

Sky Underground

by Michael Channing

Ralph was bored. Wasn't nobody around, so he went looking for Sky. She wasn't feeding fish at the river. Didn't see her in the field making flower crowns. He snuck around her house trying to catch her attention through the window. Finally he knocked on the front door.

Don't let her dad answer, don't let her dad answer.

Her dad answered. He didn't say anything for like a full minute. Just stared. Finally, "What manner of devilry you bringing to my front porch, son?"

"Um..."

"Got chains to drag my daughter down with you, I'll bet."

"No, sir."

"Oh yes, you do. With your hippie hair and your flinty eyes. You got chains aplenty."

"Is Sky here, sir?"

"Who?" He turned a bulging eye on the boy. "Who do you say?"

Sigh. "Can Christy come out and play?" He practically sang it.

The eyes settled back into a squint. "What manner of sport do you have planned for--"

"I'll just be outside." Ralph retreated into the yard.

Sky's dad watched him for another eternity, then let the screen door slam.

Ralph sat and drew in the dirt with a stick. One line intersected another, and they became a crossroad. End joined to end, and a neighborhood was built. Then a metropolis bloomed around him, imaginary citizens on their way to work or to the park. A fire at the school, but the firetrucks are stuck in traffic. A giant's hand print became a scientific find and an evangelical warning. The gods must be angry!

Which reminded him...

Don't let her dad answer, don't let her dad answer.

This time someone listened. Sky's mom wore a thick, blue robe, held it clenched around her throat.

It was July. "She went out this morning."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Fraid not. When you see her, tell her we love her."

"Yes ma'am." Ralph beat out before she asked him to pass on a kiss and hug, too.

So the day was looking to be hot and boring and friendless. Not that Sky was really a friend. She didn't like to fish, said it hurt them. Didn't have a bike. She played super heroes, but wouldn't play right. Kept calling herself Super Princess and running around with flowers in her hair instead of waiting for Ralph and Herman and Jasper to save her. But Ralph needed someone to hang with. Stupid church camp. Usually Ralph goaded the other two guys about having to put on stiff shirts and clip on ties and sit on a hard bench inside for three hours every Sunday. But occasionally it sucked to have atheist parents. Sucked big time.

So he went looking for Sky again. Didn't find her at the Log Cabin store on the other side of the trailer park fence, though he did manage to find a Jolt Cola and a Creamcicle. Didn't find her at the garbage pile, but he did find a long piece of copper wire he might be able to do something with later. Some kind of science project. But no Sky. Lunch was still forever away, and he was starting to hate Summer.

The woods were nice and shaded. The guys went there to play war or hunt snakes, neither thing Sky liked to do. But by himself, Ralph just came to read or think. The woods were good for thinking. Like about which tree might be good enough for a fort, or how far the woods went and if there were any bears living out there, or what the hell that thing was he just saw.

It could have been a raccoon, but it was too tall, too skinny. Might have been a dog but for the

bushy, ringed tail. It broke out from a tight thicket of trees running fast. Then the ground opened up and ate it. A door made of sticks and pine needles and leaves lifted, and the coon-dog disappeared down the opening, and the door dropped closed. The only way Ralph could tell it was there was by keeping his eyes locked on the spot. He knew the moment he blinked...

The door was gone. Ralph tried to see it again, like staring at one of those magic eye pictures that's supposed to have a shark hidden somewhere in the wavy, headachy lines. It was just a scattering of twigs and leaves.

He mulled it over. Decided he hadn't really seen anything at all. He leaned his head against his thinking tree and stared out at everything, which is another way of saying he was staring at nothing. And thought about nothing in particular, which is another way of saying he thought about everything at once. And the door reappeared.

The outlines suddenly clear. A hatch built into the floor of the woods disguised to look like nothing but debris. Now that he saw it, he couldn't unsee it.

