

*Backpack Adventures Series*

*Midnight at  
the Marble  
Tomb*

*by*

*Marguerite Swilling*

*Produced through the Partnership for  
Environmental Education and Rural Health,  
Texas A&M University*



**Marguerite Swilling**, author of the Backpack Adventure Series, has loved reading, writing and science all her life. From writing and directing an original play in sixth grade, she advanced to essay competitions in high school and published poetry at Texas A & M where she majored in English and minored in Earth Science. Although she is a certified secondary teacher, Mrs. Swilling has spent the past twenty-three years in the business world and has written and presented training seminars on a variety of topics. Mrs. Swilling lives in Georgetown, Texas with her husband and two daughters.

## **Backpack Adventure Series**

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## **An Introduction to Backpack Adventures:**

Welcome to the coolest club in middle school! Of course, no one outside the club can know just what makes this group so different. The secret is in the backpack.

**Roman Castillo**, a young teenage technology whiz, developed a powerful mini-computer that can transport people through space and time. He controls the computer with a wireless keypad complete with a screen that displays the co-ordinates for the time and space travel destination. He shared his invention with his best friend, Travis, as well as four others.

**Travis Allen**, Roman's best friend since kindergarten, is the son of a veterinarian and loves animals, the outdoors and math. He wears western jeans and boots that highlight his long, lanky profile. He has a short temper except with his stepsister, Summer. He's very protective of Summer and doesn't like having her travel with the BPC as the group has nicknamed their awesome device.

**Summer Martin**, Travis' stepsister, is two years younger than Travis and Roman. Her bright blue eyes are as merry as her laugh and her blonde hair is cut short and sassy. She loves to read and has a great memory for history and geography. She uses a wheelchair due to a terrible, traffic accident when she was five. Travis and his aunt built a motorized chair for Summer, and she can participate in just about everything with her two best friends, Connie and K.T.

**Connie Castillo**, Roman's sister and Summer's best friend, has long, silky black hair and her dark brown eyes are framed by thick, black lashes. She loves her brother, but sometimes questions the use of the BPC. Quiet and reserved, she is a serious student. Science is her favorite subject and dance is

her favorite pastime. She and Summer have a mutual best friend named K.T.

**K.T. Watson**, is an only child who loves her best friends, Summer and Connie, like sisters. She wears her curly, jet-black hair in dozens of tiny, tight braids so she'll look more like her favorite athlete, Venus Williams. K.T. is full of energy and courageous. A natural leader, she often instigates the adventures with the BPC. She loves soccer and cheerleading. She helped form the Backpack Club and brought in its newest member: her neighbor, Jace.

**Jace Long**, classmate and neighbor to K.T., grew up in China and moved first to California and finally to Texas. He loves soccer like K.T., is a whiz at math like Travis, and is especially close to Summer. As the newest member to the Backpack Club, Jace is the most reluctant to use the BPC for travel, but he thinks it's a great tool for communicating between the members and is the first to try the device for help with homework.

1 adventure of fishing under the full moon, but now it  
2 was time to be home.

3 "Coming, Dad!" "Almost there."

4 Dr. Allen could hear his children hollering  
5 back their answer. He went out to start the van.

6 As they reached the driveway and climbed  
7 into the waiting van, Summer said, "I'm going to go  
8 into the house instead of loading my chair in the  
9 van. I've had enough fun for one night."

10 "Well, OK, if you want," Dr. Allen replied,  
11 adding, "It sure is nice you kids can have fun close  
12 to home."

13 They all exploded with laughter.

14 "We appreciate being close to home now  
15 more than ever, Dr. Allen," Roman answered. "We  
16 truly do."

1 "I'm sure Travis can find us – he found K.T.  
2 once before," stated Roman with confidence as the  
3 others murmured their agreement. "K.T., let's be  
4 sure the backpack computer is on full power."

5 K.T. handed her backpack over to Roman  
6 who had designed the original BPC. He adjusted a  
7 few keys and checked the power settings.

8 "Come on, Travis, find us," Roman said  
9 softly, setting the backpack down in the middle of  
10 the group.

11 A sudden lightning flash of color filled the  
12 plaza around the circle of friends. Travis, visibly  
13 shaking, smiled with relief to see Summer and the  
14 others. A shout of joy greeted the lone traveler as  
15 his friends converged on him with hugs and back  
16 slaps.

