

6. Our First Camp-Out

I LIKED DIGGING WITH A PITCHFORK.

Not that I had a lot of experience. But, the one I was using to help Gramma Davis was just like Gramp's, so the way I used it and the effort it took was the same.

Gramp had taught me how to use one at the end of the last gardening season. Before getting sick, he had also given me what a good teacher would call a review, when the two of us put the garden to bed for the year. I handled the pitchfork pretty well by then. I had been getting good at it and was even allowed to work without him right beside me once—until he caught me doing the one thing I was forbidden to do.

I had been working on a really stubborn patch of dirt for hours. That part of the main path that led into the garden always got trampled all-to-heck. It was the hottest day of Indian summer, a Saturday, and maybe a half-hour till snack time. As much as I was enjoying the smell of the turned soil, I had a pretty good sweat going, and I was definitely feeling it was time for a break. To make things worse, the dirt I was jabbing at wouldn't slice worth a darn.

I raised the pitchfork with both hands wrapped onto the top of the handle, lifting it high in front of me. The plan was to drive it down, and to peel off a slab of dirt.

Gramp's voice broke apart the quiet fall afternoon. "Stop! Don't you move." I stopped. I didn't move. The pitchfork handle was frozen in space above my head. "What did I tell you not to do when using a pitchfork?" I didn't have to search my brain for the answer. "Not to raise it above my bellybutton," I answered.

"Why?" He continued leading me.

"So I wouldn't wound myself by jabbing the fork into my foot. You said that my foot doesn't have food in it, so there's no sense digging into it." I hoped I had remembered his words right.

"Like when?" he asked.

"Like when Duane Duhamel poked himself a bunch of years ago."

"No, like when Duane Duhamel, six years ago, at age seventeen, impaled his left foot with a pitchfork, and almost lost the entire foot when the wound became infected."

I should have remembered *impaled*.

"So, what do you do when you've got dirt that won't break up?" I asked.

"You take a smaller chunk. You go at it from a different angle. You ask for help."

"But I wanted to do it myself."

"When you get too proud, you can also get stupid. So that's it for you and the pitchfork for the rest of the year. Switch to the spade."

"Aw," I whined.

"Keep that up, and you'll be using a spade to dig the garden next spring, too," he warned.

Luckily I was getting to use a pitchfork again. I respected it, and it worked well for me. I was glad, too, because a pitchfork was sure a lot easier to use than a shovel. With a pitchfork, the dirt crumbled into smaller lumps, and not much stayed on the daggers of the fork if you had to lift. A shovel made a person work harder.

If I did have to dig with a shovel, a spade was probably the best overall. Even though it could cut right into the ground, there wasn't much lifting needed in order to turn the soil.

A square-ended shovel was a crummy tool because it was hard to dig with. And when you got a shovel full of dirt, it was really heavy. That could wear me out early.

Shoveling coal with Gramp's scoop shovel always wore me out the quickest. I had only used it a couple of times to help fill the cellar bin with coal, starting in the winter of fifth grade. The load of coal was mountain-high, and each scoop had to be slid through a tiny window at ground level that was only one foot high and two feet wide. The big scoop and short handle meant that my back broke within a half-an-hour. I was sure the neighbors

could hear my loud grunts way before that. My clothes were soaked with sweat in no time. I later decided the best use for the scoop was not as a shovel at all, but as a one-man toboggan!

At Gramma Davis' place, the guys, a girl and I were helping to get her garden ready for the winter. More than a week had passed since Gramp got sick, and the weather had turned into a wonderful, blue-sky-filled, yellow-leaves-rattling Indian summer. It promised to continue for several more days, according to the weather report on the radio.

I hoped it would stay nice for when Gramp and Del and I got to go on our first hunting trip of the season. It turned out that Gramp didn't get out of the hospital on the weekend they said he would, but chances were good he would be home by the end of the week. He promised that the first weekend after he was free from that place, he and I would join Del, and I'd get the chance to bag a bird with my new gun. He said he knew how much I had been chomping at the bit to make that happen.

Gramma Davis, who was close to ninety, was standing over us at the side of the garden while we worked. She was a very tiny woman, and would have been a sparrow if she lived in the bird world. My guess was that she had probably weighed twice as much fifty years earlier. She had probably shrunk four inches in that time, too.

"Now Buddy," she said. "When you get to the next row, there should still be lots of potatoes in it. Be sure to dig from the side, so you don't spear my spuds with the fork."

Her hair was bone-white and tied into a bun high at the back of her head. Her face always had a smile on it, even though it looked like it had been carved into a really big apple which had then been left to dry up. It also looked like it had been sprinkled with flour. Her hands were somewhere between claws and what everyone else had. They were thin and lined with thick blue veins. Her fingers were skinny, lumpy and made crooked by arthritis.

