

Chapter One

The train sounded like a roller coaster on the up and up. At the top of the hill waited Fort Riopelle, home of writers, artists and tourists. Later that day, a new family of assistant professors would add to the fort's illustrious guest list. The parents drove the winding road while their excess baggage and only child hopped the train. Both son and Samsonite felt more comfortable in the recliner seats of the inclined cart.

"So, first trip to Rio?" said the conductor, Jake Shuette. He was obviously the conductor because he wore that funny blue hat. The rest of his appearance spoke otherwise: a shoeless 15-year-old in a polo shirt and swim trunks.

"We're moving here."

"I noticed the luggage. That's good, we need a new kid." Jake stood five feet away but used the intercom for effect. "That's coming from the oldest kid here, I'm Jake."

"Hi, Jake."

Jake waited for the new kid to give a name, but it didn't happen. They were almost to the top of the hill anyway.

The morning fog hung low on the Tennessee hills. The radio reception never improved till the cart approached its final ascent. As the cart rose, a robotic meteorologist warned of dense fog in the morning clearing toward the afternoon with a high of 65 and a low of 60.

"Nice day," said Jake.

"Excuse me?" said the new kid.

"Nice day."

"Yeah."

Jake considered himself very adept at conversation. When his family first left New York; his friends called every day just to talk. Jake never talked on the job because of professionalism and poor reception. Phones only work at the top of the hill, and he spent the whole day climbing up and down.

The new kid also thought himself to be quite the conversationalist. He was misguided; the product of talkative parents and voice recognition toys. He had outgrown the toys but was six long years away from outgrowing his parents.

With the fog clear, the view from Fort Riopelle was unbeatable. At this elevation it was possible to see five states: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama and, of course, Tennessee. Neither passenger nor conductor took advantage of this vantage point. Jake usually gave this information as part of the train ride tour, but today the speech seemed frivolous.

The new kid read from his well-worn copy of *Tennessee for Dummies*. It was tough to tell which chapter, he flipped through the pages, read a passage and then moved forward or back. Reading in cars and trains made him car and train sick. Despite unfortunate upholstery incidents, his parents required that a book be read at all times during trips and travels.

Though he never got train sick, Jake was also sick of reading. A single page, highlighted and covered in revisions, sat on the dash next to a new blank sheet and a pen. He'd worked on the blank page all morning and every morning that year. Jake wrote his first play when he was 13-years-old. They performed it over the summer for unsuspecting tourists. Mrs. Shuette convinced her son that all those people had driven hundreds of miles only to see his premier. The Riopelle children's repertory theater production of "Endless Fieldtrip," by Jake Shuette played one sold out show in the summer of 2005. Since then, Jake suffered three years of puberty, grief, and writer's block. Jake stared at his work the whole way up the hill. Every time he was ready to adapt, the train reached its apex and his motivation turned to the locomotion.

As the train slipped through its narrow passage into Riopelle, Jake was required by law[suit(s)] to say, "Keep your arms and legs inside the train at all times."

This rule also applied to luggage, which unfortunately could neither hear nor respond to the conductor's command. A box labeled "BOOKS" nicked the wall and then tumbled down the hill and into the fog.

"What was that?" Jake asked.

"Just some books."

"Oh, we've got enough of those."

Once through the wall, Jake announced the last and only stop. The station showed signs pointing towards cities all over the world. All the signs pointed back down the

track. One also exclaimed, "Welcome to Riopelle." This addressed the new kid, but he didn't pay attention. Reading on trains always made him sick.

Below the welcome sign and over a redundant welcome mat, a 13-year-old girl named Cody held a chalkboard. Over her thick red hair, she wore a chauffer cap. The rest of her outfit was somewhere in between the boys and girls section of any major department store. She wore her whole look with a pride that made her both attractive and authoritative. Cody held a chalkboard with perfect white letters spelling "NEW KID."

Chapter Two

"How'd you know my name?" the new kid asked.

"I didn't," Cody admitted.

