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# wheeling the Snake

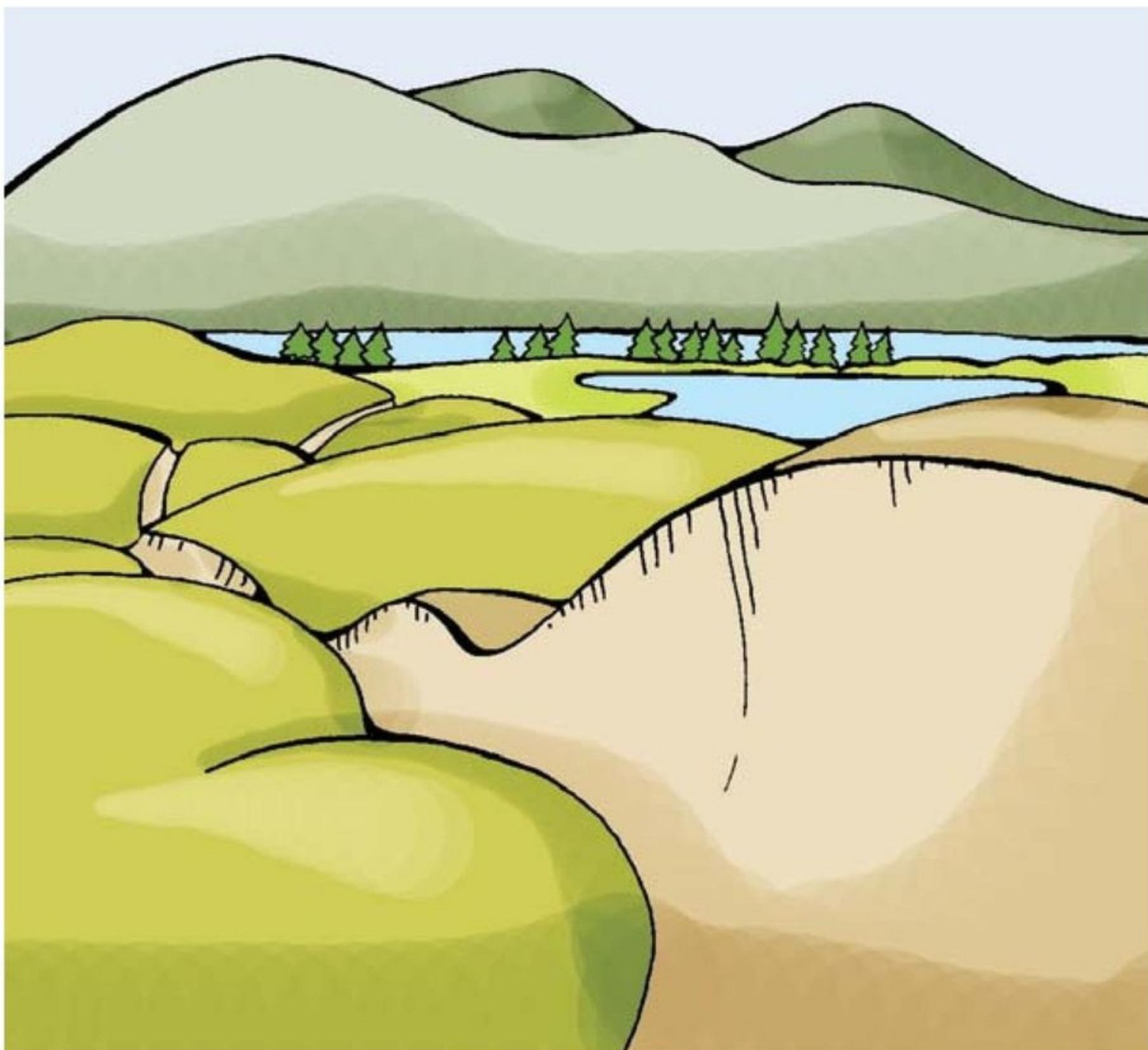


Written by Stephen Cosgrove  
Illustrated by Carolyn LaPorte

# Wheeling the Snake



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In eastern Washington there are rolling hills called the Horse Heavens. There are natural springs here, which feed Elliot's Lake. From a dam at the head of the lake, concrete ditches nearly 10 feet deep and 15 feet wide channel irrigation water down to the farmlands below. One of these ditches snakes five miles down to the alfalfa fields near Benton City. In November and December, the water is stopped, and the concrete pipeline is empty.