Wearing a light blue, print dress, she looked like she was copying Nan. Overtop she wrapped herself in a grey cardigan sweater, the pockets and sleeves of which were stuffed with wrinkled hankies. I doubted she knew that the sweater had gaping holes in the elbows of its sleeves. On her feet were not-so-shiny black dress shoes with thick leather soles. Heavy, light brown, long stockings hid her bowed legs.

As she spoke to me, Gramma Davis looked above and then to both sides of me, her head always on the move. That was because she was blind, or mostly blind. The kind of blindness she had was weird. Apparently, the black centre of her eyes, which Miss Ploor said were pupils, had an even blacker dot in each one. It meant that the old lady couldn't see anything, except for a ring around the outer part of her pupils. And even that ring was

pretty blurry. For her to be able to see anything, she had to keep moving her head, hoping she could find a part of the outer ring that would let her see what she was trying to look at.

Riel, Mokey and I volunteered to help Gramma Davis with her yard in the spring and fall, and it was the second year we had been doing it. It was easy for us to say yes when Miss Ploor asked for volunteers to be Gramma Davis' garden helpers. Unlike the Red Witch, we liked Miss Ploor so much that we would have done anything she asked. Ryan Giles and Barry Loscombe had helped before us, but they had moved on to high school, so we were the next squad in Gramma's Volunteer Brigade—another name Nan gave us.

Nan had set up this work party after my skipping school prank. She figured I needed something to focus on, other than Gramp's sickness and hunting and Miss Ruby.

The girls in the upper grades at Riverview Elementary took turns in helping us, too, and it was Mary Wickham, an eighth grade student, who came to work with us on this warm Thursday after school. She was a lot of fun and knew how to work. She was also a bit of a tomboy, but pretty cute.

Riel was following behind me with a spade, turning the soil I dug up with the fork. Mokey and Mary were raking leaves and other dead plant stuff into piles, and then stuffing the piles into a wheelbarrow. They would dump those loads into a big bin at the back of the yard. The decayed leaves then got added to the garden each spring.

Knowing we were going to be helping our elderly neighbor, all of us wore work clothes to school. That meant we could be to Gramma's place only a few minutes after Army rang the bell to dismiss us.

But Gramma didn't like us to have to get straight to work after being stuck in school all day. She always insisted on a bit of fun first. When we showed up, she wouldn't let us take our boots off, but we could sit down with her in the kitchen for a chit-chat. She would give each of us a ration of two cookies and a half-a-glass of milk. She made the best peanut butter cookies on the south side of the tracks—maybe even in the whole town.

As part of every chit-chat she got us to make a date with her to play Canasta. She loved all kinds of card games, but Canasta was her favourite. For one evening a month, three or more kids would visit and play with her. No adult needed to be involved in organizing our card-playing time with Gramma Davis. We kids just worked it out on our own.

There was lots of laughter during our card games. It didn't take long to get over the way Gramma looked all around the room instead of right at us. Maybe talking with Army and having to figure out what to do with his wandering eye helped us with that. It was easy to ignore the pinholes Gramma poked through the cards so she could tell what number was on each.

Almost every student in fifth grade through eight, over four dozen of us, had spent time with Gramma Davis at one time or another. That is, all except Randy and Lyle. I figured those two creeps wouldn't even help their own grandmothers. But, for the rest of us, even though she wasn't our real grandmother, I didn't think there was a single kid who regretted giving Gramma Davis our time. We had all come to love the old lady.

"So, I guess you won't be going hunting with your granddad this weekend," said Riel, as he turned a spade full of soil. Big, juicy earthworms, which would have been great fishing bait, wriggled in the black earth.

"No," I answered, shaking my head. "He's going to be in the hospital until Sunday. Nan's really happy that he'll at least be home in time for Thanksgiving on Monday. The doctor won't let him work next week, 'cause he has to stay home and take it easy. But, he said he'd be ready to go next Saturday. He never goes hunting early in the season, anyway." I was quick to add the last part.

"Seems like this weekend would be a good time for a camp-out, then, with the weather so good and all," Riel offered.

"You mean sleep out over night?" I felt silly after saying it.

"That's what a camp-out is, isn't it?"

"Where? When?" I asked.

"I dunno, I thought we could hike down to the river after breakfast Saturday and set up camp. We could stay overnight and come back in time for lunch on Sunday." Riel was leaning on his shovel now, one foot on the top of the spade. "Wadda' ya think?"

"Uh, we've never camped-out before," I said. "And none of us has a tent. Plus, I don't think Nan would let me, with Gramp being in the hospital." I could hear doubt leaking into my voice.

"Don't ask her, then." Riel obviously had an idea. "Ask him. Tonight. When you visit him at the hospital."

