

WHICH WAY OUT

“Ow!”

“You OK?”

“No!” Brian shouted, as he picked gravel out of his knee.

Three children struggled with a very large Great Dane. One pulling and two pushing, they slowly, painfully climbed up the side of a steep ravine.

“Why do you have to have such a big dog, anyway?” complained Brian.

“Dachshunds are nice,” groaned Jimmy. “A Chihuahua, perhaps?”

“Stop grumbling and keep pushing,” Shirley said between puffs and pants. “Come on, Lady, come on girl. A bit more and we’ll have you out.”

Suddenly, they all tumbled together in a heap of tangled arms and legs.

“Hey, cut it out. Quit slobbering all over me. Yecck!”

“She’s thanking you, Jimmy. Now no more rabbits,” Shirley told Lady.

The dog gave her a silly, puzzled look.

“Is that how she got stuck down there? Chasing a rabbit?” asked Jimmy.

The boys looked at each other and then they raced back down to the bottom of the ravine.

“Boys,” muttered Shirley, shaking her head as she leaned up against Lady. But excited voices quickly brought her over to the edge. “What’s going on?” she called, as the boys scrambled back up.

“A cave. There’s a cave.”

“Yeah and we’re going to explore it,

“You know caves are dark, don't you?” she asked them.

“We don't have any flashlights, Jimmy admitted.

Shirley looked up. “Ah,” she said “but I've got some at my house.”

“Super, let’s go!”

Leaving Lady at home, they were soon standing in front of a large crack in the rock, the cave entrance. Shirley peered into the dark hole. “This is a cave? Doesn't look like much.”

“Don't worry, it's going to be awesome. We'll tell you all about it. Grab a flashlight, Jimmy; I'll go first.”

“Hey, wait-a-minute, Brian,” Shirley said. “I'm carrying one of the lights.”

“But you can't go!” cried Jimmy.

“Why not?”

“Because you're a girl," said Brian. As if that explained everything.

“So what?" Shirley's voice had a hard edge to it.

“Girls don't explore caves." Jimmy declared. Brian nodded his agreement.

“Well, *this* girl does!” You can't stop me; besides, those are my flashlights. You won't get far in the dark.” Shirley snatched both lights and began to stomp away.

“OK, OK, you can come, just don't be a pain,” Brian said, but to Jimmy he whispered: “You wait, she'll be scared right off. She won't tail us for long.”

Shirley pushed past Brian, knelt down and crawled through the narrow opening.

An eerie sounding voice echoed out to the boys: “Watch out for all the snakes when you come in.”

Brian and Jimmy found Shirley sitting on a rock a few meters into the cave. “There weren't any snakes,” accused Jimmy.

“No? Guess I must have scared them away. What took you so long, anyway?” Shirley flashed her best irritating smile.

“Lets go," growled Brian, as he and Jimmy brushed by.

Shirley shrugged; she hopped down, scooped up a bundle she had brought along and followed the boys into the blackness. Their lights created small cones of sight in an otherwise invisible world. Although the entrance was narrow, the cave turned out to be large enough for them to stand. They carefully moved down a steep slope to a rockfall. Blocks of stones, as big as cars, rose nearly to the cave ceiling. They clambered over the jumbled pile and down the rocky incline on the far side. Here the passage split. Both paths seemed to be dead-ends.

“I guess we might as well go on back.”

“I feel a cold draft from over there.” Shirley swung her flashlight so the beam dropped to the right. A hole pierced the solid rock.

“Kind of small, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, *real* small.”

Shirley didn't hesitate; she thrust her light into the forbidding, yet beckoning darkness.

“Shirley, you can't go in there. What if you get stuck?”

“Looks like it opens right up,” she said as she started to wriggle into the tunnel. Hands grabbed her legs, and she was dragged back out.

“This time I’ll go first!” Brian ducked into the hole and quickly disappeared. Shirley and Jimmy saw only the bottom of Brian’s sneakers as he squirmed his way farther and farther into the tunnel.

"I guess it's longer than I thought," Shirley said, looking innocent. Jimmy gave her a questioning look, then bent back down to check on Brian.

"He's gone! Brian, Brian," yelled Jimmy.

"Come on, it's OK."

When Shirley squeezed out of the tunnel, she found Brian and Jimmy waiting for her. They were strangely quiet.

"Look," said Brian.