It lifted easily. He closed it, opened it again. Walked across the top. It felt sturdy, didn't bounce or droop inward. Had he chased across it a hundred times and never known?

It was dark underneath. After a minute of staring into the void he could see the earth ramped down into a passageway, and that passageway became...

A tunnel.

There were a few words that struck like tuning forks and focused the boy's noise-clouded mind into a clear silence. "Planet" was one of those words. "Train track" was also among the lexicon elite. But no term brought his heart to speed and erased the rest of the world like the word "tunnel."

He stared for a long time. Into the dark unknown. Into his own dream.

His dad was at work. Mom on the couch folding clothes. Some motivation tape in the VCR telling her she'd only begun to tap her potential. "Hey, Ralphie," Mom said. "What's doin'?"

"Where's the flashlight?"

"On top the fuse box."

"Where's the fuse box?"

"Our bedroom. In the closet. Need me to get it?"

"I got it. Where's my backpack?"

"Your room. In the closet. You need some help?"

"No, I got it. We got a water bottle?"

"Like a hot water bottle? Are you sick?"

"No. Like to drink out of. A water bottle."

"In the fridge. In the door. It's got water in it."

"I'm gonna take the whole thing, okay? I'm out playing."

"Okay. What do you need your knife for?"

"Playing."

He closed the door quietly. Slipped the pack onto his shoulders. And strode into the woods.

Ralph stood in the daylight, holding the hatch open, looking into the darkened tunnel. The flashlight beam revealed a square tunnel, smooth walls, paw prints coming and going, footprints just coming.

The mighty explorer entered and let the hatch close and the darkness engulf him.

The ceiling was low, just a few inches above his head. The passage itself maybe four feet wide.

After a while it branched. Ralph drew an arrow in the dirt, pointing the way he had come, then took the right-hand branch. He found something on the floor.

A flower. The stem tied into a knot.

"Sky," he whispered. They'd taken her. Sent up their coon-dogs to drag her out of the field and down here into their lair. Whoever they were.

Ralph took off his backpack, unzipped it. He opened the back of beef jerky, ate a thick flank of it,

downed a swallow of water, restored his supplies. Took out his fishing knife, shouldered the pack, unfolded the knife blade. And followed the weak pool of illumination cast by the flashlight.

To a dead end.

He turned around, went back to his drawn arrow, and took the left-hand branch. This cul-de-sac was even shorter than the first. And just as quickly as it began, the adventure was over.

Ralph sat in the dirt. Where had the coon-dog gone? And who had let it in? Did he dream the whole thing, dozing against a tree? The footprints and paw prints just evidence of the neighborhood kids and their pets?

He put the blame squarely on church camp.

No. He wasn't ready to go home and eat warmed-up spaghetti and play games by himself. He wanted his adventure.

He went back to the longer of the two dead ends. If they could hide a hatch in plain sight in the middle of the woods, they could put a door in a dirt wall. It felt solid. His hands slid over the packed earth. Then pounded in sweaty, pouty frustration. Then dug into the dirt with the blade of his knife. Stabbed and gouged and sliced in random desperation till a hand grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him through the wall.

Into. The wall. The hand was the same color as the dirt, not surprising since it was made of the same stuff. Mica chip fingernails imbedded in fingers of dark earth connected to an earthen arm connected to a figure the size of a small child. As the child led Ralph forward, the dirt around them collapsed into the child, creating a passage around them. Ralph watched the hand pulling him fatten and the child grow as more and more dirt collected upon it. The passage born of this process widened into a funnel, the ceiling rising away from them and the floor sloping downward, and by the time it opened fully into a large cavern, the figure yanking him along was no longer child-sized. It was the size of a sideshow tent, the kind set up beside the main event tent where you could pay a dollar on the

promise of meeting half human half animal creatures which turned out to be entirely whole humans with bad completions. The thing now holding Ralph five feet off the ground would have been well worth the dollar entry were it not so bone-quiveringly, piss-inducingly frightening.