"Ask who about what?" Mokey said.

He had seen us not working, and so he'd sneaked over to find out what we were up to. I didn't think he'd be interested in going with us—if we were even allowed to go. And if he did want to, it was almost for sure that his mother would squash the idea.

"Riel thinks it would be a good time to try camping-out," I said.

"Wow! That sounds super. Can I come?"

Riel huffed. "Do you think for a minute your mom would let you, Moke?"

"She would if my dad said it was okay," he answered. "You guys could help me sell him on it. Just stop by with me after we're finished here. He'll be home by then."

"No point getting worked up, Mokey. I doubt I'll be able to go either," I said.

"Well, if you can, and if my dad lets me come, I'm gonna bring my new Trapper Nelson pack I got last Christmas."

For Riel, getting permission to go on our first camp-out wasn't a problem. His parents knew that he could handle himself in the outdoors. Neither his mom nor his dad so much as said to be careful.

Unlike them, Mrs. Stackhouse had a fit. Mokey said he thought the roof was going to lift off the house because of his mom's hollering. She was shouting at Mr. Stackhouse, saying that Mokey couldn't go. He wasn't old enough or big enough, and he knew nothing about surviving in the wilderness.

It was a huge surprise to Riel and me when Mokey told us that his dad had said yes, and stuck to his guns. He must have thought the fun for Mokey was worth all of Mrs. Stackhouse's ranting and raving.

Getting permission for me to go wasn't as easy as Riel thought it would be. Nan said she was worried about my spending all night away from home and civilization. Right away she put up her usual roadblocks to keep me from going. And with Mom always following along with what my grandparents thought was right, I knew I was fighting an uphill battle. Also, although Mom agreeing with Nan about her worries was one thing, I had to overcome more than just her being fretful. It was Pearl that made everything more difficult for me.

My little sister wasn't trying to tag along with me anymore in town like she had at the lake. At home, she and Maisie had more things to do and more friends to do them with. Sometimes I saw her so little that I wondered if she even knew I was still alive.

I guessed the idea of going on a camp-out with her big brother struck her as a super thing to do, though. As soon as I opened my mouth about it at dinner on the night after helping Gramma Davis, Pearl got into the mix.

"It's just like at the lake. He gets to do all the fun things and I have to stick around the house! If something scared me, you could probably hear my screams here at home. It's only down the hill beside the river. Why won't you let me go?"

Nan let Mom take the lead on dealing with my little sister. "Pearl, camping overnight in the outdoors is something that boys do, not little girls. And even if it was a thing that a young lady could try, you are simply too little—too young—to go along with the boys."

Pearl wasn't satisfied. "That's not fair. Just 'cause I'm a girl shouldn't make any difference. And I'm not too little—or too young. Buddy's being mean again." She glared in my direction, but didn't look right at me. "The reason you won't let me go is because he doesn't want me to go with him and Riel and Mokey. He's just being selfish. It's not fair!"

I wondered if I could ever do anything right by my sister.

Then Nan tossed in her two cents. “Pearl, you’re the one being unfair. You have to understand that we can’t let you go camping overnight on your own with a bunch of boys, and without any adults along.” Nan nodded at Mom, then continued. “Your mother’s right. Girls don’t do that kind of thing. And you are too young and too little for us to even consider it. So, just you hush up and eat your supper, or you’ll be heading upstairs to spend some time by yourself.”

Pearl looked for a moment like she might keep up her complaining, but she didn’t. She knew better than to cross Nan.

With that, Nan turned on me. “Buddy, neither your mother nor I feel good about this. We do not want you to be spending the night in the wild with other boys as young as you are. You know full well that at this time of year, a freak blizzard could blow up out of nowhere. Then where would you be?” She looked at me, expecting me to argue. But I didn’t have to. She knew as well as I did that a blizzard wasn’t at all likely to happen.

When she didn’t get the kind of reaction she figured she would from me, she shifted gears. “All right, then I’ll just share my thoughts on this cockamamie idea with your grandfather when I visit him tonight at the hospital. He will decide. And you will not whine or argue about his decision.”

“Can I go with you so I can talk to him myself?” I asked. “You’ll just poison his mind with you and Mom’s feelings. If I get to ask, at least I’ll know it was fair.”

Nan didn’t seem to like the idea at all. “That won’t be necessary, young man. I’ll let you know his decision at breakfast tomorrow.”

By ten in the morning on Saturday, we were tromping down the road towards the market garden on the river flats. When Gramp gave his permission, he insisted that we enter and exit the forest where we were going to camp along the riverbank by going through the market garden. It was a few weeks into bird-hunting season, and he didn’t want us wandering in and out of the bushes and getting shot by hunters wanting to scare up a grouse.

