellow classmates had dropped out.

"Big", one our friends, lived in our off-campus, low-rise apartment complex. He stood six feet four, weighed about 220 and was a good friend to have, just in case. We piled into my '58 Pontiac Bonneville and drove to the site with rope, canteens of water, light windbreaker jackets, flashlights and extra batteries. It was a perfect day for this adventure - dry, light wind, relatively cool for central Florida and puffy white clouds dotting the pale blue sky.

Paynes Prairie was a vast meadowland with scattered trees. A narrow path through the tall grass led to the entrance of the caverns. We tied a rope to a nearby tree and watched as it dropped down the shaft to the floor of the cavern. The shaft was called the "chimney". Grabbing the rope, each of us lowered ourselves by using one wall to place our feet on the rocky outcroppings and our backs against the other wall. Slowly all made it down.

The cavern was large with a high, domed roof. The air was cool, dank, and earthy-smelling. As there was still some ambient light, we didn't need our flashlights for the moment. Letting our eyes adjust to the low light, we moved forward to the end of this first room. A narrow tunnel appeared. It was called the "squeeze."

The squeeze stretched thirty-five to forty feet in length. One had to negotiate the tunnel on your belly, side, and back, crawling and using handholds and toeholds to pull and push your way forward while also shining your light as it was pitch black. If you ever had a inkling of claustrophobia, this was not the place to be. Jay and I had a easy time as we were both thin and agile. The other guys were bigger and had some difficulty but all traversed the "squeeze" and entered the next room.

This part of the cavern system was narrower than the previous room. It had a high-peaked, pointed roof, wider in the middle, and a crevasse that went down an undeterminable depth. None of us ever heard the rocks we dropped into the blackness hit the bottom as they cascaded downward to their final resting place. The blackness was total - absolutely no light unless the flashlights were on. With the lights off, one could not discern the next man inches away. A narrow switch-backed trail zigzagged up the thirty-five foot vertical wall to the next set of caverns. Stalagmites populated this room as well as jumbles of small boulders and rocks.

Following in single file, we shuffled up the trail with our chests to the wall using the outcropping rocks as handholds. The tricky part was negotiating the turns as the trail serpented up the rock face. Mark somehow got turned around and had his back to the wall. Below him were his fellow spelunkers and the black abyss. He froze and stayed that way for awhile. I had already climbed into the new set of rooms and shined my light onto the wall behind me to help light the way for the rest of the party.

Mark was growing tired and had to do something, knowing full well that if he fell it would be to his doom. He called down to the the guys below that he was "going for it." One of the guys, who shall remain nameless, cried, "Wait, let me get out of the way." Nice, huh. Mark pirouetted around and grabbed a handhold. "Made it," he exclaimed and climbed the rest of the way without another incident. We rested and walked through two smaller rooms that ended with a crawlspace that no one had ever explored.

It was time to return. We slowly climbed back down the trail to the "squeeze." All the guys were tired. Two of the men crawled through the tunnel. It was Big's turn. Somehow he got stuck in the middle of the squeeze."Big" had to turn on his back and use his hands and feet on the ceiling to pull and push his way through. He grew anxious and panicked. Perspiration streamed from him. He started to scream. We had to talk calmly and slowly from either end of the tunnel to quiet him down. "Big" needed to back up and turn over to negotiate this part of the squeeze. It took quite awhile, but finally he did it and we all finished crawling through the "squeeze" and climbed up the "chimney" to the setting sun.

Some never went near a cavern again. Others visited caverns wherever they traveled around the planet. Jay and I returned to explore the crawlspace, never to find an ending. All, though, never forgot the the adventure in the Florida Caverns.