They walked together up the stone streets of Riopelle. The fort didn't begin at the top of the hill. It started around a hundred feet below the summit of what was thought to be a mountain. The mountain was a hill, a very tall hill at the base of the Appalachian Mountains. The first tier of Riopelle was at a 30 degree incline. One could choose to walk at an angle or simply climb. Cody was significantly more capable of this exercise and she walked casually ahead of the new kid who had already broken a sweat despite the moderate temperature (which would continue until the late evening).

"Hurry up." Cody yelled.

The new kid had never been hiking because his parents worried about his heart. His heart was, in fact, quite weak because he never went hiking or played basketball. He secretly loved basketball but couldn't play because of his heart.

"Where are my parents?"

"They're stuck; here's a stick," Cody said and handed him a walking stick from the closest souvenir shop.

"Thanks for the stick; how are they stuck?" The new kid grabbed the cane and examined its high price tag. "Do I have to pay for this?"

"Everyone gets stuck; Dad tows a Prius, like, every other week. All the new people drive a Prius." Cody had practiced this speech on new kids for the past two years. "It's our way of giving back to the community, or the commune as Dad puts it. We don't

live up here, we live further down the hill, but I come up here about every day. My name's Cody by the way. I live down the hill a ways."

As Cody pointed down the hill a ways, two young boys hiked up the hill. Seven-year-old Shane Bartlet and nine-year-old Luc Barthes were the same age in school. Riopelle faculty/parents loosely define time. Students don't know what grade they're in until that first year of college. Shane and Luc had been the same age for years. After classes, they spent most of their time together playing sports and experimental blues. Today, they held badminton rackets.

"Where are you going?" Shane called up to his sister, Cody.

"Yeah, where are we going?" The new kid asked.

"I'm taking the new kid on a tour." Cody answered. "This is my brother, Shane. This is his friend, Luc."

"Hello, I'm Luc." Luc spoke with a French accent.

"Hi, I'm Shane," Shane spoke with a southern accent.

"Hi I'm..."

Two young girls peaked their heads over the second protective wall.

"Who's the new kid?" Hallie Graham screamed. She was a rambunctious girl of eleven years old. She kept her brown hair short and it stuck out in all directions. Hallie was not a large girl, in fact she was quite short and nearly thin, but she stood like a giant next to Lillian Vratil.

Lillian had long blonde hair, which flowed down her thin, pale frame. She looked and moved like a little ghost floating amongst tangible children.

"I'm taking him on a tour." Cody yelled up the wall. It was commonplace for the children to pretend they were speaking to guards of ancient castles.

"We'll help." Hallie jumped the wall. Lillian paced a few steps down and came through the gate. Both girls arrived at the same time, as the gate was nearby and climbing the wall was quite complicated.

"Ok, where do you want to go?"

The new kid shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know, anywhere."

"Good we'll go exploring. Hallie do you have your compass?" Cody took charge of the expedition.

“I have a GPS finder slash two way radio. I think it might have a compass.” Hallie responded. She had most of the latest electronic gadgets. She also carried at least two packs of AA batteries at all times. Hallie was prepared for any theoretical modern catastrophe.

“Good, which way are we headed?”

“I don’t know, um. We’re at 34.97 ° North and 85.35° West, if that tells you anything.” Hallie was not prepared for any actual catastrophe.

“It tells me where to start.”

“Can we go?” Shane asked for himself and Luc.

“No, you have to stay and tell Dad where we went; so that he can tell the new kid’s parents; so that they don’t get worried.” Cody commanded her little brother.

“Can’t Lillian do that?”

“Lillian is coming with us.”

“I am?” Lillian finally joined the conversation.

“Lillian, you’re coming with us.”

“Ok.” Lillian agreed but not without reservation.

“Where are you going?” Shane asked.

Cody pointed over Shane’s head and into the forest. “That way. Which way is that, Hallie?”

“Um, West, maybe.”

“Tell Dad to tell the new kid’s parents that we headed out West.”

“Ok,” Shane hung his head. Luc served the birdie and the game began again with less enthusiasm and shorter volleys.