17 "OK, OK, take it easy. We've still got to get  
18 back before Dad misses us. I've set the co-ordinates  
19 for the barn behind the house so we won't have far  
20 to walk. Everyone hold hands."

21 Travis gave orders that the others were only  
22 too eager to follow. The circle of six grasped each  
23 other's hands.

24 "Now!" yelled Travis as he pressed three  
25 buttons at once.

26 -----  
27

28 "Travis! Summer!" yelled Dr. Allen from the  
29 back door. He could just make out six figures  
30 moving up from the river road near the horse barns.  
31 He had waited up till midnight to let them have the

## *Midnight at the Marble Tomb*

1 The first full moon of summer illuminated the  
2 bend in the river like a floodlight. Six figures stood  
3 or sat facing the river on a wide pier that formed an  
4 oasis of space in the thicket along the banks. A  
5 narrow, gravel road led away from the pier like a  
6 lifeline back into the small town, sleeping and quiet,  
7 a mile away. The fishing pier was just a short walk  
8 from Travis and Summer's house. The road passed  
9 by an old, abandoned cemetery over-run with grape  
10 vines and bushes. It was an eerie place, but not so  
11 scary to walk by in a group of six. The figures were  
12 as still as the tombstones that lay partially hidden by  
13 the moon shadows of tall pines.

14 K.T. peered out over the river, trying to see  
15 where the fishing line met the dark, swirling water.  
16 She didn't understand why her two best friends,  
17 Connie and Summer, had begged to come along  
18 with the boys in their Backpack Club to fish the  
19 river in the moonlight. It was boring enough in the  
20 daylight. The rickety, old boards of the fishing pier  
21 were rough and splintery – not much fun to sit on.  
22 She was tired of standing.

23 Summer and Connie were perfectly content.  
24 They whispered as they held their fishing rods  
25 pointed toward the water. The two were having fun  
26 even though they hadn't had a nibble in over an  
27 hour.

1       “The river’s beautiful in the moonlight,”  
2       whispered Summer.

3       “Yeah, I’m glad we convinced Roman and  
4       Travis to invite all the sixth-grade Club members to  
5       go fishing tonight,” agreed Connie.

6       Connie’s brother, Roman, sat next to her,  
7       toying with his reel. He and his best friend, Travis,  
8       had looked forward to this “full moon fishing trip”  
9       for two weeks.

10       Roman and Travis were eighth-graders and  
11       hadn’t really wanted a bunch of noisy sixth-graders  
12       joining them. Both their sisters, Connie and  
13       Summer, insisted on coming and bringing K.T. and  
14       Jace, too. And to tell the truth, Roman thought, the  
15       girls baited their own hooks and fished as well as the  
16       boys. K.T. was the only one who griped about  
17       fishing, but she tagged along anyway. She just had a  
18       hard time sitting still.

19       Roman glanced at Jace, the only sixth-grade  
20       boy member of the Backpack Club. He had been  
21       fishing for two hours without a nibble, but he never  
22       complained.

23       Travis sat on the other side of Jace and was  
24       fiddling with the worms. He hadn’t caught anything  
25       either, but that was probably because he kept pulling  
26       his line in to check the bait on the hook. He cast  
27       again and checked his watch. Eleven-twenty. The  
28       moon was now directly overhead. In a few minutes  
29       they would have to walk back. His parents had told  
30       the Club not to stay out past midnight—which was

1       The woman whispered in his ear, her voice  
2       deep and husky, “You have other things you could  
3       use to buy with.” She pointed to the sign above the  
4       shop, on the second floor. In six-inch letters, barely  
5       visible from the street, it said: FREE WILL CLINIC  
6       – BLOOD BANK – ORGAN DONATIONS.

7       Roman shuddered and turned quickly from the  
8       woman. “Come on, Jace. Let’s get the girls out of  
9       here!” For the first time in the alleyway, Roman  
10       was not only disgusted, he was scared.

11       They picked up the speed, anxious now to get  
12       to the safety of the bus stop. They were all curious  
13       to know what luck Travis was having in finding  
14       them. Had their parents found out now about their  
15       secret?

16       As they passed a relatively clean-looking  
17       building at the end of the street with the word  
18       “Clinic” painted on the window, Roman wondered  
19       who would come to this street for dental or medical  
20       or surgical procedures? How could you trust the  
21       equipment or the blood transfusions? But then, what  
22       alternative did these people have?