From Benton City, you can see the concrete ditch twisting down from the lake. The skateboarders and in-line skaters at the Drury Middle School and Benton High call it the Snake. The goal is to ride the Snake on your choice of wheels all the way to bottom. When you fall, they call it being bitten.

Those few who have actually wheeled the Snake sew a coiled snake patch on their jackets.





Late Halloween night, ten-year-old Isaac Green was still awake. He lay in bed with no hope of getting to sleep any time soon. He had been out trick-or-treating earlier, consuming most of his candy along the way. He got a lot of candy. He ate a lot of candy.

But it wasn't the sugar that was keeping him awake. Earlier that day the gates on the irrigation system had been closed.

The Snake was alive!



Isaac lay there dreaming of hips, corners, curves, and the 20-foot long, two-foot-high iron rail that ran along the bottom in an area called Lizard Ditch.

Then there was the Snake itself. Only a handful of older teenagers had ever wheeled the Snake without being bitten and earned the patch.

Isaac wanted that patch in the worst of ways.

Last year as he skated Lizard Ditch, he would look up at the Snake and dream about how he would ride it. Of course, he never did.

But Isaac knew he and his best friend, Sam, were going to do it. He and Sam were two of the three best skaters in their school.



Even though it was late, he decided to call Sam and tell him that this was the year. He reached for the phone just as it rang.

Startled, he answered, “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Jessie.” Jessie was the third best skater in his school, even if she was a girl, and also Isaac’s friend. “Let’s do it,” she said.

“Do what?”

“The Snake,” she challenged. “You, Sam, and me!”

“Well, I . . .” There was a knock at his bedroom door.

"Isaac," said his dad from the hall, "who's on the phone?"

"It's Jessie."

"Well, don't be too long."

"I won't."

He paused for a second, as much to let his dad get down the hall as to come up with an answer for Jessie.





“Sorry,” he said.

“Well,” she asked, “you want to?”

“This is so weird. I was just calling Sam to ask him the same thing. Yeah, why not!”

“Yesss!”

“Hey,” Isaac laughed as he hung up, “don’t forget your broom!” It was a tradition for the skaters, on the first Saturday after the dam closed, to sweep out the ditch.

Isaac fell back on his pillow, his mind racing.



The next morning, Isaac boarded over to Sam's house with his broom. Sam was still asleep, but his mom let him go down to his bedroom to get him up. Isaac smacked the bed with the broom, and Sam came awake, fast.

"Hey, what the . . . ?"

"Let's go!"

"Go? Oh, yeah, I forgot. We've got to sweep the ditch."

"And," Isaac said, picking a miniature Snickers bar out of Sam's Halloween bag on the floor, "we're going to ride the Snake!"

"No way!" Sam said, as he quickly rolled out of bed.

"Jessie and I are going to do it. You want to?"

Sam, realizing that Isaac was dead serious, muttered, “I want to, but what about Cliff?”

