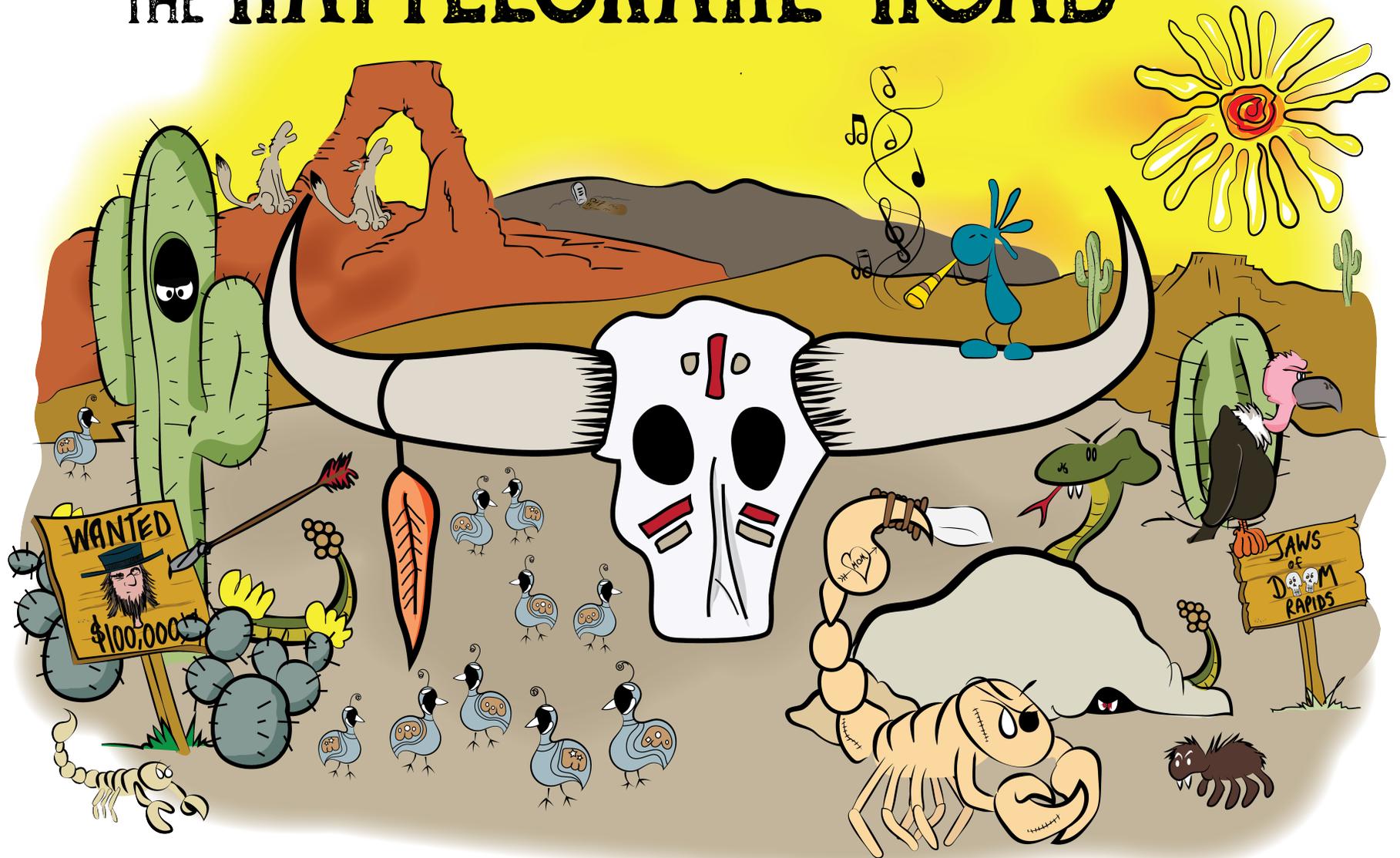


THE RATTLESNAKE ROAD



BY JAY WRIGHT

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“Today is the day,” Ellie declares. “I’m going down Rattlesnake Road.”

Nate nearly swallows his spoon.

“Ellie! You can’t. No one has ever come back from Rattlesnake Road.”

“I’ve made up my mind,” she says, pulling on the fanciest, shiniest pink boots Nate has ever seen.

GG Bear is already dressed and ready to go.

“I’m going to the Scorpion Saloon and I’m getting a Sarsaparilla root beer.”



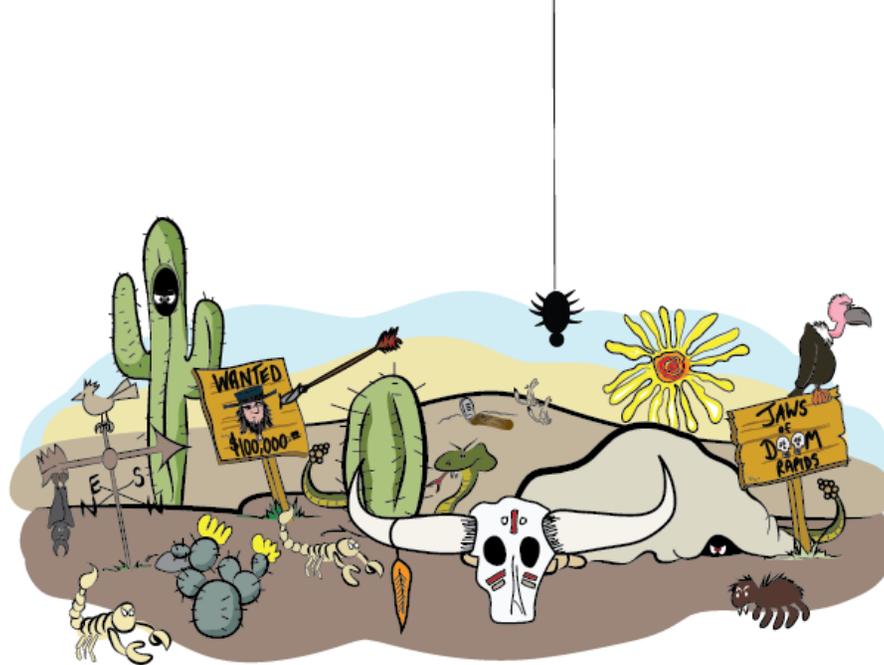


Everyone knows the Scorpion Saloon serves the best Sarsaparilla root beer in the wild, wild west. But everyone also knows it's the scariest, most dangerous place in the wild, wild west.