23       The bus stop was still bustling, so they walked  
24       out into the plaza facing the Taj Mahal. Their  
25       journey through the park and the notorious alley  
26       shortcut had taken only about twenty minutes, but it  
27       seemed like a lifetime. Summer was the first to  
28       voice what was on each one’s mind.

29       “In just ten minutes, Dad is going to start  
30       looking for us. If Travis can’t locate us by then,  
31       he’ll have to tell Dad all about the BPC.”



1       “Jaundice,” whispered the doctor. “Probably  
2 hepatitis.” She raised her voice, “I know you had to  
3 have all your vaccinations before entering India  
4 since we are still considered a developing country.  
5 Isn’t that correct?” The Backpack Club looked at  
6 each other with raised eyebrows, weak smiles, and  
7 hesitant nods.

8       “My stop is at the next building – a woman  
9 my age with liver cancer. She is beyond my help,  
10 but I have become her last friend. I bring drugs to  
11 ease the pain. Safe travels to you, young friends.  
12 Stay healthy! And watch out for the body piercing  
13 shop in the next block. They are notorious for luring  
14 young people into their store.” The young doctor  
15 ducked as she entered a ramshackle building with a  
16 sign that said “Hotel.”

17       “Body piercing doesn’t really appeal to me  
18 anyway,” Roman remarked as they neared the next  
19 building. “How about you, Jace?”

20       Before Jace could answer, a beautiful young  
21 woman dressed in a silky sari and displaying several  
22 body piercings of her own glided out of the building  
23 to stand directly in front of Roman. She held a  
24 gleaming gold hoop in one hand and a glittering  
25 diamond stud in the other. In the squalor of the  
26 alley, the jewelry worked like a mirror, catching the  
27 radiance of the moon and flashing it back into  
28 Roman’s eyes. The woman said no word, but her  
29 meaning was clear.

30       Roman coughed and laughed at the same time.  
31 “No money,” he said shaking his head. “No money.”

1       the time his dad had promised to drive the other  
2 children home.

3       “Isn’t it about time to head back?” queried  
4 K.T., breaking the silence. She set down her rod and  
5 began doing jumping jacks, shaking the weathered  
6 planks and bouncing all five of her friends. “I need  
7 to move!”

8       A chorus of “be still” and “stop that” assailed  
9 K.T., and she reluctantly stopped jumping.

10       “You can walk back anytime you want,”  
11 drawled Travis, who had little patience for K.T.’s  
12 antics. “Nobody forced you to come.”

13       “Oh, hush, Travis. You know none of us  
14 would walk back alone past the cemetery, not even  
15 you,” taunted Summer.

16       “K.T., can’t you just enjoy the moonlight and  
17 the water? Isn’t this the most romantic spot on  
18 Earth? The moon’s so bright we can even see our  
19 shadows!”

20       “If you don’t want to fish, just play a game on  
21 your BPC,” suggested Jace. K.T. was the only one  
22 who had carried her backpack to the fishing pier.  
23 The BPC was a computer inside a backpack that  
24 allowed the friends to travel in space and time as  
25 well as communicate with each other.

26       K.T. smiled. She grabbed the keypad that  
27 hung from her backpack. “That’s a great idea, Jace.  
28 Thanks.” K.T. began to type. “Let’s see if I can  
29 come up with this *exact* spot using the BPC. Most  
30 romantic and beautiful place on Earth. Full moon.  
31 River runs by it. Crowded.” She stopped as if to

1 think. “Oh yeah, it’s almost midnight and there’s a  
2 tomb next door. Well, that should...”

3 “K.T., watch it!” Travis screamed, frantically  
4 reeling in his line. K.T.’s fishing line had drifted  
5 into the others, and her pole was being dragged to  
6 the edge of the pier. With a loud splash it fell into  
7 the water as the others struggled to hold onto their  
8 rods. Only Travis had managed to keep his line free  
9 from the snag.

10 K.T. grabbed onto Summer’s arm to help her  
11 hold her rod. The keypad slammed into Summer’s  
12 rod, and a burst of brilliantly colored light enveloped  
13 the pier.

14 Travis looked around him. His friends had  
15 disappeared, rods and all. The only things left with  
16 him on the pier were his fishing rod and the worms.  
17 Then he noticed something lying on the pier,  
18 reflecting the moonlight: the broken bits of K.T.’s  
19 keypad.