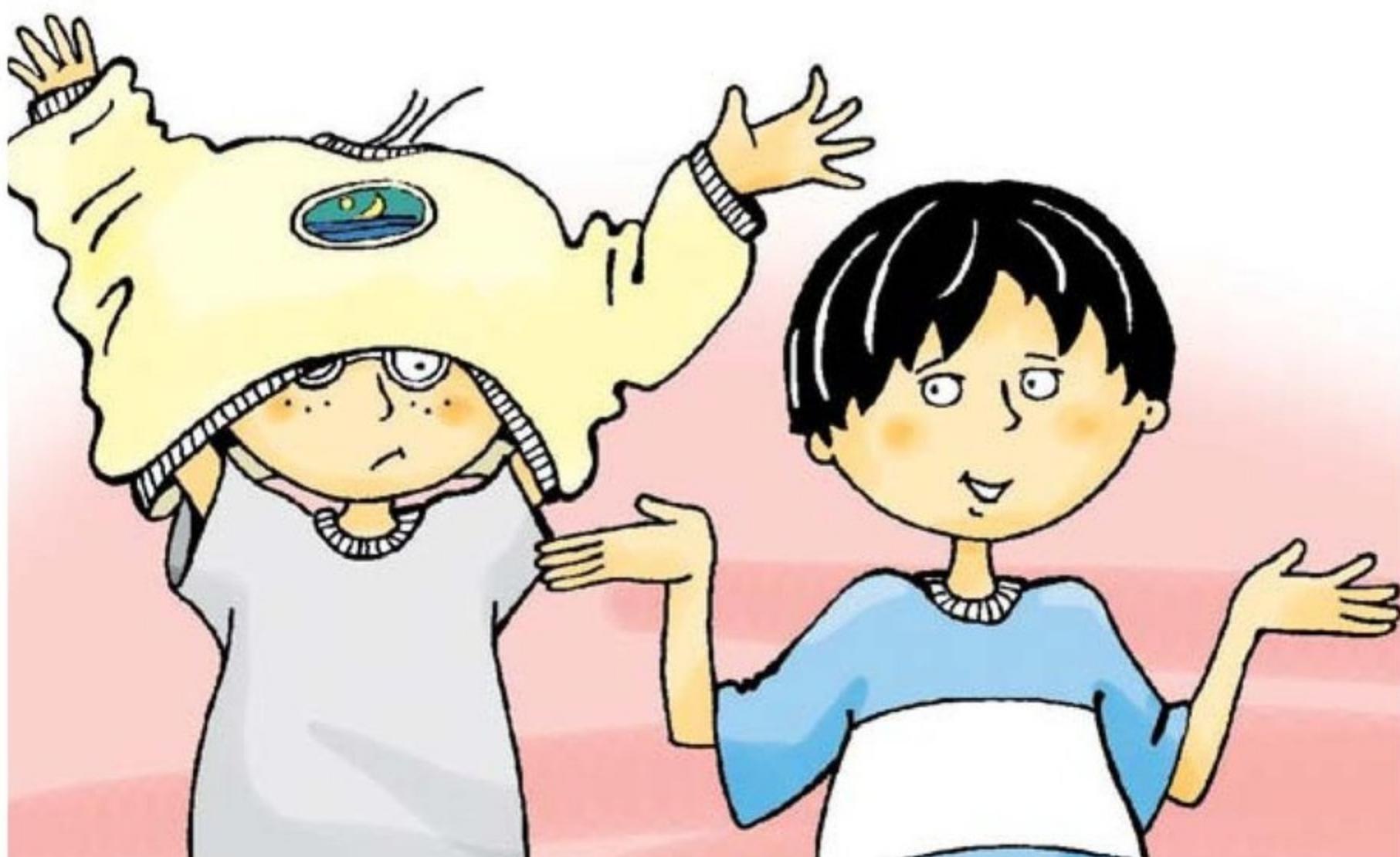
Cliff!

Cliff was a senior at Benton High. He was the bad guy’s bad guy. Last year while Sam, Jessie, and Isaac were goofing at the rail on Lizard Ditch, Cliff rode by and did a poor backside 180-kick flip, plowing right into Sam.

Cliff was so mad he nearly blew a gasket. “Get out of here,” he snapped. “This is no place for kids. If I catch you here again, you’ll be skating on your face!” Then he wheeled off.

They had avoided Cliff ever since.





As Sam pulled on a sweatshirt, he continued, "He's never going to let us get to the top, let alone ride down."

"I've got an idea," Isaac laughed. "What if we take Jordie, Sandra Glassner's little brother? Cliff is interested in Sandra. He has to be nice to Jordie."

"Do we have to?" Sam groaned. "Jordie's a rollerblader, not a skateboarder!"

"He could be a hip-hopper for all I care. He's our ticket to the top," chuckled Isaac. "Let's go!"

By the time the boys got to the base,  
Jessie was already sweeping the Lizard rail.  
With her broom in hand, she ran up the  
rounded side of the ditch to the two of them.  
“Bad news, guys,” she quipped. “Remember  
last year? Our good friend Cliff isn’t going  
to let us get near the Snake.”