Nate knows there'll be no talking Ellie out of it. There'll be no baseball cards, no soccer games, and no reading comic books in the hammock today. It will be up to him to protect her.

Outside, Ellie picks six sunflowers from her garden. She tucks them in her holster and sets off toward Rattlesnake Road.



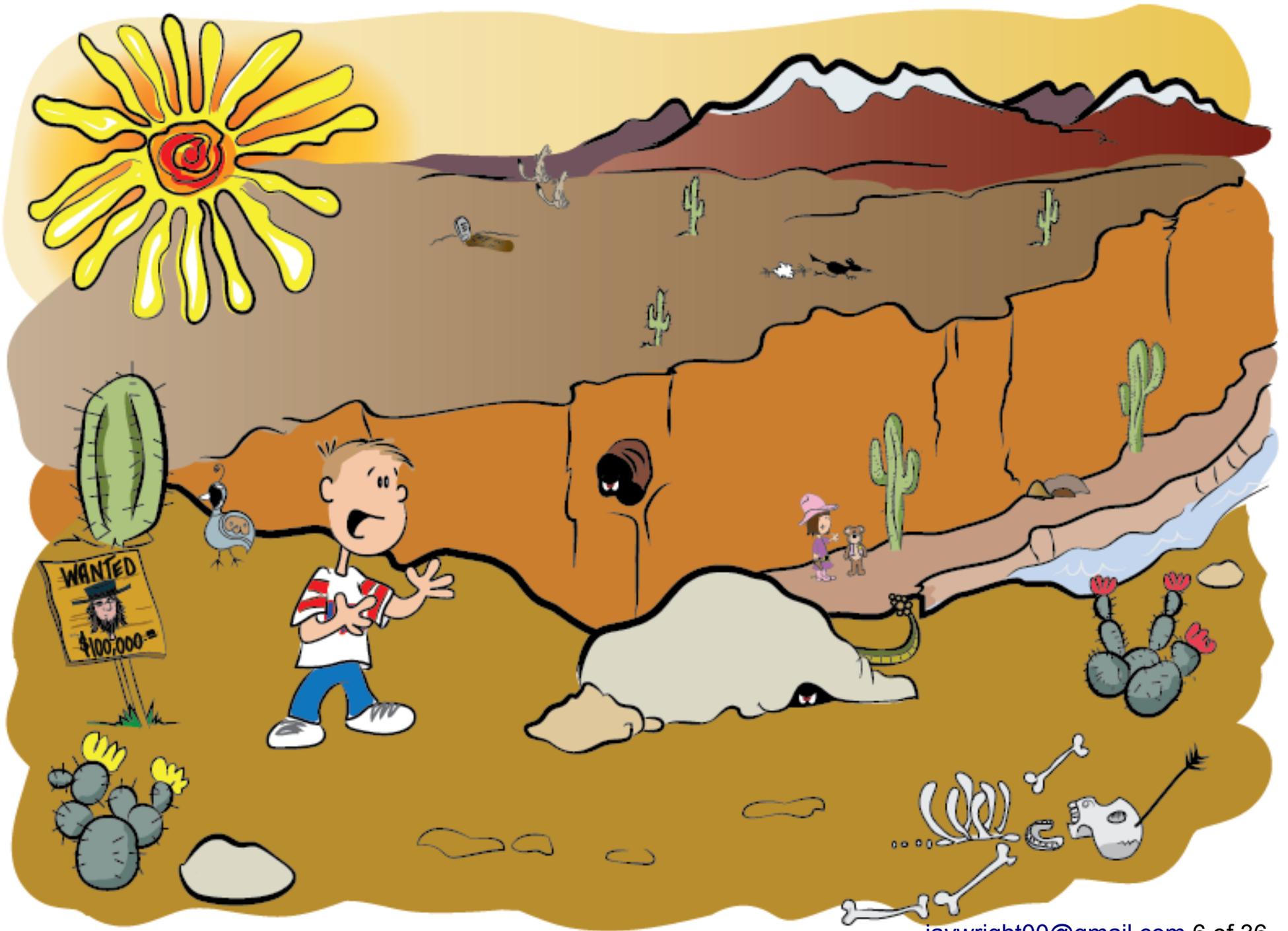


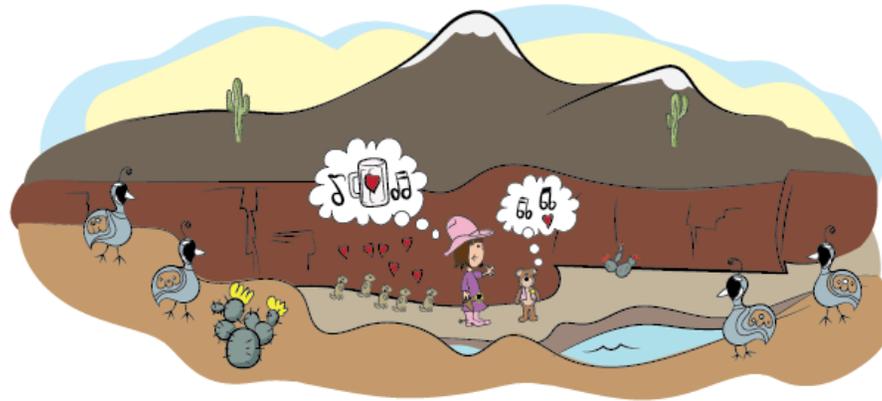
Rattlesnake Road is crawling with scorpions, tarantulas, and rattlesnakes. It's lined with cactus and blisters under the hot sun. Outlaws hide in the canyons, some never to be seen again.

The road twists along the Rogue River. It leads to the Jaws of Doom rapids, named for the pearly white “teeth” in the middle of the river. Just beyond is the Scorpion Saloon. Eyepatch, the worst, rottenest villain in the history of villain-hood runs the saloon.

Even the sheriff is afraid to set foot on Rattlesnake Road.

“Ellie has lost her mind!”

