

Hoping for Home



Stories of Arrival

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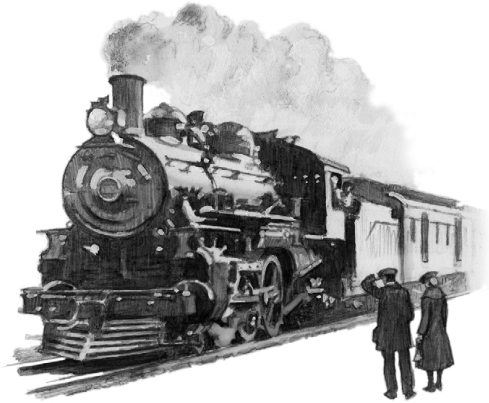
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A case of tonsillitis means that Insy has to go for help, far from her father's trapline. Travelling out of the bush takes her on a surprising journey to a very different world.

RUBY SLIPPERJACK *grew up in the bush north of Lake Superior. She still spends as much time on the land — a place that features strongly in all her stories — as she can.*

The Charleston at the Trapline



The Diary of Insy Pimash

Northwestern Ontario

February 1924

Monday, February 4, 1924

First page in my new journal.

Mama just changed the cedar poultice around my throat and gave me some more medicine tea to keep my fever down. I have tonsillitis. I had to look up the word in an old dictionary Mama has.

My throat is very sore. My head hurts too. Mama just came back into the cabin with an armload of wood, letting in a cloud of cold air when she opened the door. Eli is outside sawing wood with the handsaw. I can hear him whistling — he always whistles when he's doing something. Nina is over by the window with her doll. I can't see what she's doing from here. I'm going to try to sleep now.

Tehteh just got back from checking his traps. The first thing he did when he walked in was to come over to my bed and put his hand on my head.

I've been listening to my parents talking. It's sounding like Tehteh has to take me to the hospital. I can hear Eli and Nina running around outside and laughing — probably playing with the dogs. Mama's frying fish, but I don't feel hungry.

I like the green yarn that Mama used to sew together the cut pages of paper for my new journal.

Tuesday, February 5

Lunch Break

Mama dressed me really warm this morning and Tehteh put a canvas over the sled and several blankets and put a backrest frame at the back so I could lean against it. He wrapped me up in the blankets and tied me to the sled like a big bundle. Boogy and Patch were already tied to the dogsled harness. Those two really like to run. They're always excited to be going somewhere.

It was still dark when we left home. I watched the sun come up when we were crossing the second lake. It was nice and the ride was smooth until we came up to a long portage. The bumpy ride was really hard on my swollen throat. On smooth parts of the trail, Tehteh stood on the back runners of the sled behind me, but he would jump down and run, pushing the sled with a pole, whenever the dogs went uphill. I couldn't see him from where I was sitting, but I know he would be dragging the pole to the right side when he wanted the dogs to turn right, and whistling once to make them turn left.

We stopped for lunch about halfway and rested the dogs. I couldn't eat anything, so Tehteh made me some tea porridge, which I was able to swallow. He also heated my poultice in a frying pan!

At Old Man Mee-shichiimin's Cabin

We finally came into the clearing to the community of Flint Lake and Tehteh stopped at the first cabin we came to. The old man who lives here always takes care of Tehteh's dogs when he comes in for supplies.

I am lying on the old man's bed now, writing this. Tehteh has gone to the General Store to trade in the furs he brought with us, for cash. Tehteh also brought big chunks of moose meat for the old man. The old man is now whistling happily away and cooking some on his wood stove. His name, Mee-shichiimin, is a kind of bristly berry, but I do not know the English name for it. Suits him well, I think.

I must have dozed off again. Tehteh is back from the store and food is steaming on the table. The old man came and gave me a bowl. He had made moose broth and thin dumplings for me. I ate the whole thing. The old man wanted to know why I was scribbling on these papers and Tehteh told him that Mama wanted me to write down everything I see so I don't miss the writing lessons she makes me do each day.

On the Train

Right after the meal, Tehteh switched his moccasins for a pair of boots and carried me piggyback to the train station. I was not feeling well enough to notice much. There were a lot of people in the waiting room though. I lay on one of the benches against the wall. There was a stove in the corner — a tall stand-up kind. The ticket agent worked behind the counter with a pencil tucked above his left ear. I wondered how it stayed put.

I got really scared when the noise of the train got louder, but I didn't see the engine. We went out when the train stopped. Once inside the train, we found two bench seats facing each other and we settled in. The conductor came by when the train started moving and Tehteh gave him our tickets. He was very friendly. He knew right away that I was sick.