“Where are we going?” The new kid asked.

“On an adventure.” Cody answered.

The four adventures set off West (which was actually North East), Cody leading the way with Hallie just behind her. The new kid placed most of his weight on a walking stick and followed several yards behind. Lillian stepped lightly at the back, she neither kept up nor fell behind; she simply glided near her friends.

Nothing was strictly forbidden on Fort Riopelle, but the forest was generally discouraged. Despite the gorgeous environment, the permanent occupants considered the

outdoors to be disagreeable. They tried to pass this information onto their children, who always did as they pleased.

Chapter 3

“Are we there yet?” the new kid asked, assuming this was the type of tour that went to interesting locations of historic merit.

“No, we’re, um...” Cody differed to Hallie.

“34.99 ° North and 85.34° West.”

“Which is the site of bearded man rock.” Cody explained. She pointed to a cliff, which in the right light and with enough imagination could possibly look something very much like a bearded man, sort of. “It overlooks the, um, the Devil’s Veranda.”

She didn’t bother to point to the Devil’s Veranda, which plainly didn’t exist. This section of the hill was originally called the Devil’s Tradepost by the soldiers. It was actually known for a very bloody incident involving a bad trade, a canoe, a fox fur, a musket, and a young family. A better tour guide would have mentioned that the soldiers avoided these parts and made a trail that went around the Old Man (bearded rock was actually called the Old Man). Their trail had long since grown over, but the woods kept the cursed passage where the children now walked.

They seldom stayed on the beaten path, which was probably well advised considering the beaten path’s curse(s)¹. Most staggered rocks required climbing. Any portion of the trail, which bordered on vertical took precedent over any portion which bordered on flat. Cody charged up steep inclines with Hallie close behind.

“On belay!” Cody shouted.

“Belay on!” Hallie replied.

After each exchange and between gasps for air, Lillian would mutter in German. Lillian spoke German and could read Latin. She cursed in German.

The new kid lumbered up each climb using his walking stick and his knees. Lillian never climbed but always caught up when least expected. She usually appeared behind trees or boulders.

¹ *a second curse, of which even soldiers refused to speak, had something to do with a fire, a village, and a poorly executed exit strategy

“How’d you get up here?” Cody asked.

“I went around,” Lillian always answered.

The tour went on this way for half an hour. Cody stopped to point out Lover’s Leap or Steve’s Boulder. All had backstories which sounded like the lies they were.

An hour into the journey and Cody gave up most of the tour guide pretense. She would still explain abnormalities, like the significant new growth over a grove of toppled trees. The F5 tornado of 1972 ravaged the hillside but was stopped by the impenetrable defenses around their beloved fort. She named the tornado Wilma, assuming that tornados had names.

These longwinded and exceedingly more forced explanations came in stuttered and backwards narration after much exploration. The guide was clearly in new territory. Hallie tried to take charge, but her stories were even less believable.

“This stream is where former President Zachary Tyler met the Native American tribal council,” Hallie fibbed. “They signed an armistice where America agreed to pay Native America twenty five dollars worth of beads and frankincense.”

A few one-hundredths of Longitude later Cody said, “Maybe we should turn back. Which way is back?”

Hallie looked deep into her GPS finder, calculated their previous coordinates and declared, “Um, I don’t know.”

The new kid looked back towards his trail of granola. His parents always packed him a lunch of granola, hummus, and wheat-free bread. Obviously, he never ate this lunch so it made excellent trail material.

“I left a trail,” the new kid admitted.

“A what?” Cody looked up from the forest ground. She had placed a stick in the mud in order to tell both time and direction. At this elevation, fog diffused the sun in all directions and times.

“I left a trail of granola crumbs, which we could use to guide the way back.”

“Hold it, Hansel.” Cody said. “How can we trust you? You’re new, what do know of these mountains.”

“These aren’t mountain.” The new kid had recently read the Tennessee tourism online guide to outdoor adventure.