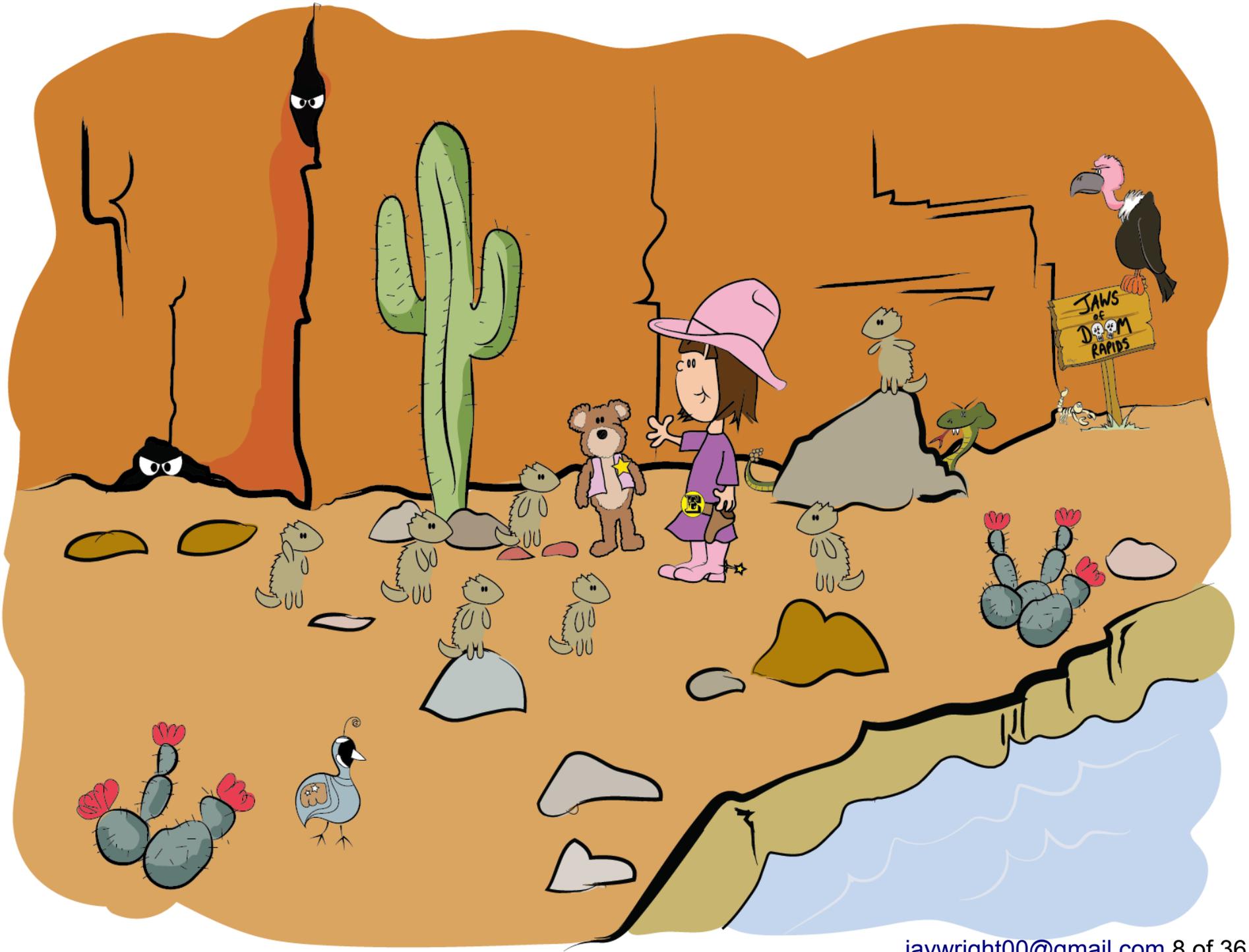


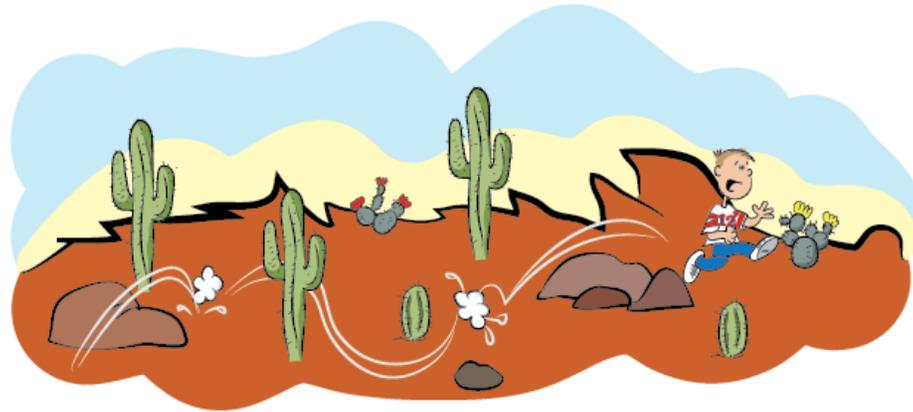


Ellie’s bold path catches unwanted attention. Eyes open, scales slither, tongues hiss, and claws sharpen. Ellie and GG Bear remain unafraid. With each step, they grow a little more thirsty for that Sarsaparilla root beer.

A lounge of horned toad lizards, shy but curious critters, emerge from their dens and are the first to greet her.

“Look GG, horny toads! Now we have a real posse.”