The law said no one could hunt within a hundred yards of the river. This gave migratory birds what Gramp called a sanctuary. Once we were inside the forest, we’d also be safe. Big game hunting didn’t start for a couple more weeks, and hunters who were after deer usually went farther away from town. Rifle bullets whizzing past our ears wasn’t something we had to worry about while camping along the riverbank.

The three of us looked like worn out young soldiers returning from war, instead of young guys going into battle. Riel was humping along with his hatchet through his belt

and Mokey’s Trapper Nelson pack on his back. It was too heavy for Mokey to manage. The pack was loaded with our food: a few cans of beans, some wieners, three cans of peaches, a loaf of bread, a bag of cookies, three apples and some dried fruit. There were also three forks, three tin plates, three jars full of apple juice and a bottle of Coke each. The food was all snuggled inside a blanket, as was the flashlight. A couple more blankets were tied to the top of the pack.

Although Riel had to hang onto the straps near his chest, and was bent over a bit as he walked, he was handling the load well. Plodding downhill probably helped.

I had my own bundle of blankets lashed to my back. The butt end of my B.B. gun rested in my hand, with the barrel against my shoulder, and my hunting knife was held to my waist by my belt.

Mokey had another blanket tied in a roll and tucked under one of his arms. He carried Riel’s B.B. gun in his hand.

We were all over-dressed for what promised to be a perfect day. Boots, double the socks, long pants, a shirt, a sweater, a heavy jacket and a baseball cap suffocated each one of us. Riel’s clothes were dull and wrinkled. Mine were a bit brighter in colour and looked cleaner. Mokey’s looked like they had just come out of the catalogue and had been washed and ironed. They probably had been.

Our little troop made it down the hill, over the prairie and through the market garden. We then bushwhacked through the brush for a few minutes until we reached the river. It was as still as the day, except for some swirls caused by the river’s currents that made it look like someone stirring oil. Its colour, a light brownish-green, almost blended into the grass that grew along the edge of the opposite bank. The gold in the trees reflected off the water. Crispy leaves littered the forest floor. Sandbars in both directions looked like smooth, light brown, bald islands. They begged to be walked on.

“Sure looks like it wants us to take a swim, doesn’t it?” said Riel.

Mokey piped in right away. “No way! There are two rules Dad made me swear not to break: stay off the sandbars and don’t go swimming. If I go against those, Dad will never win over Mom again, and I’ll be locked away for life.”

“Don’t worry, Mokey. I had to promise Gramp the same thing,” I said. “I want him to let me do this again. So, no swimming or hiking on the sandbars, Riel.”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” he said. “Let’s head upstream and find a camping spot. I’m about to fry if I don’t get out of some of these clothes.”

Our campsite turned out to be an opening in the trees on a flat, sandy area of the riverbank, with the river in front of us and a well-used game trail in behind. Surrounded by poplar trees and berry bushes that didn’t have any berries left on them, it was picture-

perfect. We shucked our gear and clawed out of our jackets and sweaters.

“Don’t you think we should be farther away from the game trail, Riel? I don’t want some bear chewing on my leg in the middle of the night,” I said.

“Oh, jeez. Let’s move farther back into the bushes, then,” whined Mokey. “Or, maybe we’d be safer if we set up camp on a sandbar.”

“What about your dad’s rule, Moke?” asked Riel. There was a nasty tone to his voice.

“Na, this is a great spot here. It’ll do fine,” I said, wanting to make Riel feel good about his choice of campsite.

“Don’t panic, Moke,” Riel said. His voice was already lighter. “We’ll be up most of the night swappin’ ghost stories around the campfire anyway. The smell of smoke will keep wildlife away.” He said it with enough confidence that Mokey quit complaining.

“What do you think we should do about a shelter? It’s too cold to sleep under the stars. Actually, it’ll be cold enough by morning that we could see some frost, and that’ll also make it damp.”

“I figured I’d show you some Indian lore,” Riel said.

Mokey jumped in quickly, “What’s a lore?”

“I dunno,” answered Riel. “It’s got somethin’ to do with the way Indians do things.”

“Oh,” said Mokey. He seemed satisfied with Riel’s answer.

“How does a wigwam sound?” Riel asked.

“Great!” I answered. “But, how do we make one?”

Within minutes, Riel had shared his plan, and we went to work. He was the builder, I was the gatherer, and Mokey was our mule.

My trusty new hunting knife could slice through a willow as thick as my thumb like a hot knife through a cold brick of butter. Willows that size grew to over six feet. Mokey and I found a large patch in a low spot only a couple dozen yards away from the campsite. The willows were growing like weeds. I started cutting and putting them lengthwise into a pile. Mokey then took armloads to Riel. By the time my donkey got back, I’d have another batch ready for him to haul away.

It took us almost a couple of hours of cutting and hauling before Riel finally hollered, “Enough! That’s enough, guys!”