“I say we, pant, follow the new kid.” Lillian was out of breath. She had been out of breath sense nearly the start of the tour. Her wheezing was generally ignored by Cody and Hallie, but it made the new kid’s hair stand up. He had a cowlick towards the crown of his head; so upright hair was not uncommon; still, she creeped him out.

Cody reset the stick in the mud. Licking her fingers she held them to the air. She used the other hand to silence her compatriots. They listened to the low shudder of twirling leaves, the high call of lonesome birds, the trickle of a Tennessee stream, and the soft breath of an asthmatic young girl. They were lost.

“Ok, we’ll follow the new kid’s granola.” Cody conceded.

“Do you have anymore? I’m kinda’ hungry.” Hallie said.

“No, I used it all on the trail.”

“Pity.”

They walked back along the stream, following an infrequent but clear line of sweetened oat clusters. Hallie snuck to the back and picked up a piece; it tasted fine but guilt forced her to spit it towards the bank. The granule of granola fell short, but stuck firmly to a ten dollar bill. The money rested in a pair of shoes. The shoes sat alone by the stream.

“Wait!” Hallie shouted.

“Wait!” Cody followed.

The new kid turned around to see Cody pointing to Hallie pointing to a pair of shoes with ten dollars inside. “Wait,” he shouted.

“Ok.” Lillian stopped.

Cody picked up the shoe and tossed the money on the ground. She depressed the shoe’s tongue like a doctor hoping for tonsillitis.

“Mhmm,” Cody declared. “It’s a size ten men’s shoe. Size 9 and a half if our owner’s from the UK. He could be vacationing. Let’s assume, for now, that the owner is an American male with size 10 feet. Anything else you notice, Hallie?”

Hallie didn’t notice anything, but she liked where this was headed. “Judging by these tracks, there was another person with him. There might have been a struggle. Some branches are disturbed. Lillian, New Kid, can you check the surrounding brush for fingerprints or DNA data?”

“No,” said the new kid.

Lillian broke off a nearby leaf and turned it over several times before setting it sailing it to the stream.

“Cody, there does seem to have been a struggle, but who’s to say it was between this American male with a size 10 shoe and another male or female of as yet indeterminate shoe size.” Hallie smiled and turned with great effect. “Perhaps it was a hungry beast. The wild fire lynx owns these woods, and everyone else pays his insatiable toll.”

“The Wildfire Lynx?”

“No, the wild fire lynx.”

Cody was once a detective. Later she became a crime novelist. She wrote detective poetry all spring before giving up a life of crime for a life of swimming. That September, she emerged from the water with a new outlook on literature and an appreciation for going off the deep end.

“You mean like a mountain lion?” the new kid humored her.

“Like, the most ferocious mountain lion in the known United States,” Hallie confirmed. “It’s faster than a puma and prettier than a lynx. I’ll show you a picture of one when we get back. Plus, there are domestic, wild fire lynx (sic). They’re prettier than anything, but not so vicious.”

“He might not need a picture. They could be anywhere.”

Lillian whipped her head and hair around, seeking through the bramble and up the hill. She had never actually seen a wild fire lynx, but owned its domestic counterpart. Her cat’s name was Schubert and his favorite composer was Debussy. She wandered if the big cats liked Debussy, or if they only liked meat.

“Hold these.” Cody handed off the shoes to the new kid. He looked over the shoes and then tied the laces together.

“What about the money?”

“Where we’re going, we won’t need money.” Hallie explained.

“Where are we going?”

“Home. It’s at 34.97 ° North and 85.35° West, as the crow flies.”

At this particular moment a crow landed on the trail ahead and ate from the prepared granola. Lillian noticed this and thought it best to stare at the crow until it flew away.

“What about the money?” asked the new kid.

“The money?” Cody had completely forgotten about the money.

“Yes, the money.”

“Oh, you can keep it.”

As a permanent resident, it was nearly impossible to spend money in Riopelle. The fort ripped off tourists from every angle. The gift shop charged a city tax even though there was no city. The coffee shop charged four dollars per cup of regular coffee. Mochas and Lattes were so expensive that it was hard to serve them without laughing. Even the obligatory train ride scammed ten dollars per adult and eight dollars per child under twelve (12 and up counted as adults as long as they didn't break anything).