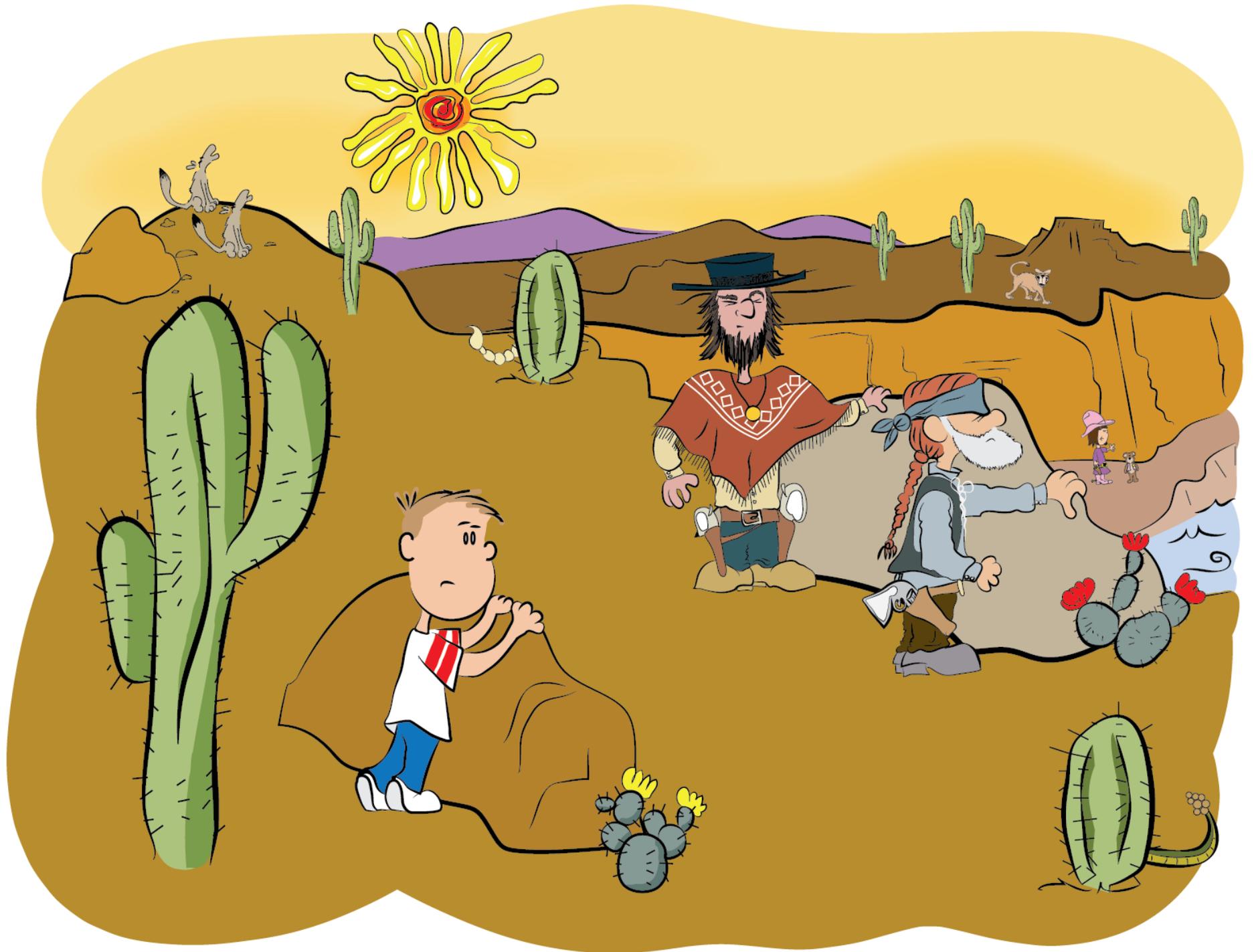


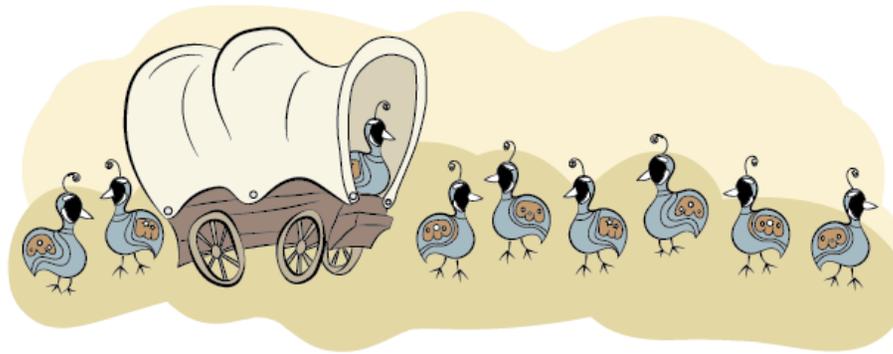
Nate races along the top of Razorback Ridge.

“What do I do? What do I do? I have to save my sister!”

He runs so fast, he almost crashes into two scruffy no-good bandits. They stare down the valley at Ellie.

“They think her spurs are made with real gold,” Nate spies on them. “They’re planning to steal her boots!”





Ellie's path is blocked by the meanest rattlesnake she has ever seen. It has eyes of coal and a rattle that rattles like a can of rusty nails.

It stares at Ellie, but Ellie stares right back.

They hold their ground.

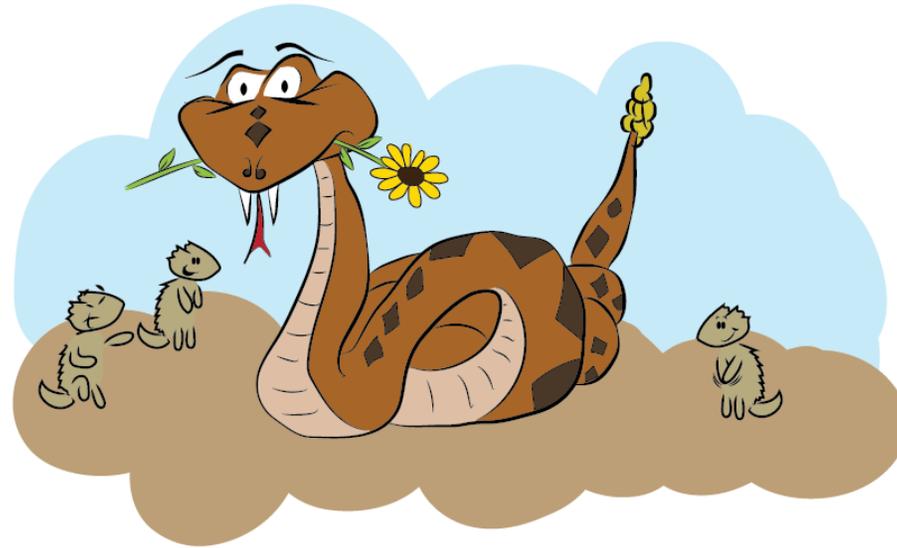
No one breathes.

