

# BACKPACK ADVENTURES

## Episode 9

### ***“Racoons, Robbers and Radios”***

*Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky*

*Stormy weather...*

*Keeps rainin' all the time*

Koehler and Arlen

“Stormy Weather”

Sung by Billie Holiday

Jace could hear his mother calling after him, warning him not to walk too far away from the group of sightseers. She wanted him to look through old photos on display in the park museum while they waited for the next tour of Longhorn Cavern. The last place on earth Jace wanted to be was in a cave. Or a museum. Spring break had been one endless journey of caverns and caves filled with wet rocks and bat guano. His parents were immigrants from China where they had loved caving. They had devised a torture route of natural wonders through four states, and today, March 19th, the last day of the break, all Jace just wanted was to get home and see his friends. At least he had been able to keep in touch with them through his backpack computer and email. Maybe he could find a flat rock to sit on and try to reach one of them now.

Jace carefully picked his way along a rocky path and then veered onto an animal trail, his eyes fixed on the ground. He stepped over deer droppings. He recognized the scattered groupings of round pellets, but not the other scat that looked like it was very fresh. He wanted to leave the trail, but the

cactus and rocky outcroppings made the walking look even harder off the trail. The Mexican juniper or “cedar trees” as they were called in Central Texas, were especially thick in this area.

The weather matched his gloomy mood. A thick, damp blanket of clouds threatened to unleash torrential rains at any moment and the rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance.

Jace felt a big, wet plop on the top of his head and reached up, expecting to find a buzzard dropping. His whole life seemed filled with animal excrement. Jace felt another drop on his nose and he wiped a fat raindrop from his face. *It had rained every day of the trip, so why should today be any different?*, he thought grumpily.

A sudden flash of lightning and almost simultaneous clap of thunder caused Jace to jump, scratching his leg on a small prickly pear cactus. He felt the hair on his arms stand on end and he squatted on the ground, sure another bolt was about to blast him. The next second he was lying face down on the narrow trail as a lightning bolt hit the live oak tree next to him and knocked him flat. The deafening crack was the last thing he remembered.

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Jace opened his eyes to dim sunlight filtering into a dark recess where he lay on his back on top of hard, flat rock. *How did I get in a cave?*, he wondered.

“So you ain’t gonna die after all?” said a voice behind him. Jace struggled to raise himself to a sitting position. His head pounded with the effort.

“Where am I?” he managed to ask.

“On the back side of Longhorn Cavern near Burnet.”

“What time is it?”

“Don’t know ‘xactly, but by my stomach’s growlin’, I’d say it’s ‘bout noon.”

Jace slowly turned his aching body to face his yet unseen companion. He stared at a youth of about sixteen who was wearing a ragged cotton shirt and faded overalls that had holes in the knees.

His red hair was cut short and stood straight up on his head. He had freckles all over his face and body. He smiled at Jace and offered his hand to shake. With great effort, Jace offered his own hand. The young man squeezed his hand and pumped his arm up and down so hard that Jace winced.

“Sorry. I don’t mean no harm. I forget how strong I am even though I ain’t had a full meal in three weeks. Just got here today. There’s lots of squirrels in the woods ’round here and I’m a pretty good shot with my sling. I plan on having meat tonight.”

Jace swallowed hard and asked, “How did I get here and what happened?”

The youth looked puzzled. “You mean you don’t remember? You must have that amnesty or whatever it’s called. I was walking down that game trail and found you lying flat on your face, out colder than a blue norther.”

“I think I was hit by lightning,” Jace answered.

The stranger hooted. “Lightnin’! There ain’t been a light *mist* much less a thunderstorm in these parts for over six months. We’re in the Dust Bowl, kiddo. There’s no way you been hit by lightnin’ in the middle of a drought.”

“I remember there was a storm,” Jace said. “I had that Billie Holliday song, ‘Stormy Weather,’ going through my head.”

“Billy Who?” the boy asked.

“Wait,” Jace said. “What year is it?”

“1933, of course, same as yesterday and the day before. March 19, 1933 to be exact. And I’m sure it’s gettin’ to be lunch time. You got any vittles in that knapsack?”

Jace pulled his backpack to his side. “No,” he answered a little too quickly, worried the stranger might try to steal the keypad. Then he remembered what the guy had said about rescuing him. The teen could have robbed him and left him for dead.

He could have ransacked his backpack by now if he had wanted. Jace opened the zipper and showed the inside to the disappointed-looking teen. “No food. Sorry.”