Ralph swung from the earth giant's four-fingered hand, kicked at its thigh as he dangled in midair. Dirt rained down as his canvas sneakers dislodged clods of earth. The enormous hand released him then scratched at the irritation. Ralph landed, rolled, then sprang to his feet.

Knife at the ready.

The giant brushed at the divot in its thigh, spread dirt from its side over the wound, smoothed it flat. Couldn't even tell it had been injured. It turned to face Ralph. Bent over, eclipsing the light that came from somewhere overhead, and said in a gravelly, booming voice, "You gave me a boo-boo."

Ralph paused.

And looked at the giant again. Not only was it as big as a tent, it was roughly shaped like one, too. Body round and wide in the middle with short, stumpy legs. Its arms long and thin, fat fingers like those of cartoon character. Its upper body narrowed, and the head which sat directly on the shoulders was small and conical like a pineapple with the stem chopped off.

"I don't think I like you," the giant said in its giant voice. "I hope the new Groundskeeper says I can eat you."

"I was defending myself, you dirt mound. What do you want with me?"

"Well I'm not gonna tell you that I'm supposed to take you to see the Groundskeeper, 'cause you gave me a boo-boo and called me a name."

"Who's the Groundskeeper?"

"How do you know about him? Are you a spy? Now I really don't like you." It stuck out a tongue carpeted in wisperly-thin roots.

"I'm not a spy. I'm an explorer. And if you want to take me to see the Groundskeeper, then you just

go right ahead."

"Well I will. So you just better come with me, or I'll have to get mean." A cloud of dust erupted as the giant slapped Ralph on the back and shoved him forward.

In between intermittent dusty swats on the back which caused him to stagger and on one occasion tumble to the ground, Ralph looked around the enormous cavern. Light streamed down from holes in the ceiling. He realized he had seen these from the other side and figured they were gopher holes or the like. When he and the guys had been playing war or trying to build lean-tos, this had been beneath their feet the whole time. Waiting.

He came to a wall.

The giant said, "Come on, get out of the way."

"The way of what? There's nowhere to go."

"I wasn't talking to you." Two earthen hands scooped him up and set him aside like someone shooing a puppy out from underfoot. The giant then continued its conversation with the blank wall.

"Move out, Terra, or I'm gonna tell."

Soil began to shower down from about three feet up the wall. It piled up quickly, shaping itself into a statue. A living statue of a little girl. "Who you gonna tell, Peaty?" Terra said. "Gonna go crying to your daddy like a little baby?" She spoke with her hands on her waist, punctuating her words with a waggle of her hips.

"No," said Peaty the giant. "I'm gonna tell the new Groundskeeper."

Terra pouted, her shoulders hunched. Finally she turned and walked into the wall. Just as Peaty had done, she gathered the earth into herself, growing--and becoming much less girlish--as she walked through the widening passage.

Peaty pointed to the hole in the wall. "Get in there, you pile of skin."

Ralph did as he was told. Behind him came the sound of shifting earth. Over his shoulder he saw

the tunnel filling in and the little dirt boy who'd first grabbed his arm following after.

"Move it, sweat bag," Peaty said, his voice now that of a child.

They came to another large chamber, light beaming down from overhead perforations. Terra stood tall as an elephant riding piggyback on another elephant. A twist of roots poked out of the top of her head, tied into a bow. She was talking to an old man, and the old man sat on what could only be called a throne.

The throne was made of junk wrought into a vaguely chair-shaped structure big enough for one of the full-formed giants to flop down in. The old man looked lost among the festoon of pretzeled handlebars and bent bike tires. The throne was decorated with reflectors and fishing lures that glinted in the sunlight beams, and the whole structure rested on a dais of milk crates, naked box springs, and industrial-sized plastic buckets.

Terra pointed at Ralph, and the old man squinted in that general direction. "Get over here so I can see you. Come on now." The old man held out a pencil-thin arm and wriggled his bony fingers.