Neither budge.

Then, quick as lightning, Ellie snatches a sunflower from her holster and stuffs it in the snake's venomous mouth.

"Come on friends, I'm getting thirsty."





A wise old tortoise interrupts Nate. “You must be the brother of that rogue little girl.”

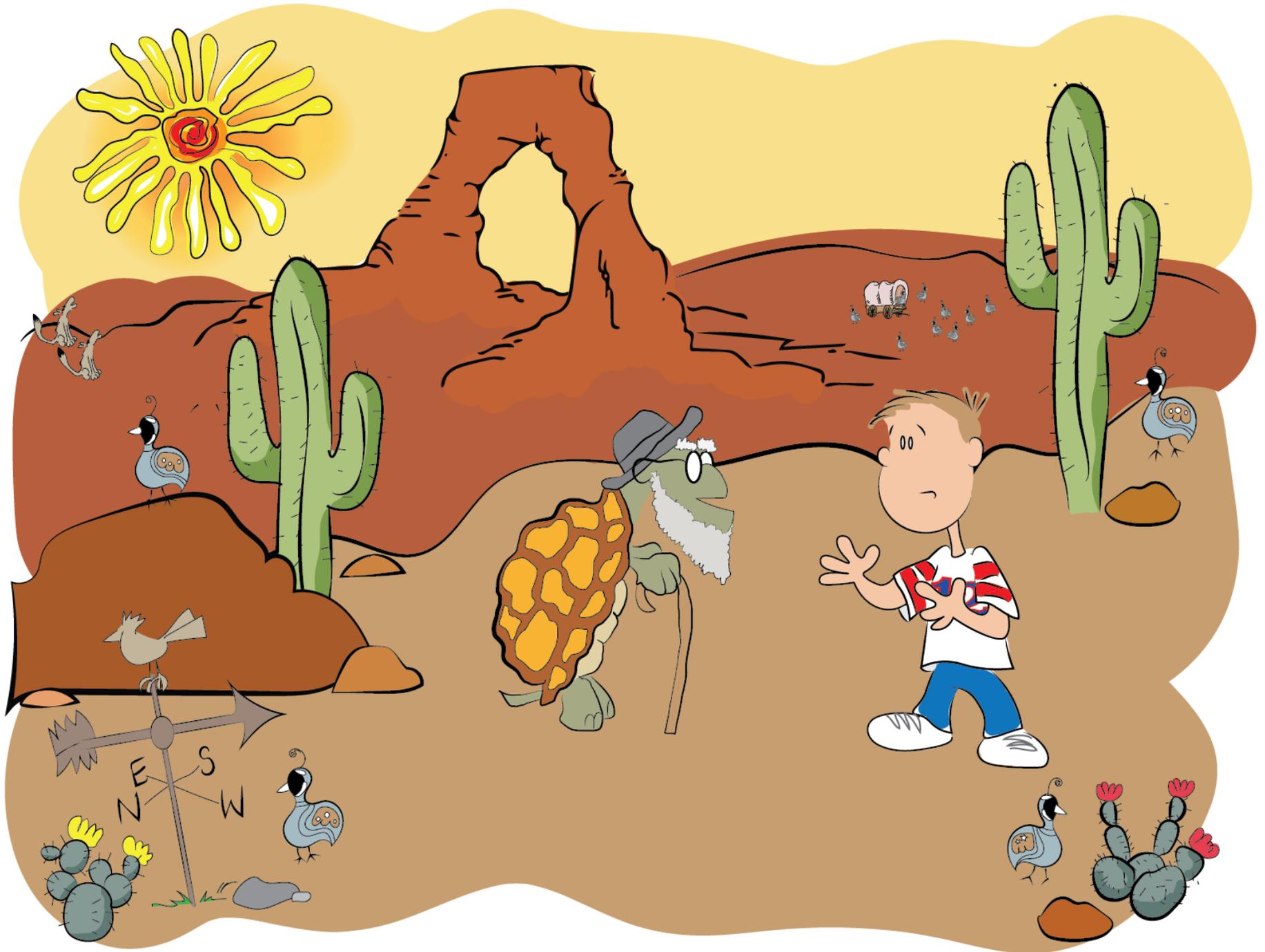
“Yes I am,” he gasps, watching as the bandits slip away.

“I must warn you. Eyepatch ‘poisons’ the Sarsaparilla with the spiciest chili peppers in the valley.”

“That’s vile!” says Nate.

“You must warn your sister.”

“I will.” Nate thanks him and races after the bandits.





Nate finds Ellie by the ancient petroglyphs.

“Ellie!” he can’t believe it, “this is no time for art class.”

Across the river, a hungry mountain lion creeps down the ridge.

Nate flags down a road runner and points, “that mountain lion is licking his lips and watching Ellie.”

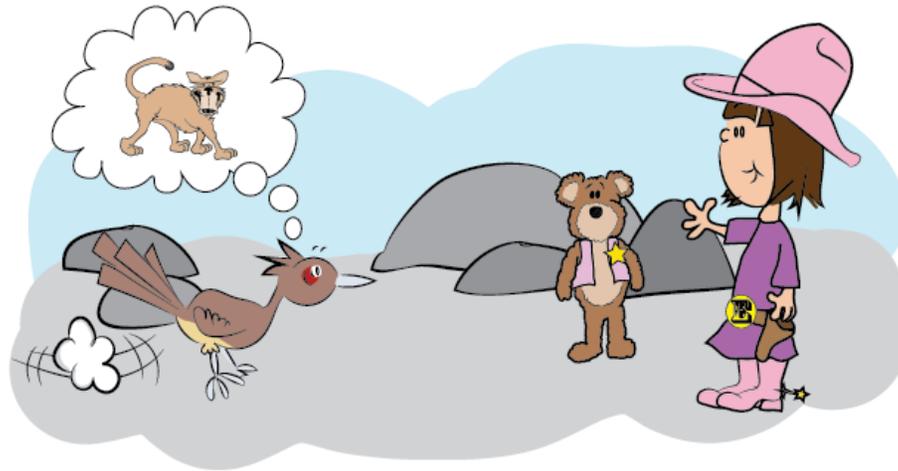
The road runner shudders.