The young man shrugged. His stomach growled loudly in anticipation of the lunch that would not materialize.

Jace peered down into his backpack. He wished he had a bag of candy or some gum. Nothing edible. Jace looked at the keypad. Lying next to it was a pamphlet about the Lone Star Flag with the words “1933 Flag Act” across the top. The scanner in the keypad must have picked up the date from the pamphlet, Jace thought. Could lightning so close to him have activated the device, sending him back in time?

“The names’s Vernon, but everyone just calls me ‘Tick’ on account of my freckles. I’m an Okie from a dried up farm outside Enid. I heard they’s offering CCC jobs to build state parks here in Texas so I hopped the ATSF as far as Waco and hitchhiked my way here.”

“Hi, I’m Jace and *what* did you say? The C-what, AT-what?”

“Ain’t you ever heard of the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corp? It’s a life- saver to lots of young men who don’t stand a chance of finding other work. For room and board, I can learn a skill and build bridges and parks and roads. Gets you outta the unemployment lines.”

“Why can’t you find work?” Jace asked. “And you’re just a teenager. Why do you have to work?”

“Jace, you really can’t remember nothin’, can you?” Tick asked, wide-eyed and incredulous.

“We’re in the midst of the Great Depression! Can’t nobody find work and I been on my own, fending for myself for two years, ever since I turned fourteen. Most o’ my friends left for Californ-i-a months ago. Only friend I got left is my old coon dog, Pepper. He’s the one that actually found you. He’s around here somewhere. He ran back farther in the cave.”

“What was that AT-thing you mentioned?” Jace felt like that was something he should remember.

“ATSF is the initials for the Atchison-Topeka-Santa Fe Railroad.”

Jace could remember seeing the big letters on the railway boxcars. He smiled in recognition of something that tied the two of them together.

“So, did you ride the rails too?” Tick asked with a broad smile that revealed a mouth full of crooked teeth.

“No, but lately I’ve watched them go by and wished I was on one,” Jace shared as he remembered the past week of travel. He smiled back at Tick. His head was feeling better now. “I’d like to meet your dog and thank him for finding me, Tick.”

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*These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,*

*These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,*

*Buries head over heels in the black old dust, I had to pack up and go.*

*An’ I just blowed in, an’ I’ll soon blow out again.*

Woody Guthrie

“Dust Bowl Blues”

Jace followed closely behind Tick as he walked deeper into the cave. Tick whistled and called for his dog, but no bark returned the greeting. Jace held his backpack over his head, afraid that a bat might swoop down and land on him. The smell of guano was particularly strong in the cave and the only light came from a small torch that Tick held in front of him and the green luminescent glow from Jace’s computer keypad. Tick kept walking and softly calling his dog’s name as they journeyed deeper into the cave’s maze of passages.

They twisted and turned for at least half an hour. Eventually the path began to climb and Jace could see the faint glimmer of an opening. Suddenly, Tick stopped dead in his tracks. Jace leaned to one side to see past him.

“What is it?” Jace whispered to his guide.

“There’s somethin’ running this way,” Tick whispered breathlessly. “Stay over to the...”

Tick’s instructions were cut short by the sudden arrival of a big, hard-shelled armadillo that came streaking into the cave through the slender opening ahead, his sharp claws clacking on the limestone floor. Close behind him bolted a dark-colored, floppy-eared coon dog with his tongue hanging out and slobber dripping down his gray muzzle. Both animals barreled past Tick and Jace, oblivious to everything around them.

Tick was hollering for Pepper to come back as he ran back into the cave to catch him. Not too far down the narrow corridor, the armadillo scurried into a tight fissure in the rock. Pepper stopped and gave a long low bay that signaled he had cornered his prey. Tick reached him and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

“Leave that nasty ‘dillo alone, you crazy coon dog! That’s not somethin’ for either one of us to eat!”

Tick dragged the reluctant dog back up to where Jace stood waiting.

“Jace meet Pepper, Pepper meet Jace,” Tick huffed as he tried to catch his breath. “Let’s get outside and let that poor creature escape. I’ll leave the torch here for the next time I come in this way. There’s lots of openings to this cave system.” Tick rubbed the orange embers into the wet, crunchy floor of the cave.