“No, problem!” Isaac smiled. “Jordan  
Glassner’s going to get us up.”





As if he'd been cued, Jordie rolled up on his skates. "What's up, boarders?" he said sarcastically as he wheeled by.

"Hey, Jordan," Isaac shouted. "Come here!"

"What?" Jordan asked suspiciously as he turned back to the group of skateboarders.

"Well," Isaac said, "you're a good skater, right?"

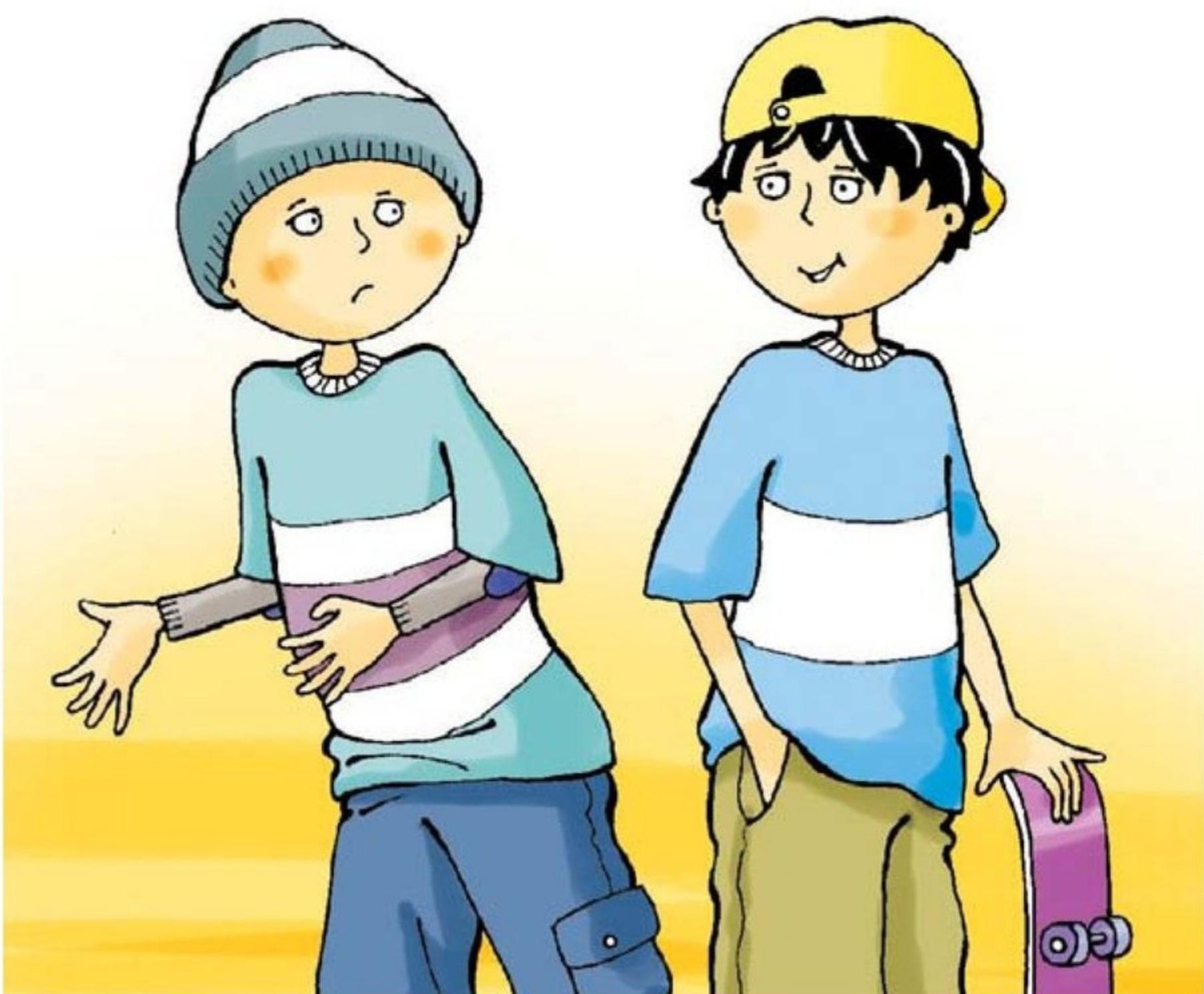
"I'm the best!" he snapped. Jessie and Sam rolled their eyes in disgust.