I was really, really happy to hear him shout that. By that time Mokey and I had taken off our shirts and were dripping. Sweat ran into my eyes and leaked down my back into my pants. My right palm, where I had been holding the knife, was beet red and threatening to blister.

“You heard what he said, Mokey. Let’s grab what’s left and head back.”

“Boy, I’m with you. I’m pooped. But wait’ll ya see what Riel’s contracted.”

“*Constructed*, not contracted,” I corrected him. I wondered if Mokey would ever grow out of his habit of misusing words.

When we broke into the clearing we had chosen for our campsite, what I saw was a work of art. A huge, green half-an-egg, with stripes of brown running through it, sat perched on the edge of the riverbank. The willows and attached leaves were woven together to make a perfect shelter. An opening, which was an upside down *v* just big enough to crawl through on one end, faced upriver. A flat spot had been saved just outside it for our campfire. That way we could look out at the fire from inside our shelter.

“Cripes, Riel, you’d think you were an Indian or something,” I joked.

He laughed. “Me no Indian, Kemosabe. Me just a half-breed,” he said.

After our talk about Métis that summer at the lake, I knew he was joking, too.

“Take a look,” he said.

The inside of the wigwam was like a cocoon. It was dark and cool. The little bit of light from the doorway let us see the tight thatching that Riel had woven. With the willows and their leaves locked together, the interior was almost as dark as a cave.

“This is amazing, Riel. How did you know how to do this?” I asked. “Prairie Indians built teepees for shelter, not wigwams.”

“I remembered seeing a picture in our Social Studies book last year,” he answered. “It didn’t take much to figure it out.”

“It’s great,” offered Mokey. “A bear would have to really be mad to get in at us. I’m still sleeping in the middle, though.”

“What? You think a bear wants to eat the little fat one first?” I asked.

“Well, I am the most delicious,” he said.

“That’s either *delicious* or *delectable*, you twerp.” Riel and I shook our heads.

“Let’s get the blankets spread out in here, and then make a fire pit. We’re going to have to gather a lot of firewood to last the night,” said Riel.

“Sure, but first I’ve gotta have a drink,” I said. “All that hacking at willows sucked me dry.”

Riel pointed to Mokey’s pack. “We’ve got a jar of juice for each of us. Why don’t we just take one now, and then we’ll know how much we’ve got to drink later. We have to make them last until tomorrow, remember.” Riel seemed to be shining as a natural leader when it came to camping.

“A gulp of juice and a couple of cookies will last me until supper,” I said.

“Jeez, that’s a long time. I might starve by then,” whined Mokey.

“No, Moke, you won’t starve, but you just might lose a pound of blubber,” laughed Riel.

“Wise guy,” was the best Mokey could come back with.

We had a snack and set to work gathering wood for the fire.

The day slipped away. By the time we had found rocks, built a fire pit and stored enough big and small firewood to do a pioneer family for a whole winter, the sun hinted it was getting ready for bed. The air next to the river was fresh and sweet.

“We’d better start fixing somethin’ to eat,” Riel said. “How about lighting a fire to get some coals going? We’ll set the cans of beans next to it to cook, like the cowboys do, and then roast the wieners on a stick. With some bread, that should fill us up.”

“I dunno,” said Mokey. “I’m not sure that’ll be enough. I’m so hungry, I could eat the arse end out of a weasel.”

“Skunk,” I corrected.

“Wadda ya’ mean, skunk?” he asked, looking around as if he expected one to wander out of the bush.

“It’s, ‘I could eat the arse end out of a skunk,’ not a weasel.”

“Who’d want to eat any part of a skunk?” he asked, screwing up his face.

“That’s the whole point,” said Riel. “Anyone who is that hungry would eat anything—including the arse end out of a skunk. Get it?”

“Got it,” I answered, waiting for Riel to say, *Good*.

He didn’t. Instead, he said to me, “No, I know you get it, but does Mokey?”

“I guess,” answered Mokey. His hesitation told me he really didn’t.

It took only one match to light the teepee fire Riel had built. He had layered grass and twigs on the bottom and carefully stacked up different sizes of kindling that he had chopped with his hatchet. We let Mokey do the honours. The dry grass lit easily, and passed the flame onto the twigs, which seemed eager to catch fire. The small pieces of wood then caught and burned with gusto. We kept the blaze small, while the great smell of wood smoke drifted over everything.

Twenty minutes later, we spread out a good-sized bed of coals. Riel fueled the fire in the middle of the glowing embers while I showed how expert I was at opening tins of beans with my hunting knife. Mokey wanted to start roasting wieners right away on the sticks I had cut.

“Hold off, Moke,” ordered Riel. “Wait for the beans to bubble.”

“But I’m starved,” Mokey whined.