The three of them struggled up the steep incline to the narrow opening and into the bright light of the midday March sun. Jace surveyed his surroundings and found the cactus, live oak and limestone very similar to what he had seen before, but with fewer Mexican juniper trees. A reddish-brown cow grazed on the stubbly grass that looked brown and burnt even though it was spring. Her udder was full and it looked as if she walked in pain, with stiff, jerky steps. A hundred yards away, her white-faced

brown calf, small and scrawny, jumped from rock to rock, slipping and falling, careening from side to side as if it were drunk.

Tick looked at the calf and shook his head. “Don’t think that one’s gonna make it. And that cow needs to be milked or she’s gonna be in a world o’ hurt. She’s got them ‘Dust Bowl Blues’ worse’n any of us. Have you heard that song? I heard a man singin’ it around a campfire once. Never could get it out of my head. I wish I was nearer to my camp. I’d grab a pot and get us some fresh milk for lunch.” His stomach let out a growl and Jace felt a hunger pang too.

“M-a-a-a-a-a-a!” The calf called plaintively to its mother who seemed to be ignoring it. The frail heifer fell to the ground and could not get back up. Its back legs lay helpless and stiff as it scrambled with its forelegs. The mother cow kept eating the stubby brown grass and walking farther away from her offspring.

“Should we try to help it?” Jace asked.

“Don’t think so. There’s somethin’ not right about that calf. Best let nature take her course.”

Tick slipped a piece of rope out of his pocket and made a crude leash for Pepper.

“Come on, Pepper, stay with me. Let’s go squirrel hunting.” Tick took a small leather slingshot from his back pocket and began to gather small flat stones, trying each to see how it fit and placing some of the stones in his pockets.

“Can you really kill a squirrel with that slingshot?” Jace asked.

“Sure thing! Squirrels is easy to pop with a rock. But the real good eatin’s when Pepper trees a big fat raccoon and I shoot the bandit-face and make coon stew.”

“Why don’t you just hunt for raccoon then?”

“It’s hard to kill a coon with a slingshot in the dark. Had to sell my gun a month ago. Work’s been sparse and the CCC project don’t start till next month. So it’s squirrel soup till I can save up enough to buy a new gun.” Tick gave Jace a toothy grin and started walking deeper into the oak copse.

Jace followed several yards behind Tick. Jace tried to scan the trees and watch his footing at the same time, constantly keeping his eyes moving.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement. He stopped and watched on his left along a ridgeline that was dotted with scrubby oak trees. What he saw made his jaw drop.

“Tick!”

Tick turned and gave Jace an annoyed look, but Jace just pointed to the ridgeline. There in plain view were a coyote and a skunk. What made the scene even stranger was the fact that the skunk was attacking the coyote. The coyote yipped at the skunk and the skunk lunged at the coyote, biting its tail, its leg, any place it could reach. With its tail tucked between its legs, the coyote backed away from the skunk and slipped on the loose rocks of the ridgeline. The confused creature lost its balance and plummeted down the steep side of the ravine. The skunk seemed to rock back and forth as it stood in place, then turned and ran into some dense brush.

Jace and Tick looked at each other silently, jaws slack, mystified.

“Did we just see a skunk beat a coyote in a fight in broad daylight?” Tick questioned. “If that don’t beat all.”

Jace shrugged and suggested, “Maybe the skunk was protecting her young.”

“How do you know it was female? And I ain’t never seen Pepper stand so still when there’s a skunk around.”

It was true. Pepper had stood as if frozen while the coyote and skunk fought.

“Maybe he’s just tired, or minding you, or...something.”

“Yeah, maybe Roosevelt will invite me to the White House for chicken soup, too.” Tick paused and shook his head. “Must be some virus affecting the animals.”

“Don’t you mean ‘some virus’?” Jace asked with a grin. “A *virus* can cause disease. *Venus* was the goddess of love.”



Tick laughed at his malapropism. “Don’t know for sure, but seems like Venus has an effect on some varmints this time of year. You don’t think that skunk and coyote was doing a love dance, now do you?”

Jace laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “Not likely, Tick.”

The three started walking into the oak grove again. Tick scanned the treetops for squirrels. Pepper began to whimper and pull against the rope leash. The air was growing thicker and heavier the farther they walked. Sweat beaded on Jace’s forehead.

“What is it, boy?” Tick squatted down close to Pepper and rubbed his neck. The dog panted and rested on its haunches. Tick turned back to look back at Jace.

“Looks like we’ll have to go back to camp empty-handed, Jace.” Tick pointed to the sky behind Jace. It looked like a large black thunderstorm was rapidly approaching. Puffy gray clouds scurried ahead of the dark mass.