"Then there's no question as to whether you can ride the Snake or not?" Isaac asked.

"Any time," Jordan bragged.

"Well," Isaac continued, looking at the others, "we're gonna do it today, and we want you to go with us. Meet us back here in an hour. We'll go up together."

Unwilling to walk away from the challenge, Jordie muttered, "Uh, sure, I'll be here." He tried to mask his fear as he rolled away.

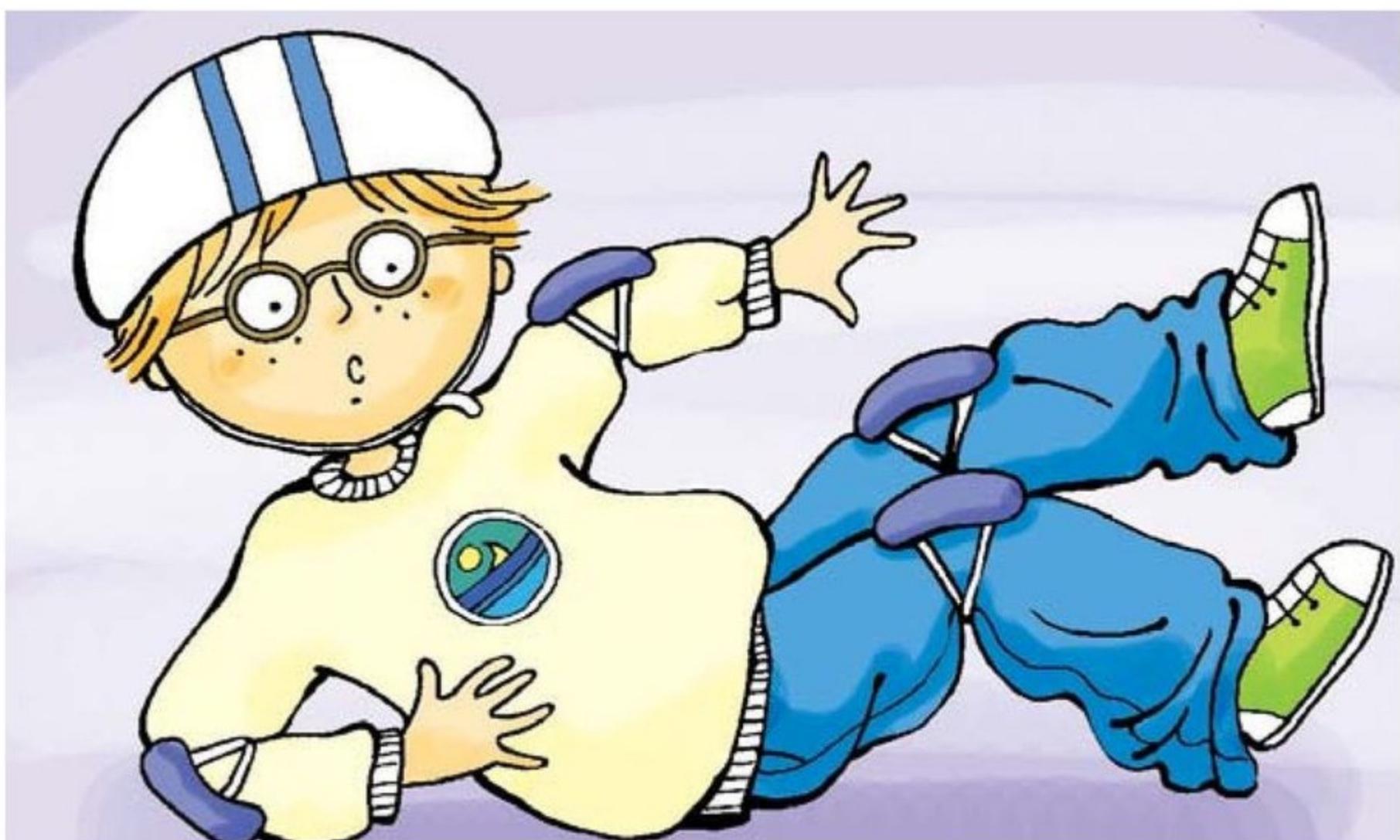


Without saying a word, the three began warming up; skating the rail. They were so intent on their practice that they didn't notice the long, ominous shadow stretching across the empty ditch.

