On the morning of the first day of September, the bright noise of sparrows woke Brian. The curtains in his room breathed in and out with the fall breeze as he lay still beside his brother; he could see his clothes folded over the foot of the white-enameled iron bed. His mother had put them there the night before. Today was to be his first day in school.

From under the bed came a frantic scrambling of sound; the red and white fox terrier jumped up. His one red ear gave to his head an archly tilted look; a saddle-shaped patch of red spread over his back. "Down, Jappy," Brian pushed him from the bed; he flung back the covers. Bobbie slept on, his plump list against his fat face, his tightly curled red hair bright against the rumpled pillow. The dog jumped against Brian's leg as the boy stood a moment by the side of the bed. Brian O'Conal was short for his six years and slight with the leanness and darkness of an Indian boy; as his grandmother had often said, it was the black Scottie MacMurray in him. He held his head back and upright with a sureness that was also his grandmother's.

With the dog trogling after him, he went to the open window. He would not have to say that next year he was going to school, thought Brian—or next fall, or next week; he was going today. He was going to school just as Artie Sherry did. He was old enough now. He would find out all about things. He would learn. He wouldn't get the trip.

"You up?" Bobbie was sitting, his red hair tousled, the sleep in his blue eyes not quite able to dim their wild (wanke). He was a chunky boy, four now, and solid, in his Uncle Sean's words, as a brick outhouse. "I wish I was going to school."

"You will when you get old enough," Brian turned from the window. He began to dress while Bobbie watched him from the bed.

Downstairs Maggie O'Conal stood at the stove in the kitchen; she prepared the family breakfast with quick, birdlike movements. Brian said good morning to her as though it were any morning, trying his best to hide the excitement that was in him, to act as though he were used to going to school every morning. He was not very successful. There was a strange tightness in his mother's face; a look of concern in her brown eyes with their fine crow's-feet at the corners.

"Off to school, Spadeen?" Brian felt a rush of emotion, as he always did when his father spoke to him. Gerald O'Conal ruffled his son's hair as he passed Brian; he sat down at the opposite end of the table. His dark red hair with gray beginning to grizzle it had a roan look along the sides of his head. In the last year his complexion had lost the blood-flush that had warmed it. He cleared his throat. "You—uh—do as they tell you, Brian."

"He will," Brian's mother said quickly. "I'm sure he will."

"I'm six now," said Brian as he picked up his spoon.

"I'm four," Bobbie said. "I'm going to school next year. I don't want any porridge."

"Porridge makes ye grow," said the grandmother, who had come in with him. Her hair was thinner now; her skin had taken on a transparency new to it. Lace hung from the velvet band around her throat; it failed to hide completely the gentle swell of a golter there.

"I still think I should go with him—"

"No, Maggie," Brian's father interrupted her. "You don't have to go," said Brian. "Forbie's starting too, and his mother isn't going with him."

The look upon Maggie O'Conal's small face deepened; it was not a happy one.

"I'm not very fuzzy about porridge," Bobbie announced.

"Well, ye must eat it," said the grandmother; "it makes ye grow."

"I'm not fuzzy about growing."

"Eat it up, Son," his mother said with the tone in her voice that Bobbie knew meant no further argument. He began to eat his oatmeal, stuffing it in with great, heaping spoonfuls. Actually he was very fond of it.

As he broke up stale bread and poured milk over it for his dog, Brian wished that parents wouldn't act as they were doing. They seemed to think it was awful to go to school. He'd heard Artie talk of getting the strap, and of Mr. Digby's getting after a person for shouting in the halls; still, that was no reason for his mother and father's acting as they were. He straightened up from the dog's dish by the sink.

"It's not time yet," said his mother.

"I know. I'm going upstairs for a minute."

In his room he picked up the pistol that lay on the table by the bed; it was a water pistol with a rubber bulb for a handle, crosshatched with creases, the rest of it cast-lead. He carried it with him always and was not truly dressed without it, or without the gloves that had red stars sewn on the fringed, funnel-shaped parts that covered his sleeves. He went downstairs again.