The new kid turned twelve the previous August; but his ride was still free. To him, ten dollars was still ten dollars, worth a DVD or even a book. He placed the money back in the shoes and slung them over his shoulder like a patriarch returning with the hunt's bounty.

“Let's get going. I'm hungry.” Hallie said.

“I'll buy everybody lunch.” The new kid promised.

Cody raised her eyebrows and huffed, “Good luck.”

As they climbed up the trail, the sun broke the fog. It was just past midday by anyone's guess. Cody did not bother to place another stick as a sundial. Hallie had a military time on her GPS finder, but felt stupid saying 13 o'clock

They took a brief rest on the Devil's Veranda, and talked about the upcoming year. As with all children, the new year starts in September.

“I want to get an electric keyboard, but I don't know how to tell my mother without making her cry,” Lillian had asked her parents for a Casio two years prior. Her mother was inconsolable.

“Lilly, you can have mine,” Hallie had several keyboards. She played perfunctorily, but lacked the spark and vigor to be concert pianist. She also lacked a concert piano. Lillian had two grand pianos: a surplus she never really appreciated.

“I couldn’t just bring it back to the house,” Lillian explained. “They wouldn’t let me inside.”

“Well, then you can keep playing it at my house,” This conversation happened at least once or twice a month. The status quo never changed, and the girl’s relationship continued to float on shared property.

“What do you do?” Cody pointed at the new kid.

He picked grass from the ground to see if he could slide each blade with the root intact. This process enthralled him so that it took several moments to notice the attractive red head pointing at him.

“Oh, I, um, I write some, I like to read. I kind of like basketball.”

“You play basketball?” Cody wanted to get a team together, but all the locals had asthma.

“No. Mom says it’s bad for my heart, “ the new kid held two blades of grass pulled clean to their white roots.

“That’s what my parents always say,” Lillian quipped. “That, and cancer. They always threaten cancer; I hate it.”

The children nodded their heads in a general agreement to hate cancer.

“What do you guys do for fun around here?”

“Hiking,” Lillian rolled her eyes.

“We usually just hang out at the coffee shop.”

“Why didn’t we just go there?”

“We’re on an adventure,” Cody said. “Coffee’s not an adventure. I hate it. I don’t know why we hang out there. No one even drinks coffee except Cameron and Zoe, and they’re gone until—what day is it?”

“‘O’ nine ‘O’ two ‘O’ six” Hallie read verbatim.

“September 2nd, 2008. Yep, they come back today. School starts Monday.”

“I hate Mondays.” Lillian said.

The children began walking without words exchanged or intentions settled. The granola trail attracted animals to the path. The creatures would scamper off long before the party could pet them. It was Hallie’s deep desire to pet animals. She thwarted this

wish with an even deeper, near pathological, need to scream, “Look! A(n) (animal name)!”

“Look! A bunny!” the bunny ran away.

Minutes later...

“Look! A deer!” the deer ran away.

Lillian quietly (in German) thanked her misguided friend. Lillian hated wilderbeasts, deer especially. She originally thought that a deer’s head was a work of art. Not because they were pretty, but because they hung on walls. She found deer head art so aesthetically displeasing that even live deer were an affront to good taste.

Slightly tastier, the granola trail was spotty to begin with. Hours of natural selection upon his two-mile buffet made the trail nearly impossible to navigate. The new kid’s forward progress required complete concentration and a hunched back.

Cody looked everywhere. She hoped to see a wild fire lynx or an ancient Indian burial site. She didn’t.

Hallie stared forward past Cody and through the new kid. She hoped only to see something pretty and then yell at it.

“Look! An alligator!”

The new kid looked up. Lillian looked down. Cody looked everywhere.

“Where?”

“There, an alligator!”

It was an alligator. It was not eating granola.

“What do we do?”

“Don’t pet it!”

