

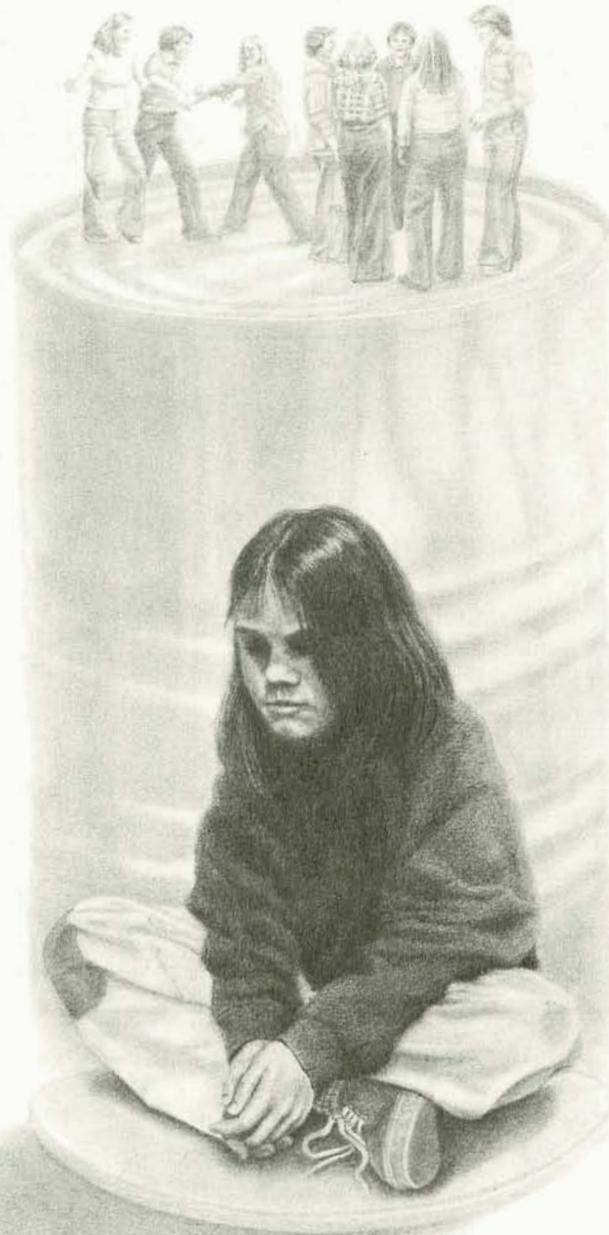
# T H E L A D D E R

Julia thought of the ladder during social studies. Bored nauseous with Idaho crops, she flattened her brain against Mr. McCowan's lecture and went off exploring Center Street for a place to hide. She hid in the easy places first, behind Nelson's hackberry tree, wide as a bathtub but very obvious. She squatted beneath fat bushes and lay along indentations where a skinny person like herself was almost invisible.

Julia ventured as far as she dared from home base, figuring the darkness in, and suddenly right in front of

her leaning longways against Esplins' shed was the broken ladder. It would take held breath and pain, but she could get under it! In her black sweater she would look like a pile of dirt. Goose bumps spread along her arms and back and legs. Staring wildly past her textbook, she crept under the ladder. Like a potato bug exposed to sudden danger, she rolled herself into a ball. For once she would not be found first! For once she would not be found at all. She heard Butch whoopee his way home and then Leon screaming safe. Even her brother Ted got

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Illustrated by Brent Christison

home free. Arda and Patti were both found and outrun. It served them right. Julia studied the whispers coming toward her. She held her breath. They floated right past as she sprang loose and ran in home, yelling all the way. Alone and supreme under the street light, she kicked the can so hard nobody could find it.

**B**y the time the school bell rang, Julia had considered at least seventeen quick ways of getting under the ladder and out again. Mr. McCowan's voice had followed her through them all, reminding her that she was not listening, which she knew already, and it followed her out the door as she leaped down all the steps at once and dodged around the corner of the building. Ahead of the other children, she ran up Center Street and out of sight into Esplins' back yard. Sure enough, the ladder was still there, long and low and forgotten. She couldn't study it—someone might see—but she knew she would fit. She ran on home out of breath. Stopping dead still on the doorstep, she took a deep breath and tried to look normal. Then she walked inside.

The house felt empty. "This is boring," she said out loud. Who could she keep her secret from? She pulled the sofa around to face the window and flung herself onto it. "Day, die your slow death," she said, "but hurry up, for pete's sake!"

Behind her, nearly hidden in the big chair, sat Great Grandma. She put down her crochet hook and took off her glasses. "What was that about dying, Julia?"