Peaty shoved Ralph forward, though this time using both hands and with greatly diminished force. Ralph stepped up to meet the Groundskeeper.

"Ah, yes. I see you now. Ralph Hunnicut. You're friends with that Jasper Pint fellow, aren't you? Never did like that kid. How many snakes did you kill last month, Ralph Hunnicut?"

There were a hundred questions and declarations crowding in Ralph's brain, jostling and elbowing each other in an effort to reach his tongue. "How do you know my name?" was on of the strongest. "You'll never take me alive!" was in there, too, repeating itself over and over and sounding less and less ridiculous each time. But of all the things he'd read in books and heard in movies, of all the cool and courageous and clever things he could have said, the only word that escaped was, "Huh?"

"Snakes, my boy. How many of them... did you kill... last month?"

This was a test. Answer the way you think the old fruit wants you to answer, receive swift

punishment. But answer honestly, and he gives you a wish or something. Ralph thought. He and the guys went snake hunting quite a lot in the summer. Armed with rakes and hoes and Jasper's dad's machete. And, once, a can of WD40 and a lighter. Ralph calculated then said, "Seven."

"Seven? Really, seven? They must teach counting different than from when I was in school. Seven?"

Must have missed a few. "Okay, ten. I think I killed ten."

The Groundskeeper rolled his eyes at the giant Terra. Her smile was full of pebbles and snail shells. The old man turned back to Ralph, leaned forward. "Now it's ten, is it? The great hunter killed ten of my lovely snakes. Did you keep their fangs? Use their skins for your suspenders?"

Ralph, no longer sure how he was expected to answer but certain the old dud was four quarters short of a dollar, said nothing. He did cross his arms to signal that whatever was coming, he was ready.

"Do you want me to tell you how many snakes you killed last month? It seems I'll have to since you've gotten the number all knotted up in your noggin." He leaned forward for the big reveal. "None. You killed exactly no snakes last month."

For some reason this was funny to the old guy, and he laughed like two stones rubbing together. "You're the bag handler. It's the other two who do the killing. They hack my lovelies to bits and chase them into bonfires. Stomp them and throw rocks. And you go along for the ride and call yourself a hunter."

Ralph felt his face turn red, his eyes begin to sting. All the great things he was preparing to say fled from his mind like children from a broken window.

"Don't feel so ashamed, my boy. Your pretend-to-be is the only thing that's keeping you alive. But you have proven yourself to be the scout for your demonic friends. You come in with your point-the-way and your look-over-here. Then they run in with sharpened sticks. But you won't get the chance to play the setter anymore."

"What are you going to do?" He would have liked that not to come out so shaky and squeaky.

"They really do a slapdash job of schooling you kids these days don't they? Gravel, Chisel, take this muffin-headed little ragamuffin out of my sight."

A moment passed in which nothing happened. The Groundskeeper stared at the two earth giants, one of which was an earth boy for the time being, and they stared back at him. They all seemed to be waiting for the other to do something.

The moment continued to pass.

"Those aren't our names anymore," Peaty said, arms crossed. "And you know it."

The old man threw his hands up in disgust. "Oh, will I be so glad when this transition is over and done and I can die in peace. Just put the brat in a cage, will you? Will you do this one last thing for me? Then I suppose you'll feed him chocolate milk and candy for the rest of his life, but for now, when you lock him up, do it real rough and make sure he hits his head on the cage when you put him in."

The Groundskeeper eased himself down from the over-sized throne. His arms shook, and his knees buckled under his own weight. If he hadn't caught himself on the banana-seat that served as an armrest, he would have fallen and broken like a dried-out Play-Doh sculpture.

Terra grabbed Ralph's arm and drug him away. His heels dug twin furrows in the dirt.