“Why would I pet it?”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I won’t.”

“Good, we should run away.”

“No, that might startle him.”

“We should walk away.”

“Bike away. This would be a lot simpler if we had bikes.”

“We don’t”

“Good, then we walk away.”

“Where to?”

“Away.”

“Good.”

The children went away from the alligator and towards the outer wall of Riopelle. Lillian tripped first; Hallie second.

Riopelle had two partial walls before arriving at the fort proper. Each wall had a canon, each canon had a cart, and each cart had rotted away. The canon took on the lazy look of a very heavy log.

“We could hide out here. We’ll be safe.” Cody assured her party.

“What are we going to do? Blast him?” the new kid said.

“I think that’s a vanity canon. It’s just for show. Unless! Does anyone have a canon ball, mortar, gun powder, a wick or a match?” Hallie’s friend Ben had recently read her a Wikipedia entry on canons. She never dreamed the information would be useful.

“I’ve got gun powder.”

“Good. That’s a start.”

“What’s an alligator doing here? Alligators aren’t native to Tennessee.” The new kid had also read an online guide to the native animals of Tennessee.

“General Henri Riopelle.”

“Who?”

“General Henri Riopelle cared about safety,” said Cody. “Ben told me all about it. Ben’s cool, but he’s really into history. He wrote a report on the fort. Just for fun. I don’t get it but some of the stuff was really interesting. Like the alligators. Riopelle actually put alligators in his moat. He had a moat; and it put alligators in it.”

“And they’re still here?”

“Apparently.”

Cody peaked over the wall. The alligator was far enough away that it still looked like a pet lizard. As the great reptile approached; it looked less like a pet lizard and more like an alligator.

“Um, it’s getting closer.”

“How close?”

“Like um, what? Like, twenty feet.”

He was over thirty feet away and waddling aimlessly, until startled by a scream.

Hallie peeked over the wall and screamed.

The alligator charged. His tail whipped over fallen leaves and granola. His gaping mouth snapped at the air. The short legs and waddling motion of a charging alligator would be comical if it wasn't inherently terrifying. Zoology books note that gators are much tamer than crocodiles; similar to bees versus wasps. For some reason, textbooks like to point out these differences, which are important unless, of course, you're being attacked by an alligator (or stung by a bee). Then it doesn't matter how docile the animal's potential.

The children froze. Each jaw gaped further, each eye wider; it was a Munch painting in expression, minus the expressionism. After five yards of forward progress for the gator offense, Lillian moved into action. She slipped away without anyone noticing, except the alligator. Her long hair chased behind, an alligator chased her hair.

“Lilly!” Hallie screamed. The alligator spun round.

Everyone moved in a separate direction. The alligator followed each trail and his own tail. The adventurers were 30, 43, and 62 feet away when they heard a feline growl over a reptilian chomp.

The beast was red, yellow, and wild. It was the rare wild fire lynx, mortal enemy of the rare Tennessee alligator. The children knew that they had stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire (lynx).

“I've found a cave.” Cody called out.

The hills were littered with caves. Some were natural, and some were wholly unnatural: caves made by desperate men in times of war. Those caves had doors; doors to protect against a Union assault or a big cat/gator attack.

The others converged on their reclaimed leader. She held the rusted iron-gate in one arm and windmilled the other, creating the universal signal for “Hurry up! This way, this way!”

“Everybody in.”

The gate swung close with a rusted creak and final clank. It was pitch black until Hallie flipped open her cell phone. The cave went green and blue.

“That’s a good idea, someone should call for help.”

“Oh, I don’t have any reception. This is just for light.” Hallie explained. “See, no bars. We’re in a cave.”

Hallie moved the phone around and revealed the high ceiling; she followed the stalactites down to the mossy walls. The weak light went out. A button, a beep and the light slipped down a long corridor.

“That looks nice.”

“Anyone feel like a little adventure?” Cody asked.

“Not really” said Lillian.

“Me either,” said Hallie.

“You have to come; you’ve got the only light.”