Shirley added the beam of her flashlight to his, and they all stared. The immense chamber was a maze of beautifully clean, pure white stalactites and stalagmites. Among these sparkling pillars they aimlessly wandered deeper and ever deeper. Gradually the deposits fused into giant sheets that formed a canyon. As the ceiling closed down and the passage narrowed, Shirley could almost feel the tons of rock above pressing down on her. Soon they were not able to stand upright, but had to walk in an uncomfortable crouch.

As the passage made a sharp turn to the right, Shirley yelled: "STOP!" Brian had been looking at the ceiling. A step in front of him the floor abruptly dropped off.

"Whew, that was close. Thanks, Shirley," Brian said, as he carefully leaned over the ledge. Without a word, he handed his light to Jimmy and

he quickly slid over the lip of the drop-off. Shirley went last. With her stomach pressed to the cool rock, she carefully tossed the lights down and then she followed, using niches and nubs of rock, exactly as the boys had. Looking back at the drop-off, now a cliff that rose high above her, Shirley wondered, can we climb back up? She picked up her bundle, which was much smaller now, and trudged after the boys.

The passages had been dry. Now the walls glistened with moisture and the sand floor was damp. Around the next corner a dark, standing pool of water reflected the light to the far side. There the stone created an impassable wall. Shirley joined Jimmy and Brian drinking deeply from the pool. Something wiggled in the water as she scooped up another handful.

“What is it?”

“I think it’s a shrimp,”

“It has no eyes. It’s blind!”

“Don't need eyes in the dark,” commented Brian

“And see,” said Shirley, “you can watch their insides work.” They stared with fascination at the tiny creature's churning and pulsating internal organs.

The water was nice and cold but slightly salty, so Shirley began to search for a new passage. She thought she saw a place that looked promising. A cravasse split the wall. With arms and legs braced, she

'chinnied up' to a sandy ledge. A path extended mysteriously ahead. "To think," she said to herself, "this has never been seen by anyone. I'm the first." Suddenly she slipped and sprawled head long into a cavernous room. Her heart raced with excitement.

"Oh! It's, it's so beautiful!" For thousands of years the beasts had thundered across these walls, always pursued by the fearless hunters armed with crude spears.

But she had only a brief glimpse of the red, yellow, orange and black figures. The flashlight dimmed and then abruptly went out. Shirley was plunged into a blackness she had never experienced before. There were no small chinks of light, no reflections, no glows, just nothing. Everything was totally invisible, even her arms and legs seemed to disappear. It was as if she had no body at all. As quickly as the light vanished, the cold crept in, making her feel uneasy. Quickly she lost all sense of direction and balance, and she felt sick to her stomach. Shirley clenched her hands so tightly that the fingernails dug into her skin, but she felt no pain. The panic completely consumed her. "What do I do?" she moaned.

"Shirley? Hey, Shirley!"

Hopelessly lost moments before, now she had a direction. She scrambled toward Brian's voice and the faint beacon of his light.

"What's the matter? You're shivering," Brian asked.

“Hey, your flashlight is out. Tsk, tsk, were you afraid of the dark?”

Jimmy said with a smirk.

Shirley surprised them: "Yes. Now let's go back."

“You've got to be kidding!”

“My light is out, and the other is getting dimmer," snapped Shirley.

“Let's go!”

Brian glanced at his light, nodded and headed toward the tunnel.

“But there are three tunnels, I don't remember three. Which is ours?”

“Over here," said Brian.

“No, here," countered Jimmy.

“I know which one," said Shirley quietly.

“Oh, yeah? Well, if we hadn't had to go find you, we wouldn't be lost now.”

“That's not true, Jimmy, and you know it," Shirley yelled back.

Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“We'll get out the same way Theseus did. You remember how he escaped from the Minotaur. Oh, come on!" Shirley got blank stares.

“Well, *I* do *my* homework." She picked up what looked like a very small ball of string. "See, I tied the end of this to a rock by the cave entrance. I wanted to be sure we couldn't get lost. All we do now is follow it back.

Pretty smart, huh?"

"Smarty-pants more like it," grumbled Jimmy.

"Well you weren't smart enough to think of it, dummy!"

"Who's a dummy?" Jimmy shouted, shaking a fist in Shirley's face.

Shirley was itching to stuff that fist right down Jimmy's throat. Instead, she smiled her most smug, arrogant smile, and slowly began to wind up the ball. "Coming?" she sweetly asked.

They retraced their way hurriedly until the drop-off, now a cliff, that stopped them cold. Brian and Jimmy both tried jumping for the ledge.

"This is getting us nowhere. We'll never get up"

"Stop complaining, and help. Think of a way out," Brian growled.