20 -----  
21  
22 As blinding light blasted the darkness, the five  
23 friends struggled to hold onto their rods and each  
24 other. All knew what was happening: the  
25 time/matter/relator device had been activated in  
26 K.T.’s BPC. No one knew why or where—or  
27 *when*—they were headed. The familiar swirling  
28 colors and winds surrounded the group for a few  
29 brief seconds that seemed like hours before they  
30 jolted to a halt on solid ground.

1 K.T. and Connie turned to face the woman.  
2 She was a slender woman, in her thirties, with a long  
3 coal-black braid and deep, dark eyes framed by thick  
4 lashes. She wore a white doctor’s coat that stuck  
5 out from the traditional Indian garb like the Taj  
6 Mahal contrasted with this stinking alley.

7 “Are you a doctor?” asked Connie and K.T.  
8 simultaneously.

9 “Yes, I am. I work at the district hospital not  
10 far from here. A health care professional could  
11 work twenty-four hours a day and not make a dent in  
12 the sickness that plagues these streets.”

13 She gave the girls a grim smile, and they  
14 called to the others to meet their new friend, Dr.  
15 Patel.

16 Roman told her they were headed to the bus  
17 stop – which was the truth – and thankfully she  
18 asked them no more questions. People in India, it  
19 seemed, were accustomed to seeing children on the  
20 streets alone.

21 They were halfway up the alley now, and the  
22 shops were a little larger. Signs above arched  
23 doorways advertised “Acupuncture” or “Tattoos.”  
24 In front of one shop, a thin young man sat with his  
25 head in his hands as a tattoo artist pricked an  
26 intricate design across his back.

27 “He’s so fatigued that he’s oblivious to the  
28 needles and ink in his back,” muttered the young  
29 doctor to Roman and Jace. As if he heard, the  
30 emaciated young man raised his head and stared at  
31 them with yellowed eyes.

1 passed, Jace could hear the unmistakable sound of  
2 vomiting, and he fought the desire to look back and  
3 see if the young woman was all right.

4 “Keep moving, Jace,” advised Summer as she  
5 followed the boys. “There’s nothing we can do.”

6 Suddenly, the sound of splattering water  
7 erupted beside Connie’s feet. She jumped back and  
8 nearly fell over K.T. as a gush of water spewed from  
9 a pipe eight feet high on a wall. It seemed to lead  
10 from living quarters, and Connie hated to think what  
11 was in that water. No one on the street seemed to  
12 notice it. As she looked up, Connie saw pipes  
13 jutting from the walls above her with no place for  
14 their contents to go but into the street.

15 Just then a little girl of about five came and  
16 pulled on Connie’s arm, her palm out-stretched.  
17 Connie was startled by how hot the child felt, how  
18 her lip quivered. Her big, brown eyes looked tired  
19 and drawn, and she moved as if her body ached.  
20 When Connie shook her head, the tiny girl  
21 disappeared into a darkened doorway.

22 K.T. was trying not to stare as an elderly man  
23 in the next doorway clutched his stomach in obvious  
24 pain. She tapped Connie’s shoulder and mouthed  
25 silently, “What’s wrong with him?” Connie simply  
26 shrugged, and both girls looked down in bitter  
27 helplessness.

28 A woman with a soft voice spoke directly  
29 behind them. “Don’t worry about all you see,  
30 children. If you think of the enormity of it, it will  
drive you crazy.”

1 They had landed by a river—much wider than  
2 where they had stood on the fishing pier. The lights  
3 of a city filled the night sky, but the brilliant full  
4 moon was still visible overhead. The insect buzz of  
5 the wooded riverbank gave way to the hum of  
6 human voices. Their rods were a tangled mess on  
7 the ground beside them. They stood on a well-kept  
8 lawn that led right to the river’s edge.

9 K.T. turned around and gasped, but no words  
10 escaped. The others pivoted to see what had made  
11 K.T. speechless. They stood gazing at a majestic,  
12 white building with spires and domes that towered  
13 above them.

14 At that moment, a policeman noticed the  
15 small group and ran over to them, shouting. They  
16 couldn’t understand him. K.T. glanced at her  
17 backpack. The keypad was gone. Only a jagged  
18 edge of plastic dangled from the clip that had  
19 connected the keypad to the pack. That meant the  
20 translating software that let them travel to other  
21 countries without a language barrier was unavailable  
22 to them.

23 “Stay calm,” Roman muttered as he noticed  
24 the shattered keypad.