Tehteh just gave me some water to drink. I can see a stove at the other end of the coach. It smells of old cigar smoke in here. I am lying on the bench and Tehteh is sitting across from me. There's a constant drone of voices around us. Once in a while, I hear the engine whistle far ahead, but the constant *clickity-clack* and rocking motion is making me sleepy.

I can tell my fever is high again. Tehteh has put a cold wet towel over my forehead. We'd left the poultice at the old man's place and all I had was the towel around my throat.

At the Hospital

It was growing dark when the train stopped at Ojibwe Hill. There was a driver waiting for us when we got off the train and he drove us to the Indian Zone Hospital. The automobile was big and black and box-like. It jolted past the lights on the roads and gave us a very bumpy ride. It was much worse than the dogsled ride through the portages! It really hurt my throat. This was my first time riding in an automobile. I think I prefer riding in the dogsled.

When we got to the hospital, a nurse took me to a large bathroom where there was a nice warm bathtub already filling. She stayed to help me wash my hair with a nice-smelling shampoo. She left a gown and housecoat for me to put on and a pair of booties for my feet. When she returned, she brought a wheelchair for me to sit on because I was feeling dizzy, and she combed my hair. She said her name was Annie. Then she pushed me out and along the hallway until we came to the room where I would stay. There were two beds, one in the corner, but I took the bed by the windows so that I could look outside.

Tehteh is sitting on a chair beside my hospital bed. We're waiting for the doctor. Tehteh looks very tired and his eyes are red, but he smiles at me when he sees me looking at him. He rubs my feet and says "*oshibiigen*" — telling me to continue writing (but, I am too tired to write any more, so this is what I have written).

The Examination Room

Nurse Annie came in a little while later with the wheelchair, saying that the doctor was ready to see me. Tehteh wheeled me down the hallway, following the nurse. We didn't have to wait long. The doctor was young, with sparkles in his eyes. He listened to my chest with the . . . the thing in his ears — I don't know what that is called. Then, one look at my throat and he knew what was wrong with me. He said that I was not to eat or drink anything because they would be taking my tonsils out first thing in the morning. Then Tehteh wheeled me back to the room.

Later, Nurse Annie came and told Tehteh that she would show him where he could sleep and eat his meals. He came back just before bedtime. He said they have a storage room of some kind in the basement with beds in it. There were four other Ojibwe men there who were waiting for family to get well enough to go home. They eat in an area off the kitchen with two caretakers who live there.

Wednesday, February 6

Tehteh stayed beside my bed until I went to sleep last night. The nurses came to check on me once in a while. Now I can hear plates and glasses rattling down the hallway and I can smell food. It is early morning. I can just see a grey shade through the windows. Tehteh arrived just as an empty cot was rolled into the room to take me to the operating room. I got very scared until he took my hand

and told me “*soongaendun*” — be brave. I wonder when the nurse will come to wheel me off to the operating room.

After the Operation

I opened my eyes and there was Tehteh sitting beside me. I’ve been sleeping a lot today. He pushed the hair off my forehead and whispered that I did really well and the tonsils were out and the doctor told him that I would be fine. A nurse showed up and they rolled the cot back to my room and got me back into my bed.

When I woke up again, Tehteh was there looking out the window. He gestured to a tray at the foot of the bed. He came and sat down beside me and opened the lid. It was lunchtime and they had given me a bowl of broth and a big mound of jelly and apple juice. My head felt much better. I could tell my fever was gone, but my throat was very sore. I swallowed the broth, but took my time with the jelly. It was red but I could not tell if it was strawberry or raspberry. Tehteh smiled and said, “*minopagon?*” I nodded yes, it was really, really good!

After I wrote that, I fell back to sleep. When I woke up again, Tehteh was sitting in the chair with his back to me, looking out the windows. I could tell from the dim light that it was late afternoon. Then he turned around and faced me. I looked at him and I could feel my face stretch into a smile and he grinned back at me. He had shaved his moustache! He had even had a haircut!

I could hear the rattling plates and glasses coming

down the hallway again. The smell of the food was wonderful, but when Tehteh opened the lid on the tray, it was more jelly, juice and a mound of white stuff. I hesitantly opened my mouth when Tehteh brought the spoon toward me, saying “*müchin*” — insisting that I eat it. He said it is called rice pudding. It was really good! I ate everything. I told Tehteh “*ando wiisinin kaygeen*” and he left, saying that, yes, he would go and eat too. He promised he would be right back.

Later

Nurse Annie came into the room and nodded at my note pages and asked how I learned to write so well. I told her that Mama taught me and that she had learned it from a missionary couple on James Bay. Because Nurse Annie seemed interested, I told her that they had looked after my mama after her Cree parents died when Mama was ten. Then Mama worked as a maid for the old missionary’s wife. She was the one who taught Mama English and to learn to read and write. I even told her that the old woman’s wedding gift to Mama when she and Tehteh got married was a wooden box full of books that Tehteh had to carry over many portages up the Albany River to the Ojibwe territory, where his trapline was. Once there, Mama taught Tehteh English and he taught her Ojibwe.