The passageways narrowed as they went, and Terra had to reduce herself several times to fit. She left mounds of earth behind and began to regain her girlish figure. Ralph was now walking behind her instead of being dragged, and they were now nearly the same size.

He readied himself to tear away and run.

Then the coon-dog joined their parade, padding along beside him. Then another on the other side. The coon-dogs were tall and skinny, had those long and bushy tails with the dark rings. Their eyes were large and bulged and glowed yellow when they caught the sunlight just so. Fluffy manes surrounded their narrow heads, and the one to Ralph's right had daisies woven into its hair. It looked at

him and chomped the air. Its teeth were long and sharp.

Ralph resigned himself to being held captive.

The cage Terra led him to was familiar. It was a dog cage. Dogcatchers put them around the neighborhood to catch strays. Ralph had seen one out in the woods once, little pellets of food on a peddle contraption that caused the door to crash shut behind the hungry animal. He'd shown it to Sky one afternoon. He told her it was a trap for little girls, but Sky just laughed. She poked a stick through the mesh and pressed the peddle down. The cage snapped shut, empty. Ralph told her she was going to be in trouble and the Girlcatcher squad would find her and lock her up. In his skittish heart, he knew they were both equally marked as criminals.

This one didn't have the trigger peddle. But it did have an open door, and on that door was a lock that would spring closed and seal the wire box shut. Ralph looked at the lock, and his knees began to shake.

"Get inside," Terra said.

"You can let me go," Ralph said, trying his best not to beg. "I won't tell anyone about you. I promise."

One of the coon-dogs nipped his backpack and began to pull.

"Good idea," Terra said. "Give me the bag."

Ralph slipped it off. "You're not really gonna lock me up forever, are you?"

"And your knife, too."

He hadn't realized he was still holding it. He gave that up, too. "I didn't do anything." He thought his voice sounded pretty tough, considering.

"Now get inside."

He didn't move. Heroes didn't cry or give in. Heroes always had something cool to say, some joke that proved they were strong and unafraid. Something smart and memorable.

"Make me," he said.

Terra started to grow. Dirt flowed upward and became a part of her body, and she dropped into the sinkhole that formed around her. Her bulk more than made up for her lower elevation. She brandished a hand as big as a sofa.

"Have it your way. The Groundskeeper did say to be rough."

Ralph cringed. "Okay, okay. I'll play nice."

He crawled into the cage. It banged closed behind him. He heard the lock snick shut. It was almost as loud as his heart.

Then the shuffling sound of dirt being shifted. "That's better." Terra, little girl shaped once more, came around to face him through the wire mesh. "Don't worry. After the old Groundskeeper is gone, we'll play a different game."

"What game is that?"

"I don't know yet. Isn't that fun? Not knowing what's coming next? I think so." She went away, humming a tuneless song to herself.

The coon-dogs circled the cage, growling a few times to establish the proper hierarchy. Then they left, and Ralph was alone.

In a cage.

Underground.

No one knew where he was. And when they finally went out looking for him, they'd never know to look here. He'd never see his friends again or his mom and dad. Never play games again or read any more books. Never go fishing or hunting for... Wait. That's why he was trapped here in the first place. Who knew that even snakes and fish and worms had a protector?

If by some miracle he ever made it back home again, his parents had a lot of explaining to do.

The cage didn't allow much room for movement. He drew his legs up under him and folded his

shoulders inwards as far as he could. And got stuck. The mesh dug into his knees and across his back. He strained to turn around and felt his shirt snag then rip down the collar. At last he unfolded, now facing the front, his shirt torn down to the middle of his spine. He lay still, sweating, panting. Blood trickled down his back.

Then he contemplated the door.

He could see the pin that held it closed. There was a ring through it that you could pull from the outside and release the trap. He reached through the mesh, felt the wires bite into the soft pink between his fingers. The ring was inches from his touch.

I could just wait like this till my fingers grow long enough to reach.

The craziness of it make him laugh. Then the hopelessness made him cry.