“Then go catch a weasel and eat the arse end out of it,” he said back.

I laughed. Mokey just said, “Very funny.”

Knowing I would want a cold drink, I put my bottle of Coke in a small creek that ran

into the river like Gramp had shown me. Riel and Mokey followed and did the same. We made a little dam of rocks around them, so they wouldn’t get washed into the big water.

The river invited us to watch it while we waited. A soft evening glow was beginning to flood the whole valley, and shadows began to creep into the forest on both sides of the quiet moving water in front of us.

The silence of the moment was broken by an eerie far away sound.

“Listen,” I said. “Do you hear them?”

“I hear something,” said Mokey.

“They’re coming from upriver,” said Riel. “There they are.” Excitement slipped into his voice.

Right down the river’s gut flew a long, long line of Canada geese, their almost mournful honks and the whistling of their wings echoing throughout the river valley. There must have been three or four dozen of them. They glided past us not twenty yards away out over the water. We could see perfectly as their wings bit into the air, lifting and dropping their bodies slightly with each beat. Their heads were perfectly still, focused on something ahead of them. In a moment they were gone.

“That was super,” Mokey whispered, as if he was in a church. But then he added, “They were close enough to shoot.”

“If you’d have wanted to,” Riel said.

I didn’t say anything.

Line after line of geese, from a dozen up to thirty or so, flew past us for an hour while we ate our supper.

The meal was great. I doubted that wieners and beans had ever tasted that good before. Then apples, dried fruit and cookies completed our banquet. We were so hungry that we hardly spoke until it was time for the dessert. Washing it all down with cold Coke made it even better. It was dark by then, but we hadn’t really noticed the blackness sneaking up on us because Riel had kept stoking the fire.

Mokey was the first to talk. He brought up my fight with Miss Ruby, the Red Witch. “You were really, really mad, Buddy!” he said. “I don’t know when I’ve seen you madder. Your face was even redder than it usually gets when you’re angry. I thought you were going to get up and punch her one.”

“You’re never supposed to hit a woman,” I said quickly. “Gramp says it’s one of the worst things a man can do.” I saw Riel look down at the ground. “But let’s drop it. I don’t want to think of her now and spoil everything.”

Mokey kept on. “Yeah, but Army let you get away with it. I mean, except for the

apology.”

I couldn't bring myself to tell them that Army had actually convinced the Red Witch to call me Budd. It didn't matter, though, because she never ended up calling me that. I was glad Army had a change of heart and told her it was okay to keep up the Master Williams thing instead. I really didn't like thinking about her outside of school. Things were bad enough when I was there.

Riel came to my rescue. “Hey, goofball, didn't ya' hear him say he didn't want to talk about it?”

“Sorry,” offered a whipped Mokey.

It was a while before anyone spoke again, choosing instead to watch the dancing colours in the blaze. After we tossed the empty bean cans and the Coke bottles into one of the used paper bags, and then into the pack, Mokey perched on one of the logs beside the fire. Riel and I sprawled on the sand in front of it. The talk led to girls.

“Mary Wickham's fun, eh?” Mokey said. “She's sure pretty, too.”

“What would you know about it?” asked Riel.

Even in the glow of the fire, it was easy to see that Mokey had started blushing. “Nothing really. I was just saying that I think she's nice looking.”

“No kidding? It's a wonder you knew what to do with your rake the other day,” I said. “Your eyes were glued to her all afternoon.”

“I was appreciating her.” Mokey was smiling now.

“More like goggling her,” accused Riel.

Mokey didn't argue. “I wonder what it's like?” he asked.

“What's what like?” I asked about Mokey's question.

“You know, dating a girl?” Mokey wondered.

“That's for me to know and you to find out,” answered Riel. His answer sounded like he was bragging.

“Buddy, what about you?” Mokey asked.

“I s'pose it depends on the girl,” I said.

“What about kissing one?” he continued.

“A girl?” asked Riel.

“Of course, ya goof,” Mokey said. “Have either of you guys ever kissed a girl?”

“Same answer,” said Riel.

“Sure, lots,” I lied.

Mokey's eyes got big. “You liar! I've never even seen you hold hands with one.”

I wondered if it was because of the way I had said it, or if it was the way my face got red when I answered, but Mokey knew he had caught me in a lie.

“I have too,” I answered. “Remember that girl from New York that visited last summer, Danielle? Well, she was so sweet on me that I got to kiss her lots.” I lied again.

That fib seemed to satisfy my chubby friend, but Riel looked at me with his eyes shadowed by his brows.

“So what's that like?” Mokey asked next.

“I think I'll follow Riel's lead,” I said. “So, that's for me to know...”

“Yeah, yeah—and for me to find out.”