Nurse Annie said she really liked that story. Then she asked me why I call my father Tehteh, so I told her that it just means “father.” She said goodbye to me then

and gave me a hug because she wouldn't be working when it was time for me to go home in the morning. She even gave me a couple of pencils so I wouldn't run out!

Later on, another nurse came and got us and we went back into the examination room. The same young doctor appeared and this time he talked to me instead of Tehteh and he told me that I could go home in the morning.

Just before Tehteh left to go to bed, he told me that he was very busy while I was asleep in the afternoon. He had walked to town and gone into the big store there and bought a small gift for everyone in the family. He had also bought some supplies and packed everything into two boxes that he had left at the train station's baggage area. They would be loaded on the train with us tomorrow morning.

Thursday, February 7

Leaving the Hospital: The Train Station Waiting Room

An older nurse came and flicked the lights on when it was still dark outside! I blinked and then got very excited when I remembered it was time to go home! She put a pile of folded clothes at the bottom of my bed. I asked where my own clothes were, because what she had were city clothes that white people wore. She said the laundry people throw all the clothes that people come in with into the furnace. She said that there was a whole room full of donated clothing that had been washed and ironed and she just placed an order for a twelve-year-old girl's clothes. I told her that I was almost thirteen, but

she looked at me and said that I was actually smaller than a regular twelve-year-old girl.

I was not too happy and I did not like her very much. She left saying I only had a few minutes to get dressed. I yanked on the pair of stockings, pulled up a pair of under-pants, a cotton under-dress over my head and then I held up a really nice pink flowered shift dress with lace on the neck and sleeves. I liked it. It was a bit baggy, but it was really pretty! Then I pulled on a pair of boots that laced up the front. They were very uncomfortable. The last thing was a long city coat that wrapped over to one side with a really big shiny button, and then I jammed the matching hat on my head.

I marched out the door and I could see Tehteh standing at the nurse's station at the other end of the hallway. I walked fast toward him and as he turned to look me up and down, I slowed. I heard him say to a young nurse with short hair and cropped bangs, who was leaning over the counter to look at me, "She is going home by dogsled to a trapper's cabin, way up north. Do you think she's going to make it dressed like that?" He smiled at her and she put a hand over her mouth, giggling. While we waited for the driver, the nurses turned up the radio behind the counter and started swinging their arms and legs — a dance they said was called the Charleston. It looked really fun! I memorized every move. I'm going to try that when I get home.

When the driver appeared, the young nurse gave me my medicine. It was a pink fluid in a bottle and she told

me to make sure I took one teaspoon three times a day until it was all gone. She handed us two paper lunch bags and we were on our way to that same big, black, box-like automobile, only this time it took us back to the train station. We passed by the restaurant window next door and I saw people sitting at tables eating breakfast. I tugged at Tehteh's coat to see if we could go in, but he just shook his head. It is very loud and busy in the waiting room here.

On the Train

When the train finally came, it hissed and squealed very loudly — like a huge metal monster!! I hung on to Tehteh's hand very hard as the train shook the floor. Many people got on the train, and again we took our seats at the back. Tehteh flipped the backrest to the other side so that his bench now faced mine.

When the train was in motion again, the conductor came by to collect the tickets. I was busy writing when he suddenly leaned over me and asked how I was feeling. I looked up and realized that it was the same man who had been very nice to us. I said that I was doing very well now, and thanked him for asking. He noticed my notepad and he smiled and said that I must be a very smart girl to be able to handwrite so evenly. Then he patted his pockets and came up with a bag of candies from his shirt pocket and handed them to me. I thanked him and as he turned to move away, he paused to ask Tehteh how I had learned to write like that and all

Tehteh said was, “Her mother.” People were still moving around, taking off coats and lighting up cigars, and women were chatting by the stove. Tehteh patted my bench and said “*neebaan*” — so I went to sleep.

I woke up and Tehteh was sound asleep in front of me with his coat rolled into a pillow under his head. He really looked different without his moustache. He’s always had a moustache.