"... He's so young," he heard his mother saying.

"She says you're awful young to go alone," said Bobbie.

"No. I'm not. What time is it?"

His father looked at his watch. "Half-past eight."

"I better be going."

His mother went over to him quickly and bent down. He kissed her and felt her arm tighten on his shoulder. When he straightened up and felt that his cheek was damp, he was impatient with her.

He left the kitchen after instructing Bobbie to hold the dog until he'd got away from the house. Dogs did not go to school.

"I thought," Gerald O'Conal said when Brian had gone, "that it was only the Irish who were sentimental."

Maggie O'Conal, with her back to him as she faced the stove, did not answer him.

"There's only one kind of Irishman," said the grandmother, "shanty Irish. They're not sentimental. They're dirty."

"And the Scots are tight," said O'Conal.

"Not tight," returned the grandmother, "canny."

"Another name for it," said Brian's father.

"He's so—so—darned independent," said Maggie O'Conal. She turned to Bobbie and spoke with unusual sharpness. "Don't you go any farther than MacTaggart's Corner—understand?"

Bobbie, who frequently strayed far from home, was intent on his porridge.

Forbies's face shone. "Do we have to line up?" he said to Artie. "Everybody does," Artie answered, his face contorting at the offending glasses. "The girls go in the girls' door an' the boys go in the boys' door. You better not let 'em catch you going in the girls' door."

"Why not?" asked Brian.

"You're not x'posed to. There's two toilets. There's the girls' toilet on the girls' side—au the boys' on the boys' side—in the basement."

"Is there?" said Forbies.

"That's where old Timhead is." Artie referred to Mr. Briggs, the school janitor, said to have a silver plate in his head ever since he had served with the Princess Pats in the war.

Ahead of them and behind them small groups of children made their way to the school on the eastern edge of the town. "There's the China Kids," said Artie.

Brian saw them, the Wongs, Tang and Vooie. It was Vooie's first day at school, and his sister, Tang, with the protectiveness of an older sister, had the collar of his coat clenching tight in her hand. Brian had seen the Wong children often, for they had grown up on that section of gray cement that ran before their father's Bluebird Café. Now that the mother, a small amber woman
brought from China by Wong to bear him. Tang and Voosie, had
died, the father had left Voosie to his sister's care. He cooked
meals for the children, and that was all. Brian knew Wong too, a
small, stooped Chinese with a white mustache, who wore summer
and winter a rooster-comb-red toque. Brian had seen him often
behind the café counter with its wicker of cigarette and tobacco
packets, its jaw breakers, licorice plugs, whips, pipes, and staring
fried-egg candles.

Brian's confidence ebbed as they neared the schoolyard on the
prairie edge and as Artie regaled the other boys with stories of the
terrible Miss MacDonald. She was cranky; she hated kids; it was
she, he told Forsbie and Brian, who would be their teacher.

Until the bell rang, Forsbie and Brian stood with their backs to
the orange brick of Lord Roberts School, watching other boys
play catch, or wrestle in the bare dirt. The swings on the town
side were occupied by swingingidlly with one foot trailing, the
boys pumping high and mightily. When the bell rang somewhere
in the depths of the school, the children formed reluctantly into
two lines at the doors; those left outside the lines were the be-
ginners, forlorn little souls whom Miss MacDonald came out to
shepherd in to the school. She assigned them their seats in the
lower grades room, at the head of the stairs, told them to sit
quietly and play with the colored plasticine Marie Abercrombie
had passed out. Then she turned to hand out the readers to the
Grade Threes, of which Artie Sherry was a member.
The first excitement over, Brian began to find school a rather
disappointing affair. Forsbie sat across from him, Artie two rows
over. He would go over and see Artie for a while, Brian decided;
he got up and started down the aisle. Miss MacDonald, at the
board, turned and saw him. "Sit down, Brian."

"I'm just going over to see Artie."

"You'll have to sit down." She turned back to the board.
Brian continued on his journey to Artie. She wasn't his mother;
he wasn't hurting anything; he wasn't doing anything wrong.
"I said to sit down!"
He stopped at the end of the aisle. "I just want to see Artie for
a minute."