“Enough talking about girls and kissing them,” Riel commanded. “You're gonna' talk us to death about stupid things. We might have to make you sleep outside by yourself.”

“Not a chance!” Mokey said, seeming sure of himself.

“Huge chance! Me build the wigwam. Me decide who sleep in it,” said Riel, doing his best movie Indian voice.

“Okay, okay.” Mokey made like he was zipping his lips.

In less than an hour, probably not much later than ten o'clock, after Riel had added some more wood to the fire, we crawled into the protection of our great little shelter. It had been a big day, and we were pooped. We took everything into the wigwam with us, including our garbage, and stuffed our boots at the far end. The smell inside the wigwam reminded me of Joe Starblanket's home, a rugged log cabin that my Indian friend had taken me to see after we met for the first time at the lake that summer.

We wiggled under the blankets. We had decided to sleep in our clothes, wearing everything except our boots, hats, and jackets. Those we used as pillows. The two B.B. rifles were on the outside of both Riel and me. I had the flashlight by my side.

Riel volunteered to stoke the fire throughout the night. Mokey suggested that wasn't a good idea. He thought a wind might come up and start a blaze in the woods along the riverbank. I kind of agreed, but Riel said he would take care of things. I tended to believe him.

The three of us lay there quietly for a while, taking in our new home. Mokey had made sure he got between Riel and me. I wondered if he would get any sleep at all, with his chubby body wedged uncomfortably between us. But, then I heard him start to snore. Riel and I snickered

“So, was Dorothy a good kisser?” I asked Riel.

Dorothy Badgley was Riel's first girlfriend, a really cute girl in our class that had pretty, curly, blonde hair and the coolest blue eyes. She was easily the best looking girl in our school. He got to know her while skating that last winter and went to a couple of movies with her before something caused them to stop seeing each other. I never found out what.

“I have a rule I got from my oldest brother, Jake,” he answered. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

That shut me up. I was glad, though, that I wouldn’t have to answer any kissing questions of my own. After some squirming around, like a dog looking for a good place to lie down, sleep soon took me away.

It was Mokey that woke us. Sometime in the middle of the night, when everything was darker than the inside of a theatre when the film breaks, his voice was a harsh whisper that broke our sleep. “Guys! Buddy. Riel. Wake up!” There was fear in his raspy calls.

Riel answered first. “What... What’s up?”

“Aw, Mokey, whadjya’ wake us up for?” I added.

“Shhh, listen!” He continued to whisper.

I listened carefully, expecting nothing. I couldn’t see anything in the black night, but soon I heard a grunting and snuffling sound. There was something on my side of the wigwam, which was right next to the game trail. It sounded like a pig routing around in a pen. The noise wasn’t loud, but really weird—and scary.

“It sounds like a bear.” Riel was whispering now.

Mokey didn’t talk, but was making small, squeaking noises.

“Mokey, shut up. Whatever it is will think you’re a wounded animal.” Now I was whispering.

I reached beside me and grabbed my B.B. rifle, pumping the lever to put a pellet into the chamber. “When you’re ready, I’ll turn on the flashlight, and we’ll holler like crazy. Then we’ll pepper my side of the wigwam with B.B.s. Load your gun, Riel.” I was not only whispering, but I could hardly speak, my mouth was so dry.

“No, don’t!” demanded Riel. “If it is a bear, it might attack.”

“Oh, God...” Mokey was into his whining now.

“Mokey, don’t start. Just shut up and listen.” Riel was taking over command.

We all listened, trying to make out the sound again. Added to the snuffling and growling was a rattling that scraped against the outside wall of the wigwam.

“It’s trying to get in!” Mokey was outright loud now.

“No, it isn’t,” said Riel, his voice all of a sudden much calmer. “I know what it is. Buddy, give me the flashlight.”

I handed it over to him. “What is it?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he turned on the flashlight and crawled on his belly like a commando out the opening of the wigwam, dragging his B.B. gun with him. “Stay inside,” he said.

The next thing Mokey and I heard was Riel bellowing, “Go on! Get out of here!”

This was followed by the *putt-putt* of B.B. after B.B. being fired. Flickers from the flashlight beam outside danced around us inside the wigwam, leaking through the thatched willows. Beside me, Mokey smelled of smoke and fear. We both smelled.

“Okay, you can come out now,” offered Riel.

Grabbing my B.B. rifle, I hurried out the opening. Mokey stayed where he had hunkered down under the blankets.

Riel was standing at the edge of the game trail beside our shelter. His head was cocked like he was listening for something. I listened too.

“Ya, it’s headed down the trail,” said Riel. “I doubt if it’ll come back. I peppered too many B.B.s into its rump.”

“Into what’s rump? What the heck was it?” I was getting frustrated.