“Is it finally going to rain?” Jace questioned. “I could use something to drink!”

“That ain’t rain, Jace, That’s a dust storm. Ain’t nothin’ refreshin’ about that.” Tick set off at a trot toward another cave opening with Pepper running right beside him. Jace followed close behind as the black dust chased after them.

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*Now laughing friends deride*

*Tears I cannot hide*

*So I smile and say*

*“when a lovely flame dies*

*Smoke gets in your eyes”*

Kern & Harbach

Jace followed Tick as he trekked down the dark passage leading to his camp deep in the cavern. Jace kept his right hand against the wall where he could feel the oily slickness of the groundwater dripping on the smooth rocks. Limestone made up every surface of the cave. Tick had assured him he knew the way even in the dark and that he had another torch at the camp. After what seemed like hours, but was really only three minutes, Jace could see the soft glow of the torch at Tick’s camp. Tick told him a single torch lasted all day. He could even make a campfire in the enormous underground room.

The boys settled down beneath the dim glow from the torch and tried to ignore the hunger pangs. Tick began to hum a tune.

“Wish I had me a radio. I just love music. We could hear all the tunes, and the news, too. They even got suspense thriller stories on the radio.”

Jace just nodded and tried to mask the rumble in his stomach with a whistle, but his mouth was too dry. He was glad Tick was in a talkative mood.

“Heard a legend ‘bout a bank robber in the Wild West days that hid out down here. His name was Sam Bass. Talk down at the tracks is that Bonnie and Clyde hid a bunch of loot down here somewhere, too,” Tick told Jace as he let Pepper off the leash.

“Tracks? You mean a racetrack?” Jace asked.

Tick shook his head, “No, the train tracks. There’s a Hooverville near where the east-west and north-south train tracks cross.”

“Hooverville?” Jace repeated.

“Yeah, you know, a shantytown. Hoover was President when the stock market crashed and started all this mess.”

“Did your family lose everything in the stock market?”

“Shoot no! We weren’t rich enough to own no stocks. But my Pa, before he ran off, said it was the de—de—deflation what caused him to file for bankruptcy and lose the farm his granddaddy had homesteaded in the Great Land Rush. Deflation and the drought.”

Jace sat down on a dry boulder near the torch. “Are you going to start a campfire?” Jace was still uneasy having only one torch to keep him from total inky darkness. The temperature was a little cool and a fire would feel good.

“Yeah, I can do that,” Tick answered. He set three logs in an ‘A’ shape, two on the bottom and one across the top. “Hand me some of those twigs from that pile there,” Tick instructed Jace. Jace passed him a handful of skinny twigs. Tick skillfully lined them up along the crossed logs and put a bit of dried grass beneath them on either side.

He held a single match to the torch and, carefully protecting the tiny flame from the cool drafts that wafted through the cave, carried it to the fire.

Jace watched in fascination as Tick lit the grass and then encouraged the flames to take hold on the twigs. Jace handed more twigs to Tick and then added larger branches. Finally, the boys placed a few larger logs on top. Soon they had a roaring fire going that filled the wide chamber with light and revealed the pastel-colored walls and majestic formations. Jace looked in awe at the beauty surrounding him. Never before had he looked at caves in this type of light. Fissures and passages crisscrossed the cavern, leading into the subterranean maze. Here they were safe from the suffocating dust storm. Here there was no sudden lightning. Here all was soft light. Here there was clear water,

sanitized by the limestone and collected in a shallow pool. Tick showed Jace how to cup his hand and drink from the black pool. They talked for what seemed to be hours. Both forgot their hunger pangs as they fed upon the beauty of the crystal-studded vault. This is the kind of tour I like, Jace thought. He was in no rush to leave since he knew he could use the backpack computer to return him to the moments just before the lightning blast.

The fire dwindled to a low glowing mass of embers. Pepper was snoring off to one side, his muzzle buried beneath his massive paws. Jace was drowsy, too, and he tried to find the most comfortable positions leaning against the rocky ledges. Tick dozed with his head on his knees, like he never intended to fall asleep.

“Would ya look here, Ezra? We got trespassers.”

Jace awoke with a start to find two burly men with long knives in their hands staring down at him. Tick was already on his feet, but Pepper lay hidden behind a large stalagmite.