Sam rolled down one side and was on his way back up the other side to do a quick kick when a large meaty hand pushed him in the chest. He flew off his board and skidded hard down the concrete bank. If it hadn't been for his elbow pads, he would have been really hurt. He looked up angrily, ready to explode.

His temper cooled quickly.

It was Cliff!





"Sorry, kid," Cliff sneered, "didn't see you."

By now, Isaac and Jessie were kneeling beside Sam, looking up at the bully. "That is so chicken, Cliff," snarled Jessie. "You are such a loser!"

Cliff was never in the mood to take anything from anybody, even a girl. He dropped his board and started down the pipe.



Just then Jordie skated up. "Hey, Cliff," he said. "My sister is down at the base and wants to talk to you. Something about a movie."

"Huh? Sandra?" asked Cliff, distracted. "She wants to see me?" Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed his board and ran thundering down the hill.

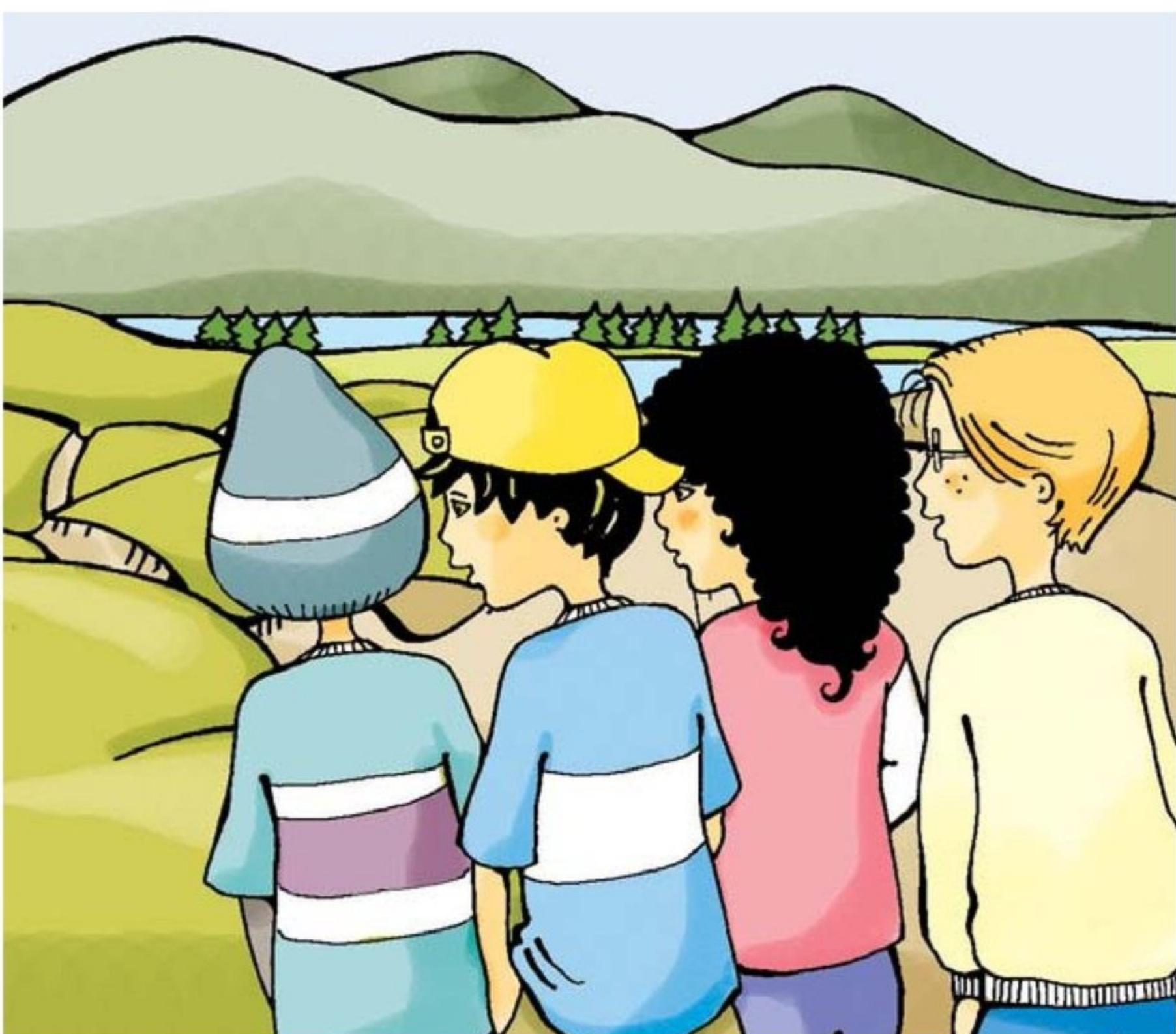
"Man, that was lucky," Isaac sighed in relief. "Your sister was really looking for him?"