No. Babies cry. Girls cry. Adventurers do not cry. They figure a way out. How? By using what they had the best they could.

So Ralph took stock.

He turned out his pants pockets and found the change from his drink and snack at the store, his lucky penny kept separate from the other coins, a shiny black rock he was going to add to his collection. And about two and a half feet of balled-up copper wire.

It was thick as pencil lead, stiff and bendable, the insulation stripped off. It was the color of gold and just as precious.

Ralph clasped his treasure to his chest, hid it from any eyes that might be watching. No one was around.

The copper wire was a bit too stiff. When he needed it to bend and catch the pull-ring, it refused and angled past its target. He pulled it back in and bent it by hand and passed it through the mesh again. This time the little hook he made at the end pointed straight up, and he couldn't aim it at the lock without first crimping it and working this new elbow out through the cage, which ruined the purpose of

having bent it in the first place.

Sweat dripped from his nose, rained down his sides, slicked his palms. He reeled in the wire and made himself be still. It was something his mom always tried to get him to do with her. Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply and visualize whatever it is you wish to accomplish. In his mind he imagined the hooked end of the copper wire catching on the pull-ring, lifting, the cage door hinging open.

He tried again. This time with a plan.

He worked one end out of the cage and down toward the linchpin. Then he poked the other end straight out through the door. He'd made a hook on that end, too, and with it he grabbed the business end and pulled it toward the goal.

His hands were steady. He didn't breathe.

The only things that existed in the world were the ring and the wire.

The space between them shrank.

Then he had it. The hook caught the ring like a miracle. Ralph let himself exhale. The hard part was over. He pulled downward on the copper wire. It went taut. And the hook at the end began to uncurl.

"No you don't!" he said and yanked the wire and shoved the door forward. Three things happened at once. The hooked end of the copper line opened completely, but it held just long enough to lift the linchpin, and the cage door opened.

Ralph wriggled out on his belly. Then stood and stretched. He'd been encaged for what, ten, fifteen minutes? But with the regained ability to move and turn around and lift his arms, he felt like a fish being returned to the sea.

Or in this case a fishbowl. He was still stuck underground. Ralph kicked the cage once, then set about freeing himself for real.

Every passage looked familiar, and every turn felt like the wrong one, but he moved without doubt. And without fear. Now that he'd proven himself to himself, what was there to be afraid of?

The piles of dirt were gone. But there were footprints, first one set, then another, growing larger as they went. Ralph slowed as he began to hear a familiar sound. Finally he stopped and listened. It was moving water, a river underground. He could smell the mud and slime and the faint but foul odor of things long dead.

And he could hear voices. He snuck closer, low against the wall of earth, and the voices clarified. The old man was saying, "And the bees. Don't forget about the bees. Very important. Don't let them get all honey-making, paper-chewing soft. Busy, they say. Ha. Laziest bunch of gossips in the world."

"I'll take care of the bees."

Ralph flinched. This voice was young, quiet, girly, familiar. It was Sky.

"And the snakes."

"You already said snakes."

"I know, but they're my favorites. Don't let those nasty boys hurt my babies."

"I won't."

"And if they do, you put the bees to them. Sic the poison ivy on them."

"I'll take care of everything."

The old man sighed. For some reason Ralph thought of his dad at the end of the night, sitting back in his recliner, clicking off the TV. He sighed just like that.

"Will they miss me?" the old man said.

"They'll miss you forever," Sky said.

Then things went quiet. Ralph crept toward the sound of the river. Around the corner he saw them. The two giants dwarfed Sky, yet somehow they seemed in awe of her, the way you watch a skunk when you spot one crossing your path. The coon-dogs lay at her feet. Their bushy heads followed her hand

as she placed flowers one by one into a canoe. In that canoe lay the old man. His eyes were closed.

The flowers fell about him gently, covering his weathered face.