“A porcupine,” he answered. “It was probably just wanderin’ down the trail and smelled our boots. They like salt, and when we sweat in our boots, it leaves a rim of salt around the ankles. I guess it thought it’d take a free lick.”

“No kidding,” I said. “How did you know it was a ‘porky’?”

“I heard its quills rattling on the willows of the wigwam,” he answered. He turned his attention to the pit where the fire had been. “I’ll get the fire going again. I kind of fell asleep at the switch.”

“Mokey, do you want to come outside while Riel gets the fire going again?” I asked.

“Not a chance,” he answered, his voice muffled by blankets. “Just hurry up and get back in here.”

We were back in bed not long after, laughing about what had happened. My impersonation of scared Mokey sent Riel into a laughing fit that made him let out a fart. Then there was a second *brrrt*, and he floated his blankets up and down like he was trying to send up smoke signals. He kept laughing even louder as Mokey and I ducked under our covers.

Luckily, his “bum-burp” didn’t lead to an all our farting contest.

It was Riel’s turn to wake us up next. “Get up. Get up, you two. Hurry up and get your boots and jackets on!” The inside of the wigwam was turning grey, and I could just make out his body, squatting and leaning into the entrance at our feet.

Mokey’s voice stumbled, “Wha...? Who? What’s happening?”

I wasn’t much better. “C’mon, Riel. Let us sleep.”

“No, get up. Hurry!” He wasn’t whispering. “You gotta see this.” He backed out and stood up.

In just a minute or two, Mokey and I were running down the game trail, after Riel,

following the flow of the river. A racket ahead of us was growing louder and louder. When it looked like the trail might veer away from the river, Riel dropped to his knees and crawled into the brush to his right. Mokey and I did the same.

The crispness of the fall morning seemed to cause the unbelievably loud noise to become almost deafening. We crawled through a thicket and came out at the edge of the river. In the rosy blush of dawn, I saw one of the most spectacular things I had ever seen. What could have been thousands and thousands of Canada geese were spread across sandbars for a mile down the river. They were marshalling together into v's, like troops organizing for battle. It was truly some of Nature's best magic.

On the sandbar closest to us, a magnificent gander, with his chest pouted and his beak aimed skyward, bugled and plopped his way toward the point of the island of sand. Dozens of others took up their place in the v, aiming upriver. Then, with a thunder roll of wing beats and a chorus of cackling, the geese took to the air on a mission to find food. It must have been just like what fighter planes did on an early morning raid. And it was all happening right in front of us!

We watched the incredible parade for almost an hour. One after another, a line would form, and the winged creatures would whistle and sing their way along the river, lifting ever so slightly until they were just specks in the dawn sky. The great birds had to be deserting the sandbars for waiting fields. I wondered if they were aware that guns in pits waited for some of them.

After this wild sight, the three of us made our way back to our campsite. We started a new fire to warm up and then had peaches with bread, apples, and the rest of our dried fruit for breakfast. Maybe it was because we were so awestruck by what we had seen that we hardly spoke for the rest of the morning. We were home before lunch.

That afternoon, Nan gave me the task of digging up the parsnips and the last couple of turnips, or "neeps" as she would call them. Gramp had fun calling them "rutabaga" just to bug her. Whatever they were called, they were going to be part of Monday's Thanksgiving dinner. She also wanted the last cabbage and what was left of the Brussels sprouts, which I knew I wouldn't be eating. I didn't like them at all. I was more than happy to pick one of the three pumpkins and clean it out, though, so she could make a pumpkin pie for dessert.

My mouth was already watering as I pried the parsnips out of the ground. I loved the way Nan fixed them by peeling and cutting them up, and then boiling them with a little sugar first, before finally tossing them with butter in a frying pan. I could already smell—even taste—the roasted turkey, the dressing, the cranberry sauce, the spuds smothered

in gravy and the vegetables that topped it all off. But, besides the food, the best part of Thanksgiving, of course, would be having Gramp home with us. He would be out of the hospital in time for dinner. I was sure Nan felt the same way I did.

That night, us musketeers curled into our theatre seats with a bag of sunflower seeds and a bar of toffee each to enjoy the best Western movie ever. It was even better than *High Noon*. The bad guy in it was as nasty as they come. But Alan Ladd, who played *Shane*, and Van Heflin, who was the pioneer settler that took Shane in as a part of his family, made a team tough enough to outdo the evil wrongdoer and his henchmen. It was made even better because Aunt Tootsie, who worked as cashier at the theatre, had let all three of us in for free.

In the darkness of the Empress Theatre, Gramp's return from the hospital and the attack of the killer porcupine on our camp-out were the furthest things from my mind. But, I promised myself I would write about both in my diary before I went to bed. I knew that even the dusty Wild West streets and the crackling of the six-shooters in the movie wouldn't make those other memories hard to remember.