

The Great Green Gulch

By ReadWorks

"You've got to be kidding me!" A puddle of drool surrounded Jules's new Nikes. They were his birthday gift, custom-colored and everything.

His twin sister, Ilana, had gotten a puppy for her birthday. Ever since Ilana had become obsessed with puppies, Jules had wanted nothing to do with them, especially Barnaby. Everything Barnaby did was a miracle to Ilana, and a disturbance to Jules.

"He's not trained, Ilana. He's just lazy," Jules squawked when Ilana started showing off Barnaby's ability to sit on command. As far as Jules was concerned, Barnaby did not know any tricks, and he most certainly did not know how to respect people's personal property. Barnaby lifted his head and stared at Jules, who, in spite of himself, felt a pang when he looked into the dog's sad, inquisitive eyes.

"Oh, lay off it," Ilana said. "He's the smartest." Jules could hear her words beginning to move into baby-speak. "And the most adorable! Aren't you, Mr. Barnaby?"

"Could you not?"

"Not what? Have the most awesome doggy in the whole wide world?"

"No. Could you not act like the most annoying thirteen-year-old in the whole wide world?"

"Very funny."

"Cut it out, you two!" their dad said, lowering the *Wall Street Journal* just enough to reveal two disapproving eyes, his glasses balanced on the tip of his nose.

It had been like this ever since the end of summer. Jules and Ilana used to do everything together. They sketched comics together. They ate lunch together (one peanut butter and jelly sandwich, one peanut butter and fluff sandwich, split in half so they'd each get both). They even wrote comedy acts together, which they'd perform for their parents once a week in what they called the "Sunday Theater."

They hadn't put on a show since the middle of August, right around the time Ilana and Ryan started hanging out. Ryan was Jules's friend—or at least he used to be. Now, when Ryan came to the house, it was to see Ilana, not Jules. Sometimes they'd all hang out, but the way Ilana laughed at Ryan's not-so-funny jokes drove Jules nuts. And the way Ryan looked at Ilana while she laughed made Jules want to throw up. It wasn't that he didn't expect his sister to have a boyfriend, but *Ryan*?

Ilana and Jules had just begun writing their first full-length comic book when she lost all interest in comics, leaving Jules with nothing more than a prologue. He had a tough time drawing skyscrapers and shadows, and making the text look the way it did in real comic books. Those were Ilana's specialties.

Still, he wasn't about to beg for her help. Jules knew how to draw the figures. He was, after all, the one who'd created their protagonist, The Great Green Gulch, and his sidekick pet, Rocky Raccoon. Jules and Ilana still weren't sure if The Great Green Gulch was going to be their hero, their villain, or both. It was time to get back to work.

Jules ran up to his room, grabbed his sketchbook, and flopped down on his bed to read what they had so far. After he read, he closed his eyes, envisioning each scene. He heard footsteps through the open window and looked outside. It was Ryan. Jules would never be able to focus between his inane jokes and Ilana's giggles.

He shoved his sketchbook and pencil in his back pocket and went downstairs. He pulled on his old, worn sneakers and stomped toward the door. The *Wall Street Journal* lowered once more.

"And where exactly are you going?"

"Out. To get some work done for once," Jules said, glaring at Ilana.

"Well, that sounds like a fine idea," said their dad, already back behind his wall of stock market reports. "Dinner's at seven."

"What? How come you let him go out right before dinner but when I ask..." Ilana's voice faded behind the door. Jules brushed Ryan's shoulder as he strode down the driveway, straight toward the woods across the street.

There were plenty of trails that Jules and Ilana used to walk a mile or so down the road, but they'd never entered the woods over here. There were no clear paths, only thick trees, skinny saplings, thorny bushes, and endless fallen leaves.

Jules marched right in, trudging through the browning leaves. He walked with conviction but without direction, wandering to the left of a group of pines and then veering right around a giant elm. Seeing the white puff of his breath, Jules realized it was actually pretty cold out. *He was actually pretty cold.* He'd been so heated when he rushed out of the house that he hadn't thought to bring a jacket.

He moved faster, hoping he might warm himself up. He started to jog and then broke into a full-on sprint, kicking up leaves as he went. Jules's mind felt wonderfully empty as he ran, and his body really did start warming up.

The trees around him looked different than the ones near the edge of the forest. They were gnarly and knotted, nearly choked by twisting vines. Something hard hit the top of Jules's foot, and he lurched forward, his stomach flying from his body as he nose-dived toward the ground.

He landed softly in a pile of leaves, and the shock dissipated. He felt under the leaves where he'd caught his foot, and discovered a root. Or was it a vine? The more he looked, the more it seemed like they were all connected.

Jules laughed and let his body sink back down into the leaves. He closed his eyes, picturing the next scene of his story. *The Great Green Gulch tore through the forest in silence. He was its savior and also its greatest danger; he warded off those who tried to harm the trees, but with breath that turned toxic when his anger flared.*

Jules could picture the steam flowing from The Great Green Gulch's nostrils like smokestacks. He could practically feel its warmth on his skin. Or was it actually getting warmer outside? It couldn't just be his imagination. It was too real.

Jules opened his eyes, and there it was: The Great Green Gulch. Drool dripped from the side of its mouth and came toward Jules in slow motion.

Jules covered his face as it splashed him. The liquid hit his clothes and trickled down his neck, and Jules squinted, rubbing his eyes with the one little dry spot he could find on the inside of his shirt.

The Great Green Gulch looked different. He looked...hairier. He looked directly at Jules, with sad, inquisitive eyes.