“Please, go warn her.”

Like a bolt of lightning, the Road Runner races off with his message.

“Who does she think she is?! Koko-Ellie?”





The bandits are closing in on Ellie.

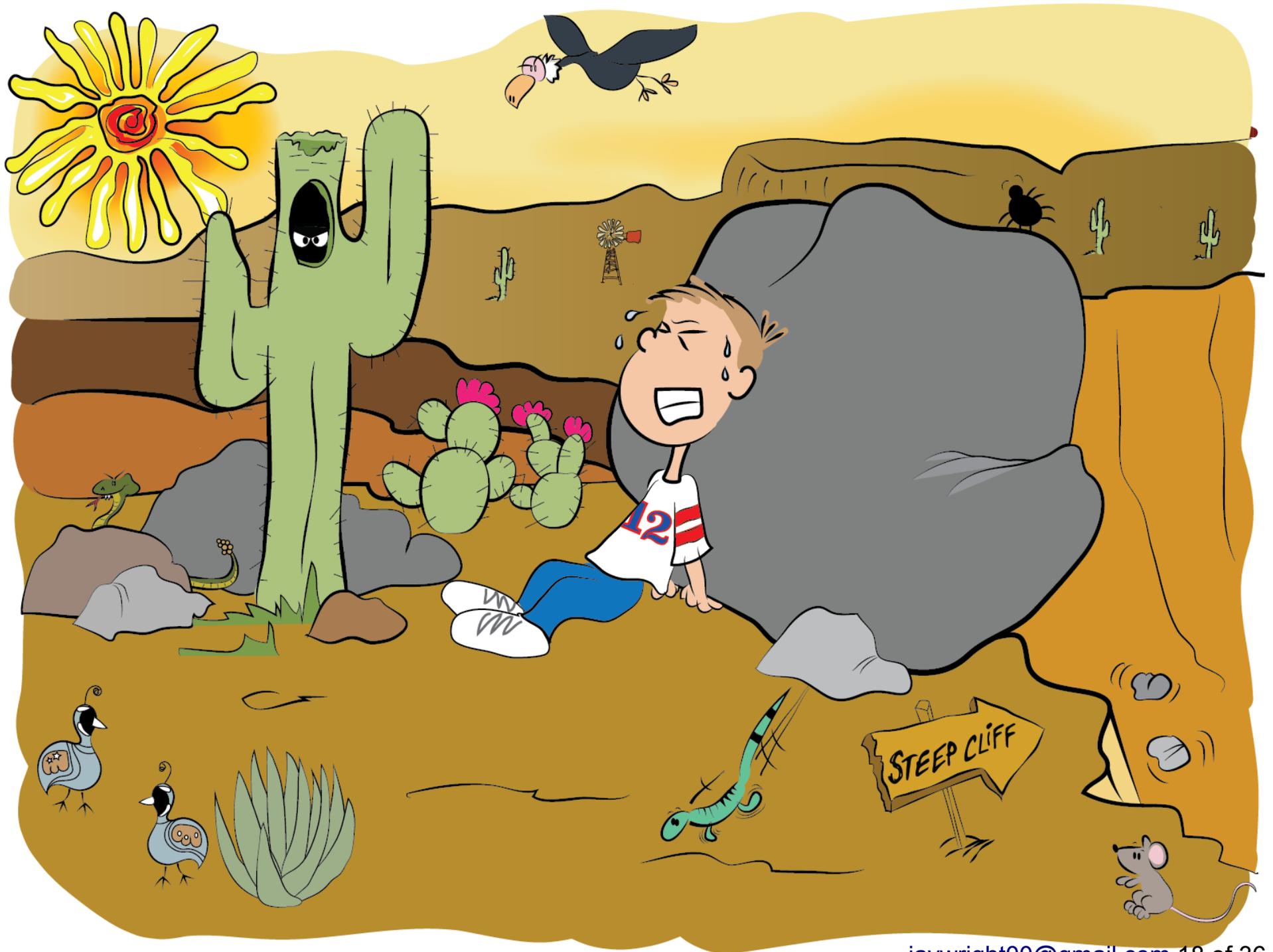
Nate has to think fast.

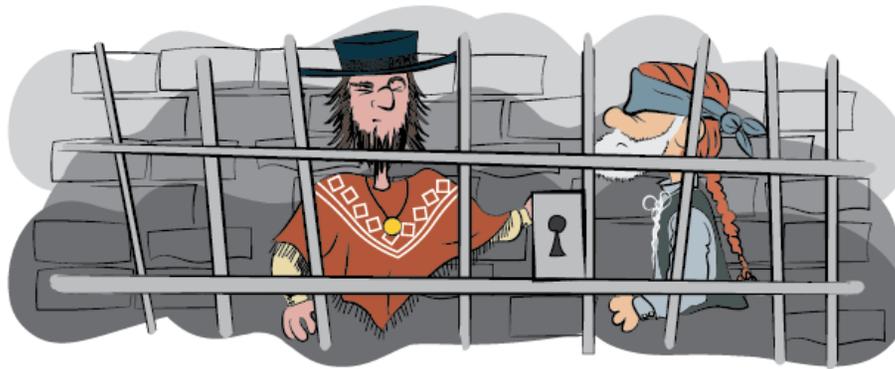
He begins pushing the largest boulder he can find. He grunts, strains, and musters all his strength. The boulder barely moves.

Nate's determination is fierce.

Finally, it rolls! An avalanche of rocks slide down right in front of the bandits. When the dust settles, their path is blocked.

Nate runs off to see what trouble she'll get into next.





“It’s Beautiful!” Ellie says admiring the scenery. “I thought the desert was bare and plain. But there are bright green cactus and deep red cliffs. Look at all the yellow wild flowers. Everything is in bloom!”

She and her posse come across an old tombstone, bleached by the sun. She kneels down and lays a sunflower by the grave. “Poor old chap.”





Ellie's posse reaches the end of the road. They stare at the Jaws of Doom.

"See those teeth," she points. "No boat has ever made it thru."

Ellie tosses a sunflower into the river.

"But I think they go the wrong way."

The sunflower floats naturally thru the rapids.

"See that? Sometimes, you just gotta go with the flow."

Ellie picks up GG Bear and hops into the river.

