

# "First Day of School"

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 scrabbling 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 fist 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'Connal 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 Scotch MacMurray in him. He held his head back and upright with a sureness that was also his grandmother's.

With the dog trotting 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 strap.

"You up?" Bobbie was sitting, his red hair tousled, the sleep in his blue eyes not quite able to dim their wild twinkle. 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'Connal 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, Spalpeen?" Brian felt a rush of emotion, as he always did when his father spoke to him. Gerald O'Connal 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 goiter there.

"I still think I should go with him -"

"No, Maggie," Brian's father interrupted her.

"You don't have to go," said Brian. "Forbsie's starting too, and his mother isn't going with him."

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

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

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

"I'm not fussy 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, cross-hatched 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'Connal said when Brian had gone, "that it was only the Irish who were sentimental."

Maggie O'Connal, 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'Connal.

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

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

"He's so - so - *damned* independent," said Maggie O'Connal. 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.

Forbsie's fat 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 s'posed to. There's two toilets. There's the girls' toilet on the girls' side - an' the boys' on the boys' side - in the basement."

"Is there!" said Forbsie.

"That's where old Tinhead 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 clenched 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 Vooie, had died, the father had left Vooie 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 welter of cigarette and tobacco packets, its jaw breakers, licorice plugs, whips, pipes, and staring fried-egg candies.

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 Forbsie and Brian, who would be their teacher. Until the bell rang, Forbsie 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; girls swinging idly 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 beginners, 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 Mariel 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. Forbsie 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

No sign betrayed Brian's response one way or the other to the institution of education.

"We're only trying to - to -" What were they trying to do? He'd talked it over enough with Hislop when he'd been here. Each year a new crop. Teach them to line up six times a day, regulate their lives with bells, trim off the uncomfortable habits, the unsocial ones - or was it simply the ones that interfered with . . . ? "We . . . want to help you. You want people to like you, don't you?"

He could see the gentle swell and ebb of the boy's chest under his sweater, that and nothing more.

"You want to get along with people. You want to grow up to be . . ." An individual whose every emotion, wish, action, was the resultant of two forces: what he felt and truly wanted, what he thought he should feel and ought to want. Give him the faiths that belonged to all other men.

His mind shied from his thinking like a horse from too high a jump. The thing was to get the child to talk - without frightening it out of him. "Miss MacDonald is your teacher now. You must do as she says. It's - it's like . . ." He cast about for something to say, any wedge to slip under the barrier between them. "You do what your mother tells you," he cried. "You don't disobey her."

Still no interest or understanding showed in the boy's dark eyes.

"What would the boy understand?"

"Have you a dog, Brian?"

There was a flicker of the boy's eyes. That was it.

"He does what you tell him. You expect him to do what you want him to. A dog isn't much good if he won't do what he's told." He looked for a moment at the boy with his erect back, his legs slightly apart. "Does he do any tricks?"

"He can jump over -" The words spilled out, then stopped.

"Over your arms if you hold them out?"

"Over a stick," Brian corrected him.

"Oh." The teacher was silent because he knew it was the right moment to say nothing.

"Tricks aren't any good. He's going to catch gophers. That isn't a trick."

The Principal nodded.

"They're for catching gophers."

"That's right."

"Fox terriers. He's a fox terrier. I don't like her."

"Don't you?"

"She tried to make me sit down. I didn't feel like sitting down. I wasn't hurting anything."

window a meadow lark went up his bright scale with a *one-two-three-and-here-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 pointing at 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 attend 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 unflinching, 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 expression 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 and handed it to Brian. "She'd like you to have 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, lulled to languor 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.