“This isn’t a light.” Hallie pressed a few buttons and caused a polyphonic ring. “It’s a cellular telephone.”

Cody swiped the phone. She pressed one, two, three and charged toward the corridor. Hallie ran behind followed by the new kid who pulled the unwilling Lillian.

“Hey that’s my flashlight.” Hallie grabbed her phone and took the lead.

The corridor was slick; water trickled at their feet. Bugs crunched with each frightening step. The blue-green light provided by the nation’s most reliable nationwide network gave the cave a ghostly quality. Their shadows danced behind like spirits playing catch up.

The corridors rounded the hill at a slight incline. The children could only notice it in the slow strain of their calves. The consecutive curves created a consistent monotony that continued until the path split. Nobody saw the fork coming because of the monotony and five feet of visibility.

A cell phone flashlight has an approximate range of five feet. Both routes continued significantly past five feet.

“Two roads divide in a cave.” Cody announced.

“And I chose the one less creepy,” said Hallie.

“Go Left.”

The spelunkers turned to Lillian, the ghost light against her face.

“Go left, it leads up.” Lillian asserted.

“We’re going up?”

“We’re going up.” Lillian pointed left. “You can feel in your calves.”

They had no choice, but to rub their calves.

“Left is up.”

“Yep.”

“So what’s down?”

“Right.”

“No, what’s down there?” Cody pointed right. Nobody could see this because the spotlight was on Lillian, who squinted her eyes enough to scrunch her nose. The effect was frightening enough that Hallie moved the light. Now everyone could see Cody point right. They could also see down the dim descending right corridor.

Every spoken word reverberated like Lou Gehrig’s farewell speech. Cody had tested this earlier by actually reciting Lou Gehrig’s farewell speech: a piece of historical trivia lost on the others. Since each syllable double upon itself, every phrase became a round. One voice sounded like ten. Not surprisingly, 100 bat wings sounded like a thousand.

From the right, the winged rodents ascended. Terror doesn’t describe the feeling of being 12 years old, in a new place, with new people, and 100 angry bats.

When he was five and covered in bees (an ill-reasoned vacation to Bee Island, don’t ask). The new kid’s parents informed him that if he stayed perfectly still, he wouldn’t get stung. However, the emotional sting stuck for at least seven years. He assumed that by remaining perfectly still; the bats wouldn’t suck his blood. This was true, but only because Tennessee grey bats don’t actually suck blood.

Hallie had never been submerged in bees, nor did her parents give practical advice. She ran away with the light and the bats. Bats don’t follow light; they follow sound. Luckily, Hallie didn’t have a light she had a phone. The phone was ringing.

“Where’d Hallie go?”

“Left”

“Up”

Hallie was so scared that she almost forgot to answer her phone. She knew that if she didn't answer her phone her mother would worry. The call was from her mother. Lillian created personalized ringtones for every contact on Hallie's list². Bat's can't resist a fugue.

If Hallie didn't pick up the phone; her mother would think something bad happened to her like a car accident, a boating accident, a train accident, or a bat attack. Hallie didn't want her mother to worry.

"Hey Mom, can I call you back?" Hallie yelled over the flapping and the screeching and the running and the screeching. "I'm kind of busy right now. Oh, yeah, I'm um; 34.97 ° North and 85.35° West. What?"

Hallie came to a complete stop. The bats flew past, and she was alone with her phone and a her GPS finder and her mother.

"That's our house?" Hallie said. "There must be some mistake. Um, let me check again. We're at 34.97 ° North and 85.35° West. What do you mean that's in China?"

"Hallie where are you?" Cody and the others crept down the black hallway toward their wayward friend.

"In China!" Hallie replied. "Oh nothing, Mom, I was just talking to Cody. Yeah, she's with me. Lillian and the New Kid. I don't know; I'll have to ask him. Yeah, we're fine. We just got lost somewhere on the Silk Road."

"Marco!"

"Polo!" Hallie said. "Yeah Mom, I've got to go. Cody's calling me."

"Marco!"

"Polo!"