"I cannot believe it!" Nate shouts. "Ellie just jumped into the Jaws of Doom!"





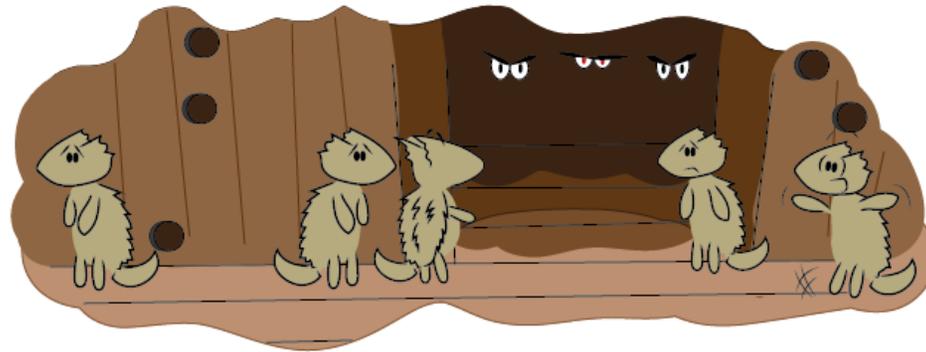
Following the sunflower's path, Ellie and her posse wash up on a warm sandy beach. They are soaking wet. Ellie wrings out GG Bear and they all dry out under the hot desert sun.

"Just up yonder is the Scorpion Saloon."

GG Bear looks cautiously up the canyon.

"Did you know the quail harvest the Sarsaparilla? They bring it to the saloon in a covered wagon," Ellie tells no one in particular. "I read that at the library."





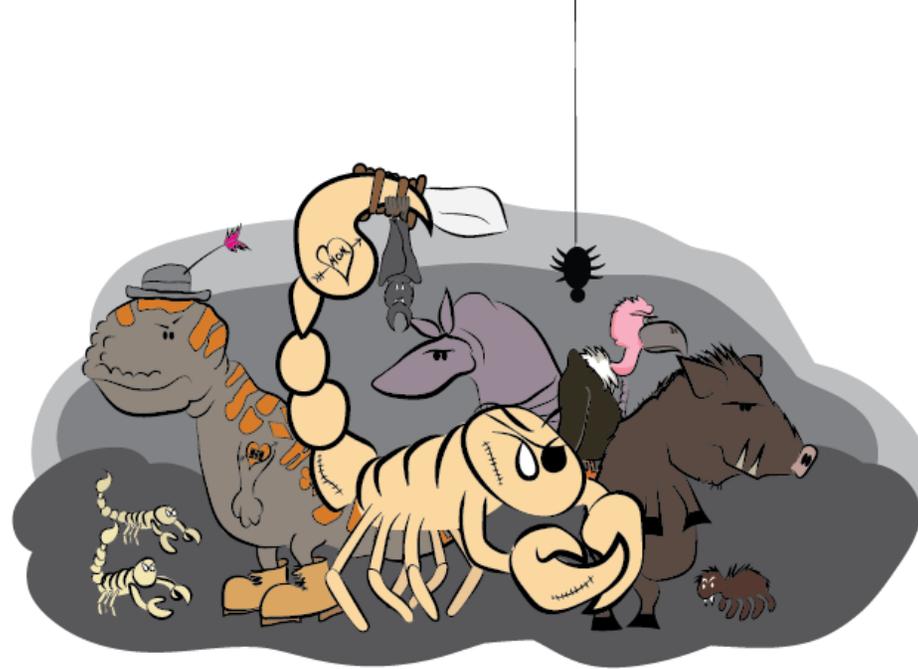
It's a hot, dusty afternoon inside the Scorpion Saloon. It's dark, except for the light streaming thru old bullet holes shot in the wall.

When the old porch creaks, everyone turns. In the doorway stand the fanciest, shiniest pink boots they have ever seen.

There's dead silence.

All eyes are on Ellie.





“Barkeep! I’ve come for that there Sarsaparilla root beer.”

“We’re out!” barks Eyepatch.

“I didn’t come this far for nothing,” says Ellie. “I saw the quail and I know you’ve got a’plenty.”

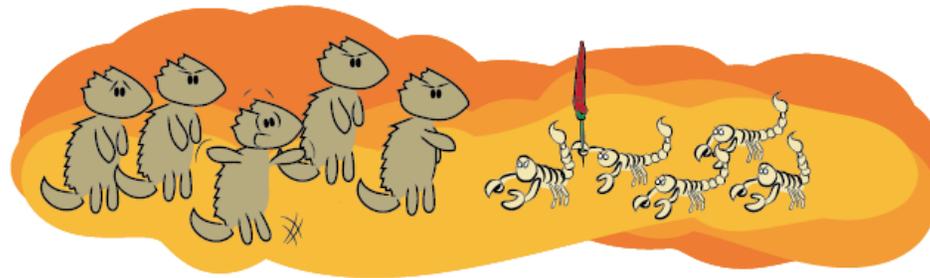
Eyepatch stares her down.

He pours her the most beautiful stream of root beer she’s ever seen. Then, he turns his back to perform his vile, wretched trick. He drops a clawful of spicy chili peppers into her mug.

When he places it on the bar, Ellie reaches for the handle.

“No Ellie!” Nate bursts into the saloon. “Don’t drink it!”





Ellie raises her mug toward Nate. “Howdy Pardner.”

Then she turns to Eyepatch, pulls a sunflower from her holster, and sets it in the ‘poisoned’ root beer.

“We did that your way,” she pushes the mug back, “and now we do it my way.”