He flicked the flowers away. "Can you just drop me in the water already? I got some dying to do."

Terra and Peaty picked up the canoe and placed it in the river, let it go. The current took it, and the little boat disappeared downstream. Sky dropped one last flower into the water then stood up.

The coon-dogs got up with her, and the giants took to either side. It wasn't hard for Ralph to realize what was going on. He came around from behind the corner. Sky and her posse stared for a moment. Then the coon-dogs ran full speed right at him.

The one with the daisy crown got to him first. Its front paws hit solid in the chest, carried him over, pinned him to the ground. Ralph shielded his face with his arms, kicked his feet but hit nothing. And realized. The animal wasn't attacking.

It was licking his arms. His forehead, his fingers. He unfolded his arms, and the coon-dog swabbed his face. Then the other one joined in.

A noise--a finger snap--and the coon-dogs left him. Ralph sat up and saw them heeling beside Sky. Sky was still just a little girl, her brown hair all mussed up and spiced with pine needles, her knees scabbed over, her bare feet mud-caked. But the way she stood, the way she looked him straight on like she was sizing him up. She seemed older.

"Sky? What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking over." She still sounded like a little girl. Might as well have ended her declaration with "Duh!"

"But-- Why you?"

"Because I take care of animals and talk to the flowers and the bumblebees. They need me. They like me."

"So, you're gonna live down here? With them?"

She crossed her arms and jutted one hip. It was the same pose the girly version of Terra had struck when Ralph first saw her. "What wrong with them? They're my friends."

The two giants took defensive stances, like linebackers ready to pounce. The coon-dogs just lay with their heads on their paws, minding their own coon-doggy business.

"You can't live underground."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't." Seemed enough of an argument to Ralph. It also happened to be the same answer to the questions, "Why can't I stay up past nine o'clock?" "Why can't I have that new video game system?" and "Why can't I go to church camp with the rest of the guys?"

So he tried again. "Because you'll starve down here."

"No she won't," Peaty growled. "We'll take care of her. We'll bring her food and popsicles."

"Well, what about--" He was about to say "going to the bathroom," but didn't really want to raise that issue with a girl. "You'll be the only kid."

"So?" She turned angry all of a sudden, the way a cat can instantaneously shift from a blissful lump of fur to a hissing knot of teeth and claws. She bore down on Ralph, her eyes sharpened and her brow pinched. "What do you care? It's not like anybody's gonna miss me. Why don't you just go? Get outta here before I let one of these guys eat you."

Peaty rubbed his belly and grinned.

Sky lifted her arm, pointed away.

"But, I don't know how to get out."

She snapped her fingers, and the coon-dogs sprang to attention. "Garbanzo, take him outside." Garbanzo was the one without daisies in his mane. The coon-dog walked a little ways back toward where Ralph had come from, stopped and turned, watched Ralph with his buggy yellow eyes.

"But..." Ralph said.

He didn't have anything to follow that, so he followed Garbanzo down the tunnel. He heard Terra say behind him, "What do you wanna play first?"

Then their voices died away, and the sound of the river dwindled to nothing. Garbanzo trotted along. Sometimes he paused for Ralph to catch up then licked the back of his hand before taking the lead again.

Ralph didn't bother trying to memorize the maze of tunnels. The way back certainly wouldn't match the way out. Plus his head was full of thoughts he could only half grasp, like trying to see the whole sky and all the stars at once.

At last he saw an arrow drawn in the dirt. He looked in the direction it pointed and saw the floor angle up to the trapdoor. Garbanzo licked his hand then nudged him forward with his snout. Ralph pushed up the trapdoor, stepped out into the dazzling light of day, and let the door drop closed. A spatter of leaves and pine straw fluffed up, but when it settled, the entrance blended flush into the floor of the woods once more.

He shuffled toward his house. Birds sang in the treetops. The sun was warm, and the air smelled green. His mom was calling him in for lunch.

