

Ted didn't waste any time. He turned and ran for his life. The forest was surely his only escape. He dashed off, around the side of the house, out the back gate by Grandpa Joe's workshop, and down the path that meandered its way through the woods. Behind him, he could hear the rapid steps of his pursuers, with Collin screeching out, "Get him – get himmmmm!"

He had a few seconds' lead on the older boys, and once deep in the woods, he darted off the path and into the undergrowth. Knowing the woods so well, the boy headed for the tall pine he often climbed. This was in fact the tallest tree in the woods, and it was deep in the undergrowth away from the path. He dived for cover as he heard the boys' eager footsteps patter past on the path.

Ted tried to control his breathing. He was puffed from the efforts of his escape, and was sure that they would hear his panting. He lay as still as he could. The thick leafy bushes of the undergrowth gave him good cover, though he wished he could bury himself deeper. Through the foliage, he could see the section of the path that he had just left. The boys had stopped near this point, and were now stalking through the bushes in his direction. From his angle down low to the earth he could see their feet. He heard them whispering, and shivered at the thought that they might be able to see him. Should he make a run for it, or should he stay still in the hope that they could not see him? His heart was pounding in his chest as he lay as flat he could, slowly catching his breath.

Something crawled over his leg. He stiffened and gasped, but his hand over his mouth thankfully muffled it. It was then that he realized that he was out in the woods with no shoes on. How mad would Granny Peggy be if she knew this?

The boys crept closer and closer. Ted was sure that they could see him. He pressed himself as flat as he could, holding his breath, trying not to contemplate what would happen once they found him. There was another rustle in the bushes immediately in front of him. What was it? There it was again. Not much light filtered down through the trees in these woods at the best of times, and this was made worse by the fact that it was now late afternoon. Ted strained his eyes, peering through the leaves just in front of him. To his horror, as if he was in some sort of nightmare, he saw the ghastly shape of a cane rat just a few feet away. The creature sniffed in Ted's direction and crouched ready to pounce, its beady eyes seeming to look right into his soul. The whole world seemed to be ganging up against him. He felt as if this rat was in some sort of strange alliance with the bully, who was so close now, bearing down on his hiding place. There was no escape: he was doomed.

The rat was big – not the size of a cat but it would have put up a fight with Peggy's terriers. Oh how he wished they were here right now! The creature shook its rough coat and darted forward a few inches, ready for its final pounce. Ted's heart nearly jumped out of his mouth. He felt dizzy and light-headed, fighting off every instinct

to get up and run for his life. His pursuers were nearly upon him.

Just then a butterfly fluttered past Ted's nose, and settled on his hand, making him flinch once again. He bit his lip to stifle the sharp cry that he wanted to let out. Suddenly time seemed to stand still, as he became strangely mesmerized by the beauty of this creature. The butterfly's large blue wings opened and closed methodically as it sat on his hand staring up at him. It was the largest butterfly he had ever seen: its wings were large enough to span the palm of his hand. The creature seemed so peaceful and unaware of the urgent predicament into which it had just settled. Its presence seemed to have a strange calming effect. He could feel his breathing slowing down, and the blood was flowing back to his head. However this calm moment passed in a flash. Ted's focus on the butterfly was broken as the cane rat suddenly charged forward. Scratching through the dirt it came, white front teeth bared ready for its assault.

What followed triggered an incredible chain of events. The cane rat startled the butterfly, which fluttered off with amazing agility, crossing in front of the incoming rat. This must have startled the rat, because it suddenly changed direction and scurried off past Ted. The boy lay frozen, helplessly watching the events unfold before him. The rat's new course took it straight towards Collin, who was now only a few feet away from Ted's hiding place.

The cane rat must have run right over Collin's foot, because the bully let out a high-pitched screech, and ran

back to the path in a panic. His screams triggered Robert into letting out a similar shriek. He too turned and fled. Robert managed to trip and fall in the undergrowth, rolling over once, then getting up and scampering off, covered in leaves and dust. The rat, startled by the behaviour of these weird humans, darted off, vanishing deep into the undergrowth.

Ted let out a long slow breath. A chuckle of relief escaped him although his heart was still pounding, and he was shaking. He knew that this battle was not over yet.