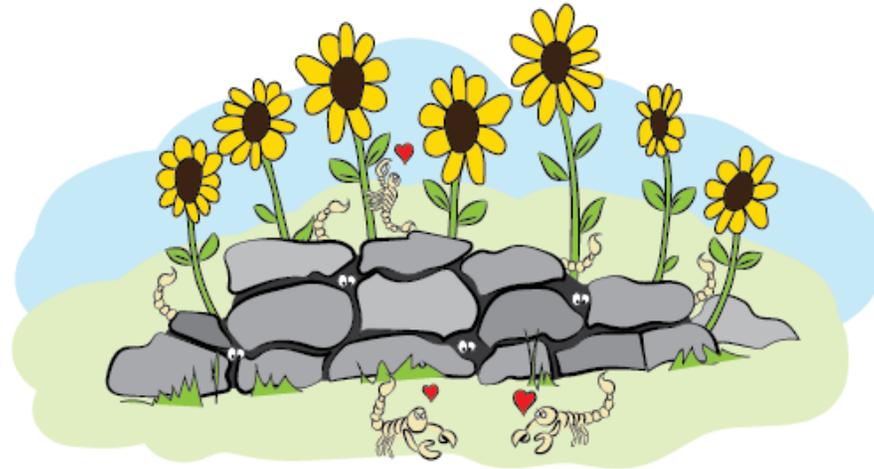
The room gasps.

“I didn’t order no chili peppers!”

A black widow spider faints.

“Fill me up a fresh mug and keep your claws where I can see them.”





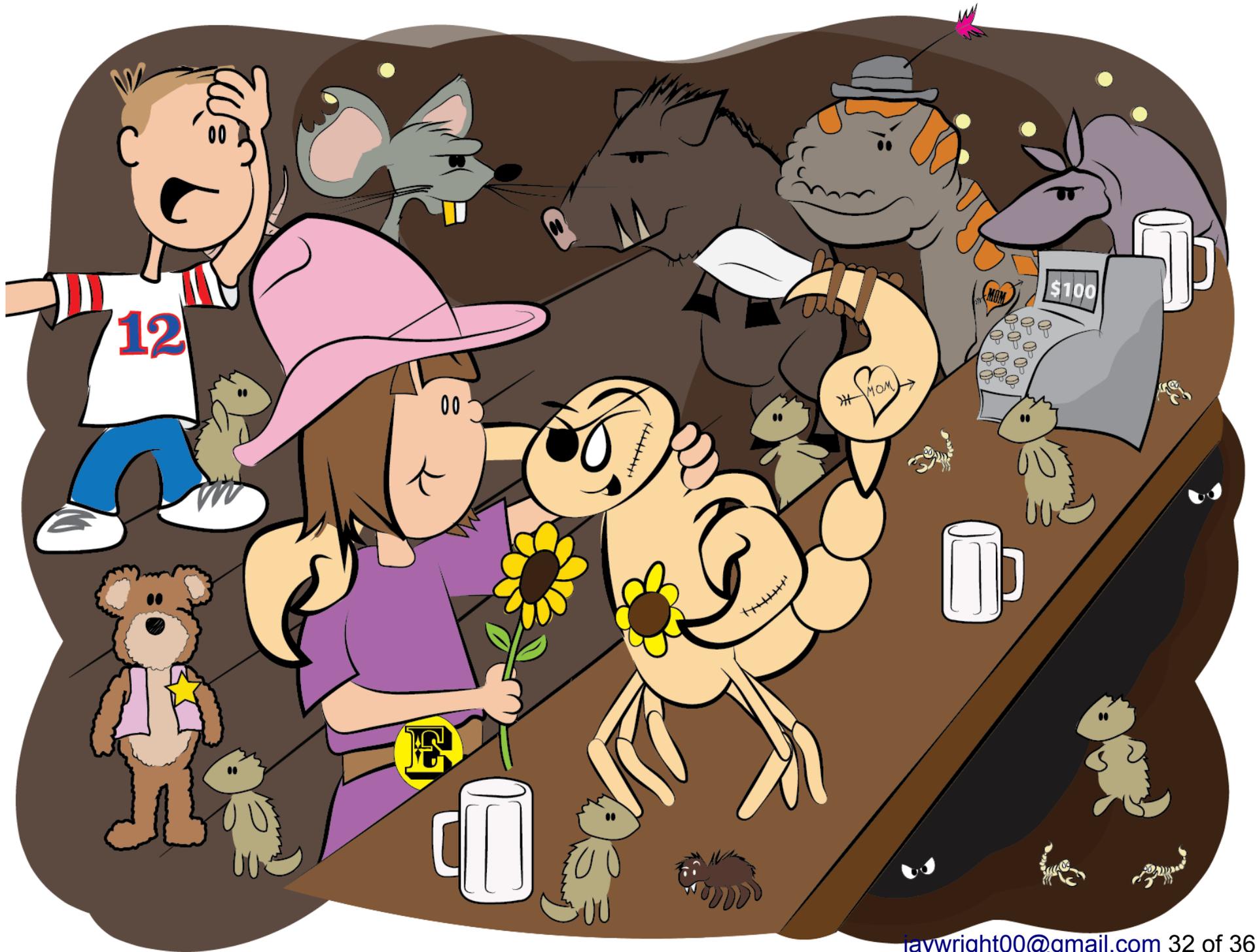
“Lil’ Firecracker,” Eyepatch calls her. “You see, my mom raised me in a stone wall by a field of sunflowers.” Eyepatch stands up and shows Ellie the sunflower tattoo on his belly. “I’ve had a hard life, but my happiest days were living by those sunflowers.”

He puts the sunflower in a mug of fresh water.

“I haven’t seen one of these since I was a young scorpiling.”

“That one’s from my garden,” Ellie says. “I planted it myself.”

“Well, I’m gonna pour you the best darned mug of Sarsaparilla root beer you ever did taste.”





Ellie slaps her allowance on the bar. “Another round for my posse!”

Everyone raises their mugs and toasts, “Cheers!”

With thick, foamy root beer mustaches, Nate slips into a game of cribbage and Ellie plays crazy eights. She has two sunflowers left, one for Nate and one for her.

They play all afternoon until the Gila Monster accidentally eats the cards and GG Bear decides it’s getting dark.

“Nate, this is best Sarsaparilla root beer we’ve ever had. Dontcha think?”

“It sure is Ellie.”



“Lil’ Firecracker,” says Eyepatch, “there’s an old mine with a secret passageway to get around the Jaws of Doom. Old Toad will show you the way.”

“Thank you,” says Ellie. “You keep the seeds from that sunflower and in the spring you can plant your own garden.” And with that she dusts off her fancy, shiny pink boots and sets out for home.

“It’s good to be a little rogue once in a while, isn’t it Ellie.”

“Yes, Nate, it certainly can be delicious.”