"All right!" Jimmy said angrily, "How about this? I'll get on your shoulders, I should be able to reach that overhang then. The rest of the way up is easy. Once I'm on top, you throw me the light, and I'll go for help."

"No!" The urgency in Shirley's voice made the boys turn and stare at her.

"No, please," said Shirley. "I can't stay in the dark."

"Oh, great. Just great! A wonderful time to be afraid of the dark. You won't be alone, so what's the problem?"

"You don't understand; you don't know what it's like."

“OK, so you go.”

“Brian, you really don't know what it's like. We have to go together.

Believe me, please!”

“Well, how do we do that?”

“You are the strongest, Brian, so Jimmy and I will get to the ledge on your shoulders. Then we'll make loops in this for your - -”

“It'll break,” interrupted Jimmy.

“I don't think so. Actually, this is a type of nylon line, more like fishing line than string,” said Shirley, “and it's really strong. All you need is two or three loops so you can reach our hands. We pull you up.”

The three soon sat with their legs dangling over the drop-off. “I can't believe we made it,” Jimmy whispered, relief evident in his voice.

“Does it hurt much, Brian?” Shirley asked as she wrapped some cloth around his bleeding hands.

“Not too bad. I never thought ‘fishing line’ could be so sharp. So let's get going.”

“Now it's a piece of cake,” assured Shirley, as she started winding up the line again.

“Everything looks so different from this direction. I guess the string was a good idea, Shirley.” Jimmy had barely gotten the words out when they collided. “Why did you stop?”

“The string.”

“What about the string?”

“I'm at the end,” she said softly.

“You can't be!” yelled Jimmy, “I don't know where we are, but it's sure not - -”

“It must have come untied. I'm sorry,” said Shirley.

“You're sorry? You stupid idiot, you can't even tie a knot!”

“You're no rocket scientist yourself, Jimmy! Now shut up!” Brian shot Jimmy a look that said he meant it.

“Oh, no,” blurted Shirley. “Look!”

The light was dimming. As it began to flicker and fade, Shirley commanded: “Sit down and hold hands, quickly, quickly.”

Blackness wrapped around them like an enormous blanket. Shirley felt as if she were being smothered. “Please, not again,” she sobbed.

“Shirley, do you still have your flashlight?” asked an invisible Brian.

“Yes, why?”

“Maybe the bulb burned out and the batteries are still good.”

Anxiously she passed the last battery to Jimmy, and they fumbled it. The battery slipped between her fingers. “Don't move,” Jimmy said.

“Everybody stay still, and I'll feel around for it.” Jimmy was very careful as

he swept his hand back and forth over the ground. As gentle as he was, the air became thick with dust, and they all began to cough. After a few minutes of blind searching, Jimmy spat dust from his mouth, "I've got it!" he cried.

"Thank goodness," sighed Shirley. The pain was sudden and sharp as the light came on. It seemed to burn through her eyes and pierce straight to her brain. Although the darkness had not been as terrifying this time, she endured the pain willingly, even gratefully. Anything for light!

"Have a clue to where we are, and how to get out of here?"

It was Brian. Steady as always. I wish I could be so calm, Shirley thought.

"I guess we should just stay where we are, until someone finds us."

Shirley bit back a nasty reply. "Jimmy," she said, "nobody knows we're here."

"Oh, yeah, right."

"What if we go ten feet, then turn around and see if we can recognize anything. We just keep doing that."

"It's worth a try, Shirley," agreed Brian.

The third time looking back, they all thought it seemed familiar.

"Hey, I remember these." Stalactites, hanging from the ceiling, glittered in the beam of the lone flash light. "We're going the right way!"

“It's so beautiful; I hate to leave,” sighed Shirley. She hung back and was swallowed once more by darkness. And again, that nameless fear began to gnaw into her mind. It would turn her insides to jelly, her brain to unreasoning mush. Shirley could feel panic edging ever closer. “No!” she shouted.

The glimpse had been so brief that perhaps it was all merely her imagination. Real or not, the desire to see those paintings again was so strong, that it pushed back the panic. “I won't be frightened! You can't scare me, not anymore.” The fear shrivelled to a small seed, and Shirley quickly locked it into a tiny corner of her mind. She knew it would always be there, but it no longer would have the power to control her.

Shirley heard the boys calling, and she saw the faint glow in the tunnel. The cavern began to gleam and glitter, it's splendor beckoning once again. “I'll be back,” she whispered. Then she walked toward the light.