"Oh, hi, Gram. I didn't see you." Julia rose on one elbow and looked toward the big chair. "I still don't see you. Isn't anybody home?"

"Just me and the made beds. We won't have supper till your mother gets back." Grandma put her glasses on again and tucked the unfinished doilie into her pocket.

"I'm not hungry. Where is she?"

"You're hungry, all right."

"Where did you say Mother went?" Julia could hear Grandma lifting herself from the chair. It took a long time.

"Well, she sure told me, but—"

"I think I'll just lie here for a few hours and watch the sky turn black."

"Is a storm coming? Oh dear."

"I'd better not tell you why because it's a secret."

"I hope it doesn't storm. I'm through liking storms."

Julia stood up by Grandma and put both hands flat against the warm glass where sun poured in. "Night's out there somewhere, Gram, and if I keep my mouth shut I'll have more fun than I ever had in my entire life." She pressed her nose against the hot surface just as Patti and Arda came down the sidewalk dragging their sweaters and talking and chewing gum they had been saving all day. Julia backed away from the window frowning. *Dummies*. She had discovered long ago how to chew gum in school and get away with it.

**S**upper was the last obstacle to be overcome. Julia looked toward the food on her plate but was under the ladder again, squished and tense, only this time it wasn't Mr. McCowan's voice following her but her father's.

"Julia? Julia!" She looked up. Everyone was watching her.

"I'm finished. Mother's finished. Ted has finished

twice, and Grandmother is tired," said her father.

"I'm not hungry."

"All children are hungry," said Grandma. "Though boys are worse."

Julia looked past Grandma at the kitchen window. Center Street had emptied itself and gray was in the air now.

"Please eat your supper, Julia."

"I can't. I think I'm too excited."

"Well, tell us about it," said her father. "We like excitement."

"It's a secret. I can never tell."

"I won't tell," said Ted. Julia didn't answer. Ted was the last person she would ever tell anything to.

"Why does it take so long to get dark, anyway?"

"Oh, my, does it?" Grandma took off her glasses and bracing herself with her hands against the table twisted slowly around to look out the window behind her.

"Yesterday it was dusk by now," said Julia.

"Night is a tunnel. Who can be sure of the end of it?" Grandma had turned away from the evening sky and put her glasses on again.

"All I know is that you can't play kick the can until after dark," said Mother. "It's getting warmer so the days are longer."

"What difference does it make? Jul can't play kick the can," said Ted. "She hides dumb. She can run fast but she hides dumb so why hide at all?"

Julia didn't say one word. What did he know!

"You like night. I like morning," said Grandma. "As soon as I see my window white with sun, I know I'm not dead."

"Of course you're not dead!" Mother hugged her. "You mustn't worry about it."

Grandma's hands, loose skin over bone, waved toward Julia. "I wake up at four and watch for morning. She can't eat good food because the sky won't get dark fast enough to suit her."

Julia tried to eat. "Too bad Grandma can't have fun anymore," she said. "I'd find her a good place to hide." With her eyes she measured Grandma. Would she fit under the ladder? Possibly she would.

"Too bad she can't take my nights and give me her days. I'd be young and she could be old."

Julia leaned toward Grandma and the window. "Don't go to bed, Gram. Sit outside for once and watch us. You'll see a sight."

Grandma shook her head. "It's my bones. They float apart and I can't manage myself." Then, abruptly, as if all her worries were over, she raised both arms toward Julia. "Would you like my bones, too?"

Instead of answering, Julia raised her own arms sideways, wide like airplane wings. "This is going to be the best night of my life. If I had a big black tent, I'd throw it over the whole world."

Grandma sank down into her print dress and worried voice again and her hands were in her lap. "Well, leave me outside of it."

"There's more to life than kick the can, Julia," said her father. Julia smiled. After all, what did they know. Tonight, what did anybody know about the importance of Butch Nelson standing under the streetlight holding a tin can.

Julia was first out, Ted trailing, and then all of the houses opened their doors and players ran furiously toward the light. The sky wasn't black yet, but they went over the rules and played tag to practice their running. Only when it was dark could they really play and Julia knew she would need darkest dark to hide under her ladder, but she must not seem anxious. Complete darkness could be games away. When someone tagged her she didn't become angry, and even though Leon called her Fool instead of Jul she pretended to be having a good time.

Finally the universe did not let Julia down. The sky disappeared. The spell of the dark and the game fell on them all. As soon as Butch propped his head against the pole and flung his arms up to blind himself, Julia ran. One by one the others disappeared and Julia wound herself slowly down under the ladder, leaning her side against the shed to hold her position. She pulled her feet under her and hugged her knees and rested her forehead in the grass. Now if she paid attention, she would know when to run home free.