"Where's your backpack?" his mom asked him at the table.

"Left it in a tree."

"And your knife?"

"In the backpack."

"Did you have fun?"

"Yeah."

"You miss your friends, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"They'll be home a couple of weeks. You'll find ways to keep busy, then when they get back you

guys can have a sleep over out in the yard with your tent. That sound good?"

"I guess." He pushed a wad of spaghetti noodles around his plate. Without knowing he was going to say it, he said, "I wish Sky could be there."

"Who? Oh, you mean that preacher's little girl. I thought you guys hated her."

"What?"

"I see you all time making fun of her and leaving her behind when she tries to play with you guys. The other day she was carrying these flowers, and you ran past and knocked them out of her hands. I yelled out the door for you come back and say you're sorry. But you kept on going."

"I didn't hear you."

"I guess not."

But Ralph remembered the flower incident. He was playing with her. He tried to take one, but he got clumsy. Then he ran because that's what you do. She was supposed to chase after. "Did she cry?" Ralph asked his mom.

"No. But she didn't look happy, that's for sure."

For a moment Ralph looked into his own mind as though through a window. He saw with the perspective of an outsider. The way he and the guys would run up on Sky and pull her hair. How they'd find her at the river tossing bread crumbs in the water and they'd sit down with their fishing poles and laugh at the way she worried over the worms and the crickets they impaled on hooks. Then Ralph closed the shutters on that widow and turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring at his plate of spaghetti.

"It's okay," his mom said. "You're a good boy, really. You just do the stuff that boys do. Sometimes that don't exactly make me happy, but I'll always be proud of you."

Ralph got up from the table.

"Where are you going?"

"I forgot something."

"What?"

"I was supposed to tell somebody something."

Out the door and into the woods. "You can't have her," he told the trees. "'Cause she doesn't belong to you."

A droning hum built around him. The air began to vibrate with sound. Bees. They swarmed out of a rotten stump and filled the world with their noise. Ralph found himself in a cloud of bees, a haze of swirling black and yellow. They landed on his arm, and he shook them away. But he never suffered a single sting.

"I know you're trying to scare me. But you can't. I'm not leaving you."

The snakes came next. Slithered from under leaves, down the trunks of trees. A nightmare carpet of writhing scales. From the distance came the snarl of a wildcat. The hair on Ralph's arms stood at electric attention.

"Your momma says she loves you." He said it louder. Then he screamed it over the insect roar.

Which suddenly stopped. The bees retreated, and the snakes went back into hiding. A silence descended on the woods.

At his feet, the ground opened up and Sky came out. "What did you say?"

"I said your momma loves you."

She looked ready to cry. "Is that all?"

"And your dad, too, I guess. He didn't say. But I'm pretty sure he does."

"What about you?"

"Me? What about me?"

All the strength he'd seen down underground was gone from her. She was a little girl again, with little girl eyes ready to melt and a little girl mouth that twitched like a caterpillar.

Ralph said, "I..." Good start, but where to go from here? "...want..." Yeah, but what do you want? "...to be your friend."

Sky rose up on her toes. Her fists clenched and sort of danced in the air. She turned and went back underground.

Ralph waited. The sun was high and hot. The shirt he'd changed into clung to his skin. It had been easy to hide the torn one from his mom. Right now it was under his bed, waiting for the moment he could stuff it into the bottom of the trash. Course he still had a scar halfway down his back. If his parents decided on a beach trip anytime soon, he'd have some explaining to do. Actually, he'd just say he'd been playing. That seemed to work for just about everything.

Sky came back out. "What do you wanna do first?" she said.

"What about..." He pointed at the hidden opening to her underground kingdom.

"Terra and Peaty are in charge now. They were the ones who picked me in the first place. All they really had to do was pick each other. Come on. I'll teach you how to say stuff in Butterfly." She skipped away.

Ralph followed his friend. The day wasn't so boring after all.