The train was still rolling along with its endless *clickity-clack*. Then I noticed that it was beginning to slow down. I sat up and looked out the window. The sun was just rising over the trees. I remembered my brown lunch bag and pulled it from under my coat, which was draped over me. I looked inside and there was apple juice, a container of rice pudding and a muffin. I decided to eat that yummy rice pudding first, making sure that I took sips of the juice with it. My throat was tender, but not throbbing with pain anymore. Tehteh woke up when the train stopped. We were in the middle of nowhere. I didn’t see any houses at all. I happened to look at the clean slope of white snow over a rock when I saw a rabbit hop out of the bushes and run up the slope and come to a sudden stop right across from my window. I pointed to the rabbit just as Tehteh sat up. It sat there looking at the train. When the train lurched forward again with a lot of clanging and banging, the rabbit whirled and high-tailed it back into the bush. I saw a huge tank thing go by on the other side of the train windows — maybe that is what we had to stop for — whatever that was.

I think I will save the muffin for our lunch stop on the way home. Tehteh says we should be there soon.

Back at Old Man's Cabin

When we got off the train, Tehteh made me stay inside the waiting room until the train pulled out. Then he came in with one box under each arm and we hurried down the railway tracks to the old man's place. As we neared the cabin, Boogy and Patch saw us and they were jumping up at the end of their chains, yipping. Their back ends were shaking from wagging their tails so fast! I ran and hugged them and they licked my face!

Tehteh was already inside when I got to the door. I stepped inside to see that the old man was by the stove and he turned and, with raised bushy eyebrows, he pointed at my clothes. Then he began a rasping hissing laugh that shook his shoulders! On impulse, I twirled around and did a good curtsy for him. Now his rasping took on a louder hiss as he clapped his hands and a gaping hole appeared on his bristly whiskered face. Then Tehteh went *tsk, tsk, tsk*, "*ta-gibichita-eh*" — so I stopped. Tehteh was right. No reason to give the old man a heart attack.

I went to the bed and took off the coat and silly boots. The old man had a meal of rabbit stew with dumplings ready for us. He told Tehteh that he was saving the moose meat for the long weeks until he would see him again — I guess Tehteh always brings him meat or fish when he comes into the community for supplies. The old man gave me a bowl of rabbit broth and lots of

soft dumplings. It was delicious. They talked by the table for a while until Tehteh had to leave to go to the General Store to get some warm clothes for me.

At the Lunch Stop

When Tehteh got back from the store, he was in a hurry to leave so we could make it back to our cabin before dark. He brought back a wool sweater that I pulled on over my dress, and I stuffed my skirt into a pair of boys' thick wool pants with a buttoned hole in front. While Tehteh switched his boots back to his moccasins, I pulled on two pairs of boys' work socks. He couldn't find any boots my size at the store, so he bought a pair of boys' high, thick boot liners and tied them onto my feet with two-yard-long oil-lamp wicks. They were just like thick mukluks. Since I was going to be tied back into the canvas and blanket bag, I was going to be warm enough. The last thing to put on was the thick green parka he had bought. It had a wide hood with a thick fur fringe that would protect my face from the wind while crossing the lakes. Finally, I was ready to go, so Tehteh wrapped me up again and tied me to the sled.

The dogs were just bursting to go. With one last wave to the old man, Tehteh jumped on the back of the sled runners behind me and we were off. The dogs were running flat out when we hit the first lake, and soon we were up into another portage. Even with the lunch stop, we're making good time.

We Have Arrived!

We got home just before the sun went down. Boogy and Patch started barking even before we were halfway across the lake. Soon, we could hear the other three dogs at the cabin barking back. Then I could see smoke coming out of the stovepipe of our cabin by the lake. It was good to be home!

As soon as Tehteh came in after tying the dogs to their doghouses, Mama stopped and said, "John, you look exactly like you did the day I first saw you!" Tehteh laughed and said, "You always look as pretty as the day I first saw you." Eli made a *wee-wee* whistle at their flirting and we all laughed.

Mama opened the two boxes we brought back. Tehteh pulled out a doll with a very pretty yellow dress and a matching bonnet for Nina. Eli practically squealed with joy when he got a harmonica, and Mama was speechless when she unfolded a very beautiful royal blue dress, trimmed with lace and ribbons. I got a stack of four hard-covered, real notebooks and a package of pencils! When the box was empty, Mama asked if Tehteh got anything for himself. He pulled his shirt open and revealed a brand-new pair of white long johns! "Two pairs!" he said.

The other box had brown sugar, syrup, cocoa powder, molasses and other cooking treats. I watched from my bed, smiling, as Mama, Nina and Eli crowded around the kitchen table.

The quiet scene was suddenly split by the high-

pitched screech of Eli blowing and sucking on the harmonica!! Tehteh was just untying his moccasins when Mama turned to glare at him. He quickly jumped to his feet and ushered Eli out the door with him.

While Mama was dishing out the evening meal, I decided to teach Nina how to do the Charleston — one foot kicking out and then the other, with our arms swinging back and forth. But then I heard a bang and a gush of water — I had accidentally kicked the slop pail over!