“You don’t suppose they’s down here looking for Miss Bonnie’s treasures, do you, Sylvanus?” asked the second man who was inching his way nearer to Jace.

Jace’s hand slowly reached for his backpack. He hoped the green glow on the keypad would not attract their attention. He had set the return coordinates earlier while he talked with Tick, but he had wanted to check them in the daylight, just to be sure they were correct.

“How do, strangers? Are you here to get a job with the CCC like we are?” Tick asked in as calm a voice as he could muster.

“Listen to him, Ezra. He thinks gentlemen like us would stoop to workin’ for a livin’. Most likely he’s trying to get us off track so we don’t take the loot from him.”

Jace could smell the two men: their scent of unwashed body, tobacco and alcohol filled the cave air like poison. Jace pushed himself to a standing position, his knees quaking. The glint of the knives was apparent even in the dusky torch light.

“Sylvanus, perhaps we should allow these boys to hand over the Barrow loot.”

“There’s no loot. That’s just Hooverville talk,” Tick replied boldly.

“Well then, we’ll just have to see for ourselves, won’t we?” said the first man as he lunged for Tick. Tick deftly dodged his knife and called for Jace to run.

But Jace couldn’t leave Tick to fight two armed men. He grabbed the torch and dropped it on the smoldering embers, then quickly doused the campfire with water from Tick’s cook pot. Smoke filled the cavern and gave the youngsters a moment to run away as the two men fumbled and coughed. As the boys reached the cave opening, they could hear the shouted curses from the men as they struggled to follow.

Suddenly, Pepper’s low moaning bay rumbled up from the cavern depths. Jace looked with alarm at Tick, thinking that Pepper had been hurt.

But Tick was bent over double with laughter.

“What is it, Tick? Is Pepper alright?”

“That’s his coon call. Been watching a mother coon setting up a nest near our camp and I was wondering when Pepper was gonna sniff her out. The smoke must o’ riled her up too. Like they say in that new song, smoke gets in your eyes! Boy, it does. Say, we’d better get out o’ the way ‘fore we get runned over,” Tick answered, as he scurried through the opening and hid in the bushes to the side. Jace quickly followed.

A moment later, the two robbers came clawing and scrambling through the tight opening with a huge mother raccoon and bleary-eyed coon dog in hot pursuit. Above all of them, hundreds of free-tail bats made a smoke-like plume that swirled into the blue spring sky. Jace wondered where the dust storm had gone, but evidence of its passing was everywhere: a fine coating of sooty sand covered the leaves and ground and coated every blade of grass.

The two men could be heard hollering for their lives as they headed down the steep hillside away from Longhorn Cavern. Pepper’s barks echoed off the limestone ridges and Tick’s laughter faded away to a chortle.

“That chase will wear old Pepper out good now. He’ll be mighty hungry when he gets back. Guess I’ll head over to town and see if any of the churches have got handouts tonight. It’s about a ten mile walk one way.” Tick kicked a small white rock from the pathway. “Sure will be nice to start workin’ again and not depending on handouts. You gonna join me?”

“No, I think I’ll stay here a bit longer.”

Tick nodded and extended his right hand. “Best o’ luck, Jace.”

“Best of luck to you, too, Tick.”

As Tick walked off, Jace picked up his backpack and checked the coordinates. Everything looked right. He stepped behind a clump of cedar trees and pressed the buttons that would return him to where the lightning had struck. He set the return clock for a few minutes before the actual strike. He didn’t want to be struck twice.

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*The years have changed you, somehow;*

*I see you now*

"Sophisticated Lady"

Duke Ellington

Jace felt a drop of rain hit his head and he ran back to the museum at Longhorn Cavern. As a lightning storm raged overhead, Jace wandered around the small rooms of the museum, looking intently at the grainy black and white photos that told the story of the CCC and the building of the cavern pathways and that very building.

The walls of the museum were substantial, strong and rough. Just like the young men who built them, Jace thought.

“Jace, the tour’s about to start, but you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.” Jace’s mother had been glad he had come back from walking so quickly. The storm had turned out to be very dangerous and the tour had been delayed until it subsided.

“I’d like to go on the tour, Mom,” Jace answered.

His mother smiled and teased him. “You’re studying these old photographs a lot, Jace. I thought you didn’t like all these boring historical displays.”

Jace looked into the eyes of one young man in a CCC photo. Even in the black-and-white picture, you could see by his freckled face that he was a redhead.

Jace shrugged. “Some of it is pretty cool.”