"No," laughed Jordie, "I made it up."

"Gee!" said Sam, scrambling to his feet. "Let's get up there while we've got the chance."

The hike to the dam, the beginning of the Snake, took them nearly an hour. At the top, five high-school kids stood around idly spinning the wheels on their boards. One of them was trying to stop the bleeding on a bad scrape on his arm. The group looked nervous, none of them ready to try the Snake.

Jordie, Isaac, Jessie, and Sam all turned together and looked down. The ditch was steep and ran straight for about a hundred yards before breaking into a hard right turn.



While the three boarders watched, Jordie nervously sat on the edge of the ditch and laced up the boots of his in-line skates. Buried in their own thoughts, they didn't say anything. Jordie took a deep breath, "Okay, let's do it!"

Isaac stepped onto his board and crouched a bit as the wheels bit into the side of the ditch. He could hear the others following. The ditch was steeper than anything he had ever boarded, and soon he was going way too fast to make the first turn. He kicked the tail out on his board and skidded to a stop.

The others pulled up behind him. "I don't know," said Isaac hesitantly, "this is really steep."





From above, taunts and catcalls came from the high schoolers. They found some measure of courage in harassing those who had taken the challenge that they couldn't.

The four of them might have changed their minds. They might have walked down. But Jessie removed that option. "Blow it out your ears!" she yelled back at them. Then she stepped on her board, and just like that, she was gone!

The others, not to be outdone by a girl, followed.

They fairly flew down the next section. They were moving so fast, the air seemed to be sucked right out of their lungs. They had ridden through several of the early turns when Sam raced past Jessie and then tipped an edge. He spun a ragged 360 and nearly dropped, almost bitten.

Again, they stopped.

They were all breathing hard, openly frightened. If it was possible, the Snake was even steeper in this section. Without saying a word, they climbed to the top of the ditch only to be confronted by Cliff.





When Cliff was mad like this, he liked to hit something. The only something in reach was Isaac.

Roaring profanities, Cliff swung his fist. Isaac had two choices—to get on his board and ride, or to let Cliff have some punching practice.

There was really no choice.

With wheels roaring on the rough concrete surface, the four of them blasted down the hill. They flew into the final curve and through a crowd that had gathered at the edge of Lizard Ditch. The last three hundred feet of concrete was all sparks and dust as they each dug in their edges and ground to a stop.



They stood there looking dazed and trying to catch their breath. Up the hill, kids from their school were running toward them, whooping and shouting.

The four looked at each other and then laughed.

There was really nothing to say. They had done what few had done before. They had wheeled the Snake, and not one of them had been bitten.

Skateboarders and rollerbladers all over the county still talk about that ride. It's what legends are made of.

It's what makes wheeling the Snake as cool as it is. Few have tried, and fewer have earned the coiled snake patch.

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