This method of blind navigation has its perks. No guide is better on the Silk Road than Marco Polo. However, the entire basis of the game is to find each other using only sound. Ironically, this is the entire basis of a bat's hunting strategy.

² Mrs Vratil, Jean (Hallie's mother) and Mr. Vratil, Dan (Hallie's Father). Hallie's phone was for emergency and family use only. In the event of an emergency; Hallie was supposed to call her family.

The bats returned and Hallie dropped her phone. It slid down the pathway like ketchup leaving a glass bottle. The phone slivered slow and consistent to Cody who lied down to avoid the bats. The phone gently tapped her in the forehead.

“Oh my, God!” Cody exclaimed. She stood up with the phone. The bats had passed, but she hardly noticed “They got Hallie!”

“Who?” Lillian said.

“Who do you think,” said Cody. “The vampires. They took Hallie back to their lair.”

“Those weren’t vampires,” the new kid had had it with imagination. “They were bats.”

“That’s just what they want you to think. Vampires turn into bats to expedite their travel. They can’t apparate, like wizards or witches. They have to transmography and then fly to get where they’re going.”

“Hallie was taken by Vampire bats?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Cody clarified. “Vampire bats don’t live around these parts. Hallie was taken by vampires in the form of bats.”

“Well, then we better save her,” said the new kid. “We’ll need a stake, a cross, holy water, garlic—“

“—I’ve got garlic.” Lillian chimed in.

“Why do you have garlic?”

“It’s good for you.”

Throughout this conversation, Hallie had followed the wall (which was slimey and gross) back to her friends. She wanted to tell them not to worry, but preferred the vampire story.

“Hey guys,” said Hallie. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, we were just about to save you from vampires,” the new kid explained.

“Good thing you’re alright, because I’m terrified of the undead.”

“Me too.”

“Where do we go now? My suggestion is away from the bats.”

“My GPS finder says we’re already home. It’s accurate to within 15 feet. So we’re either at my house or in the front yard.” Hallie showed them the coordinates like that would help.

“That’s it!” Cody yelled and her voice echoed down the dark depths of the bat cave. “We’re below Riopelle. This is the underground network just below the fort.”

“Where did you think we were?” The new kid was irate.

“On an adventure.” Cody reasoned. “I knew these caves went all the way through the hill, but I didn’t know they went right under the fort. I say we stay the course. We’ll be home in no time. We’re already there.”

“That was my plan all along,” said Lillian.

Cody ignored Lilly and, phone in hand, guided the children up the gentle slope. The others stayed close behind. 40 meters later, the path ended at a modern door.

“Should we knock first?” Hallie asked.

Cody knock, knocked and waited.

“Nobody’s home, better turn back.” Cody moved toward the back, but ran into Lilly the wall.

“We’re not going back.” Lilly protested. “We’re going forward. We’re going to open that door and we’re not going back.”

She pushed Cody aside and opened the door. A single uncovered 20W bulb blinded the squinting children. Opening their dilated eyes, everyone but the new kid knew exactly where they were.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“This is the basement of the souvenir shop.”

“What’s with all the beanie babies?” The room had three sections: standard souvenirs³, holiday decorations, and beanie babies.

“I didn’t know this place connected to the caves.” Cody turned to see the sign on the door: EMPLOYEE’S ONLY.

“So that’s what that means.” Hallie pointed at the sign.

The new kid had surveyed the room enough, and walked towards the stairs, which promised a red EXIT.

“Where are you going?” said Cody.

The new kid was half way up the steps. He turned around with heaping piles of reluctance.

“We can’t go out there. Then they’ll know we went down in the caves.” Cody pointed at the sign. “The caves are for employees only. I don’t even have my work permit. We have to think this one through.”

Hallie, Cody, and the new kid lowered their heads in traditional thinker poses. This gave Lillian the opportunity to slip past, up the stairs and into the souvenir shop.

“Hi, Mrs. Barthes.” Lillian called from upstairs.

“Hi, Lillian.”

Lillian opened the door and whispered back to her friends. “The coast is clear.”