"You're out! Beatcha!" The can clanked along the street. "Safe! I'm safe!" Who was it? Ted? Arda? Ted for sure. She heard Butch gallop along the gravel driveway, catching and outrunning who was it? Oh, she had fooled them! She had fooled them. Then it was quiet. Now the organized search for the last and best. And just at the right moment, home. She waited. One more kick and then the clanking again. Jimmy?

When no hunters came near and there were no longer any shouts or whispers to figure out and when she realized that she hadn't once heard her name spoken, Julia let herself lean loosely against the shed. It must be a trick! No fair! She tightened into a ball again. Any minute now Butch and Leon would creep past her, completely fooled, and she would fly home! There was no way they could catch her! But the noises were all far away and bunched together, and then she heard words: "All in! Donna's it! No peeking and no cheating!" It was Butch's voice. *Bossy Butch.*

All in? I'm not in. I'm waiting to be not found! If it's a trick you'll be sorry. Suddenly she was out to recess and everyone else had been chosen and the odd-numbered team had to take her. Suddenly she was behind the hackberry tree, exposed, discovered.

Loud voices kept rising, the hunting and clanking noises, the found sounds. The best hunters crept so close once she almost exploded with trying to hear her name.

I'm hiding and you can't find me, cried Julia inside herself. Look for me! At least look for me!

Once she heard Oldham's screen door creak. *Somebody cheated.* Somebody went inside! I'm telling! If she could only tell. She never cheated!

Curled under her ladder, Julia counted six games played but never her name. The hunters came and went, past her, and so near that she breathed on them, but she didn't run. How could she? A skinny fool Jul. All she could do was wait until bedtime. She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her black sweater, but she let all her tears run down into the grass.

Center Street children say goodnight by slamming their doors and Julia knew when she could come safely out. Stiff and numb she walked home. Ted's bedroom light went on. Inside the empty kitchen

she took off her black sweater and laid it on a chair. "I'm going to bed," she called into the lighted living room and ran up the stairs.

In bed, Julia gathered her knees tightly against her chest and shut her eyes. They flew open. She let the knees go and shut her eyes again. They would not stay. She ought to go tell her parents what had happened to her and what she was, but they would say that of course she wasn't. Then she saw Ted's light go out, and the hall was dark except for the soft edge of downstairs light. She climbed out of bed and tiptoed downstairs into Grandmother's room. The streetlight threw shapes on the wall, and Julia could see the woman lying in darkness with her arms outside the covers, folded flat over each other.

"Come sit, Julia."

Julia sat on the foot of the bed. "Grandma?"

"Yes, I'm awake. When I go to bed I don't go to sleep. I go back to Arizona and grow up again and marry your great grandfather. Then we move north—"

"Tonight we played kick the can. We always play kick the can on Center Street. Tonight was supposed to be the best game we ever played."

"When I was your age I hauled hay for my father. I ruined myself hauling hay and lost four of my babies. Don't ever haul hay. That's a boy's work."

Julia lay back across the foot of the bed. "I'm a nothing, Grandma. I mean, I'm dumb and ugly and skinny as a gray hair on a dead man's head. I had a hiding place under Esplin's ladder that was plain as pie but nobody could ever have found me. I thought of it in school. I hate social studies. It was exactly like I planned except that—"

"One day in school putting on my blue coat I stepped on Keith's books. His coat was hanging right by mine. I hung it there on purpose because I liked Keith's red hair. I didn't know my foot was on his books."

"Grandma?"

"He looked right at me, disgusted, and I knew he didn't like me after all."

"But you didn't marry Keith. Who is Keith anyway? Nobody looked for me. How could they not even look for a person?"

"Your grandfather died before he got old, bless him. He always knew what to do. I could sleep if he were here to tell me what to do."

"Grandma, it isn't possible. Is it?"

"Not possible? Not possible? I don't remember. If only it were morning!"

Grandma's voice crumpled and Julia knew she was crying. She sat up and laid her head softly over Grandma's folded arms.

"What's the matter, Grandma? Are you crying over me?"

"I could be, Julia. Possibly I am. I don't remember."

"I know I'm somebody, and smart too, Grandma. What do they know? Now don't cry. Don't cry over Jul."

Julia patted the covers until Grandma was asleep. "I hope when you wake up it's day already," she said. She tiptoed back upstairs and climbed into her bed. She was tired and her bones hurt, too. Stretching as long and flat as she could, she closed her eyes hard against the streetlight beyond and below.

EILEEN GIBBONS KUMP received an MA in English from BYU and had additional study in creative writing at Stanford. A book of short stories, *Bread and Milk and Other Stories*, was published in March 1980. She is the mother of four children.