25 Roman stepped up to meet the policeman who  
26 was dressed in a khaki uniform and black beret.  
27 “Hello, officer. My five friends and I were just  
28 trying to do a little fishing.”

29 “Four. There are four,” answered the small  
30 built man in English. He was not much taller than  
31 Roman. “You are foreign visitors? Can’t you read

1 the notices? No fishing.” He picked up the rods,  
2 took a knife, and cut the lines at the rod tips,  
3 gathering the hook ends into a tangled mess.

4 Roman scanned his friends and realized  
5 Travis was not with them. His eyes locked with  
6 Summer’s, and he knew she had missed her brother  
7 too. The grim realization that they were stranded far  
8 from home was written across their faces.

9 The policeman thrust the rods into Roman’s  
10 hands and shoved the ball of tangled line at K.T.  
11 “You should learn to read and to count. Now, take  
12 your things and return to the sidewalk. The only  
13 thing you can catch here is one of the last buses back  
14 to your hotel. The Taj will be closing at midnight.  
15 Go now to the bus stop!”

16 The policeman pointed to a low-slung  
17 building several hundred yards away. It looked like  
18 an anthill with all the dark figures swarming around  
19 it. He abruptly turned and ran toward a large group  
20 of tourists who were streaming across the grass,  
21 ignoring the sidewalks.

22 “Let’s go around to the other side while we  
23 have a chance,” shouted Summer, pushing the  
24 throttle on her motorized wheelchair to full power.  
25 “We can talk when we get there. I think I know  
26 what happened!”

27 Halfway up the long walkway that led to the  
28 front of the building, Summer stopped her friends,  
29 who were breathless from keeping up with her. By  
30 now, all were aware that Travis was not with them  
31 and the keypad was useless.

camel dung. The hodgepodge of two- and three-  
story buildings was a jumble of shops, homes,  
stables, and flophouses.

There seemed to be a festival going on—  
brightly colored banners waved from the building  
rooftops. Even at this late hour, shops were open  
and vendors sold all variety of products from tiny  
kiosks attached to the ancient stone buildings.  
Summer fought the urge to wretch as she passed a  
stand with fruit and vegetables covered with gnats  
that a toothless woman swatted away with a rolled  
up newspaper. Above the fruit, dead chickens hung  
upside down, feathers and all.

Next to the fruit stand, a butcher shop  
displayed what looked in the dim light to be leg of  
lamb (with fresh meat available on demand, judging  
by the bleating sounds coming from the stall).

Across from the butcher, the acrid smell of  
shrimp, mussels and other shellfish permeated the  
night air as the fish vendor stirred a thick, iron pot  
over the tiny flame of a dung fire.

“Shrimp curry?” the vendor called, “Raw  
oysters?”

“Can’t we move a little faster?” pleaded  
Summer as they snaked their way through the  
crowded lane. “I don’t like this shortcut.”

“We’re going as fast as we can,” answered  
Roman, who was leading the way with Jace.

Jace’s attention was drawn to an open  
doorway where he could see a young woman who  
was holding her hand over her mouth. As they

1       “Yeah, this is not a very sanitary place. Be  
2 careful where you step. I thought I saw a hypo-  
3 dermic needle on the path,” warned Connie.

4       “It’s not just where you step,” added Summer.  
5 “Disgusting trash was hanging in those bushes that  
6 kept trying to gouge me! Ugh!”

7       “OK, OK, so this was not the best place to  
8 rest. It gives me the creeps too. I don’t like the  
9 sounds coming from behind those bushes, either.  
10 Let’s head back to the bus stop,” said Roman. “Drat  
11 these bugs!”

12       “How do we get out of here?” Jace  
13 whimpered.

14       When the friends emerged, it was at another  
15 gate that opened onto the winding, crowded  
16 thoroughfare along the river. They could also see a  
17 long, narrow alleyway that led straight back to the  
18 bus stop. At the far end of the alley, a neon sign  
19 read “Agra Bus Line.” The white rooftops of the  
20 Taj could be seen behind it in the distance.

21       “OK, that’s the bus stop—probably the best  
22 place for us to wait. Let’s take this short cut. Just  
23 stay together!” Roman said as he carried the fishing  
24 rods like spears and led the way into the alley.