"You must put up your hand if you want something. Then I'll
give you permission to see Artie."

He stood watching her.

"Sit down in your seat!"

He continued to stand. Miss MacDonald's thin face reddened
slightly. She bit her lip. "Sit down!"

Brian stood. Utter classroom quiet had descended. Outside the
window a meadow lark went up his bright scale with a one-two-
three-and-and-her-I-go. Miss MacDonald began to walk down the
aisle in which Brian was standing. He reached into his hip pocket
and felt the comfort of the water pistol there. Miss MacDonald
stopped three seats ahead of him. "Will you sit down?"

Wordlessly he drew the pistol out, being careful not to squeeze
the butt. He held it behind his back. Miss MacDonald reached out
her hand to guide him back to his seat. It paused in mid-air as
Brian brought the water pistol to view. One clear drop of water
hung from the end point of Miss MacDonald's midriff. Her
mouth flew open. She stared at the pistol and at the slight drip of
water from the small hand holding it.

"I filled it," Brian assured her, "out of the fountain."

Her face flamed. "Give me that pistol!"

He made no move to hand it to her.

Her hand darted out to the water pistol. Startled, Brian
squeezed. The pistol squirted. Miss MacDonald, with her dripping
hand, jerked the pistol from his grasp. She propelled him from
the room.

As he walked ahead of her to the end of the hall where the
Principal's office was, Brian's heart pounded; he was in for it. The
front of her dress dripping, Miss MacDonald knocked on the
Principal's door. It opened, and Mr. Digby, tall and sandy-haired,
a questioning look upon his rough face, stood there.

With emotion poorly concealed, Miss MacDonald told him what
had happened, the indignant spray of saliva from her thin lips
unheeded, the corners of her mouth quivering. When she had
finished, Digby said:

"You'd better let your classes go. Miss Spencer has, hers. I'll at-
tend to Brian.

The door closed on Miss MacDonald's outraged back.

Mr. Digby walked to the desk, sat down; he leaned forward with
his elbows on the top. "Well, Brian?"

The boy stared at him.

"Little trouble?"

With his dark gaze deliberately unflicking, Brian continued to
stare.

Mr. Digby's long fingers began to drum the desk top. He leaned
back in the chair; the fingers drummed on. He cleared his throat.

"Don't—Won't you talk to me?"

"Unchanged? Brian's face looked up to the Principal; no expres-
sion was there, certainly no inclination to talk was indicated. Mr.
Digby rose from his chair, Brian's eyes lifting with him.

"You—Don't you like school, Brian?"

"What if everyone in the room wanted to stand up? She
couldn't teach very well then, could she?"
Brian considered a moment. "She stands up."

"That's because she's the teacher."

"Does she have to stand up to teach people things?"

Digby nodded.

"Maybe I have to stand up to learn things," suggested Brian.
Do you have to?

"Maybe I do," said Brian. "Does she?"

"Maybe she does," said Digby.

"Well, I don't."

"You could learn anyway, suggested Digby, "couldn't you?"

"Yes, I could. But I don't think I'll learn from her. I better have
another teacher."

"I don't think that could be arranged," Digby explained to him.

"You see, she's the only one we have for Grade One. You want to
go to school, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm going to find out about things."

"Then you'd better try to get along with Miss MacDonald."

There was a note of firmness in Digby's voice.

Brian was silent. Digby reached into his desk drawer; he drew
out the water pistol. He told it to Brian. "She'd like you to
use this back," he said, knowing that it was the farthest thing
from Miss MacDonald's desires.

"Thank you. It doesn't work very good anyway."

"All right. No more school today—this afternoon. Think about
what I said."

For some time after Brian had left, Digby sat at his desk. On
the half-opened window behind him a fly, lured to langour by
the morning sun, bunted crazily up the pane, fell protestingly; and
lay half-paralyzed on the sill, the numbness of his sound lost in
the emptiness of the office.