25       The smell of the Shahjahan Park was like  
26 perfume compared to the alley. Animals of all  
27 kinds—camels, donkeys, goats, sheep—were  
28 clustered by slightly recessed doorways that served  
29 as holding pens. The narrow street was once paved,  
30 but now Summer’s wheelchair had to dodge  
31 potholes filled with murky water and clumps of

1       “K.T., when we were on the pier, you were  
2 typing place descriptors, but you gave no co-  
3 ordinates, did you?” asked Summer. K.T. shook her  
4 head violently. “Well, I think the descriptors you  
5 typed programmed the BPC to fix co-ordinates for  
6 the Taj Mahal: romantic, beautiful, moonlight, by a  
7 river, crowded.” She paused and added quietly,  
8 “Tomb.”

9       “I wasn’t trying to send us anywhere!”  
10 groaned K.T.

11       “We all know it was an accident. The lines  
12 got tangled, and the keypad must have activated  
13 when it crashed into my rod,” surmised Summer.  
14 “Since we were all connected, we were all  
15 transported. Except Travis. His line wasn’t tangled  
16 with ours.”

17       “Don’t worry,” comforted Roman patting  
18 Summer’s shoulder. “Your brother will figure out  
19 how to help us.”

20       “Yeah, I know. I’m just thinking about him  
21 walking back home by himself. At least, we’ve got  
22 each other, even if we *are* thousands of miles from  
23 home. The way it looks around here, you could  
24 never get lonely in India,” Summer commented as  
25 another horde of tourists approached them along the  
26 shadowy walkway.

27       “Well, let’s go see what everyone who  
28 traveled here on purpose came to see,” suggested  
29 Roman. “The most romantic tomb on Earth.”

30       “As long as we stay together so Travis can  
31 find us all,” added Connie as they struggled to move

1 through the crowds that walked in the opposite  
2 direction.

3 “Yeah, don’t leave me,” yelled Jace, grabbing  
4 the back of Summer’s chair.

5 After skirting a high wall, they finally reached  
6 the front of the monument. When they rounded the  
7 minaret-topped corner, they gazed in awe at the  
8 beauty of the Taj Mahal: four long, dark reflecting  
9 pools bisecting manicured, formal gardens that lined  
10 broad, stone walkways.

11 And there, at the end of the grounds, stood the  
12 white marble mausoleum, glowing gently beneath  
13 the moon as if the dome were the source of the  
14 brilliant light. It was so massive and yet so perfectly  
15 proportioned that it seemed surreal.

16 “Do you think we can go inside?” asked  
17 Summer breathlessly.

18 “Let’s find out,” answered K.T. as she led the  
19 group toward the ornate front entrance.

20 Just then a policeman began to herd people  
21 away from the entrance. They could hear a  
22 recording announcing the closing of the Taj Mahal  
23 since the 11:30 tour, the last one of the night, had  
24 been sold out. First in English, then in an Indian  
25 language, then French, then Jace recognized  
26 Chinese. On and on the recording droned in various  
27 languages as more police led ever-increasing  
28 numbers of visitors away from the doorways.

29 The friends found themselves caught in a river  
30 of people once more, and they struggled to hold onto  
31 one another. Jace hooked onto the back of Summer's

1 chair with Connie holding his shoulders. K.T. clung  
2 tight behind Connie. Roman lugged the fishing rods  
3 in his left arm and kept his right hand on K.T.’s  
4 shoulder. They looked like a funny conga line as  
5 they inched toward the bus stop with people of every  
6 race and nationality.

7 “I’m afraid Travis won’t be able to transport  
8 us if we stay in this crowd,” worried Roman. “Let’s  
9 try to get some space around us. Look, across the  
10 street. That looks like a park.”

11 -----  
12

13 “Shahjahan Park,” Jace read on the bronze  
14 plaque embedded in the stone column that marked  
15 the entrance to a park that was a mixture of tall leafy  
16 trees and coarse pathways. Flowering bushes  
17 crowded below the trees and stretched thorny limbs  
18 into the pathways, scratching the youths as they tried  
19 to find a clearing to stop and rest. Summer’s  
20 wheelchair was having a hard time rolling over the  
21 trash that littered the mucky paths. Finally they  
22 reached a shallow clearing and huddled together.

23 “Looks like this is not the best place to wait,”  
24 muttered Roman as he slapped at a mosquito. “I  
25 sure hope Travis has made it home and is working  
26 on a rescue!”

27 “It’s amazing a park can smell so bad! What  
28 *is* that stench?” asked K.T. holding her nose.

29 “You don’t want to know, K.T.” answered  
30 Jace. “Think about it: lots of people, no public  
31 bathrooms, nice wooded area...”