



A Time for Giving

Ten Tales of Christmas

Scholastic Canada Ltd.



Violet Pesheens

These Are My Words

The Residential School Diary
of Violet Pesheens

Flint Lake, Ontario
September 1966 – June 1967

BY RUBY SLIPPERJACK

Violet (nicknamed Pynut) is spending her first winter off the Reserve, enjoying time with her grandma, even if it's just doing chores or going fishing. Life in the village is different from what she's used to. There are challenges, like the scary dog that won't stop charging at her; but surprises too, like making new friends. And Pynut wants to talk with an older girl who is home from Residential School, because Pynut herself will be going there, far from home, in the fall.



Winter with Grandma

Sunday, November 14, 1965

I turned twelve years old today.

Grandma gave me a new diary for my birthday. It has a shiny gold lock on it and tiny little keys!

Oh, here's Grandma coming up the path! The usual packsack is on her back and her long skirt is sticking out beneath the thick coat that she often wears, like all the women here. She has on that blue cotton scarf with big red flowers on it. That's her "going to the store" outfit. She always has her walking stick with her too. Good for beating off dogs.

The first thing I noticed when I moved here is that they dress differently in this village than the Reserve up north where I was living with Mother.

Evening, after supper

Grandma brought home some pork chops as a special treat, so we had a very nice supper. Just now she lit the coal-oil lamp for me at the table. She is

reading a book with the other lamp beside her bed. I think she is the only grandparent here who can read and write. She just put the last log into the stove for the night. It is time for bed.

Monday, November 15

The snow was very deep on the path to the school this morning. I got there and found a note on the door — *NO School Today*. I was so happy to see that! I ran all the way home. The big black dog next door came up barking and growling at me again. I do not like that dog, yet I have to walk by him each time I come home. He does not bother me when I am going. It's only when I come back that he charges at me.

I just finished my homework from Friday. It was a good thing that there was no school today.

Tuesday, November 16

Teacher said the oil stove in the school broke yesterday and he had to get it fixed. Too bad it was fixed so quickly. Another day at home would have been nice. At lunchtime, when the black dog came charging at me, he ran into a frozen stump that was buried in the snow. He gave such a loud grunt that I laughed out loud and he came at me again, barking even louder, and he even followed me a ways. I think he didn't like it when I laughed at him. Then I heard Bill yell, "Blackie!" He was kind of late to call his dog!

Friday, November 19

School was fun today. I like the way the class is divided and I love the smell of crayons and Plasticine from the little kids by the window. Since Tall Mike and I are the only ones sitting in the Grade Five row, right next to the blackboard, we have to wipe it and dust off the erasers at the end of each day. Sometimes I wish Tall Mike didn't sit behind me — he never says anything and his knees are always lifting up the top of his desk.

So far, I'm liking my first winter with Grandma. I did not like the Reserve up north where Mother lives. No, that is not true. It's my stepfather I do not like. I love my half-brother and half-sister. Oh! I forgot her birthday was last week — now she's six, just a year younger than him! Anyway, I will have to write to Mother tomorrow. After being here with Grandma every summer, I'm glad I finally talked Mother into letting me stay this winter.

I saw a big beige dog this morning. I had never seen him before. He was sitting on the hill just watching me go by. After school when I came back, he was there again, watching the big black dog charging at me. I just kept walking. Grandma says he probably belongs to the new railway foreman who just moved in to that house on the other side of the hill beside the railway tracks.

Sunday, November 21

I am tired. Grandma and I have been getting our winter wood supply all day. She cut some trees down behind our cabin and then we piled the logs on the toboggan and pulled the load home. After that, we put a log on the sawhorse and then we cut it with a handsaw. It is much easier doing it together, with Grandma at the other end of the saw and us pulling and pushing it back and forth. Then she split the wood with an axe and I brought the split wood inside and piled it in the woodbox behind the door. When the box was full, I piled the rest of the split wood outside, close to the door. The sun was shining and the air was crisp. It was really nice. We laugh a lot when we work together.

Tuesday, November 23

I was coming home after school and Blackie came charging at me as usual, but then the beige dog suddenly came in at full speed and he shoulder-slammed Blackie right off his feet and sent him tumbling over and over. Blackie was yelping and then he scrambled up and ran off around the cabin with his tail between his legs. The beige dog glanced at me, wagged his tail and ran back up the hill. Grandma didn't know what to make of that when I told her.

Wednesday, November 24

Blackie did not charge me at lunch or after school! The beige dog still sits on top of the hill watching me go by.

Friday, November 26

After school it was my turn to wipe off the blackboards. Then Tall Mike yelled from the door, "Pynut! Your grandma's waiting for you at the store!"

Grandma was there with two boxes ready to go when I got there. We put them on top of our toboggan and tied them criss-cross to the toboggan so they wouldn't fall off. Then we set off, pulling on the rope, walking side by side. The path is just wide enough for both of us. As we passed by the trapper's cabin at the fork of the path, his brown dog was just bouncing off his chain, straining to attack us. Grandma says I have to always watch to see if the trapper is in the village to get his supplies, and then I must always use the school path. His dog is very dangerous. Then up the hill, sure enough, the beige dog was there again, watching us go by.

Wednesday, December 1

I woke up this morning and I was alone. Then I remembered.

Last night, a man who lives by the lake came up to our cabin and banged on the door. When Grandma

lit the lamp and opened the door, he said his wife was having a baby and that it was too soon. The baby was not due to be born until next month.

So Grandma got dressed, blew out the light and went with the man.

I put a log in the fire and made a jam sandwich before I headed off to school.

I came home for lunch and Grandma was *still* not home, so I made another jam sandwich.

When I came in after school, she *was* home and already making supper.

A baby girl was born. Grandma says she has lots of hair.

Friday, December 10

There was a big pile of wood beside our cabin when I got home after school. There must have been about twenty logs! Grandma said it was from the very thankful new father.

The beige dog followed me home at lunchtime. But he did not follow me again after school, just stayed on top of the hill watching me.

Tuesday, December 14

I opened the door to head off to school this morning and there was the beige dog, sitting on the path waiting for me! He walked in front of me until we came to the hill and then he ran off the hill.

We have been making Christmas decorations at school. There are all kinds of paper snowflakes on the windows, and we made different coloured chain links that we hung along the blackboard. It looks really nice! Teacher tried to make us sing some Christmas songs, but the kids just giggled and laughed at him because he really can't carry a tune! He sounded awful and I tried very hard not to laugh too.

Thursday, December 16

We knew Teacher was up to something this morning. The first thing he did was to put a bucket on the floor at the front corner of the room. Then he was making a grunting sound and creating a scraping noise at the door. He came down the row of seats with a spruce tree, knocking Tall Mike's toque clean off his head as he struggled with the tree to the front of the classroom. He tried to stick the butt end into the bucket, but he kept missing it, and by then the whole class was just roaring with laughter. Finally he got the tree upright and tied it to wires from the blackboard to keep it from falling over. We were all laughing really hard by then!

I saw one at the hospital last year when I had mumps, so I knew that he was making a Christmas tree.

The other kids did not know what he was doing, and they laughed even harder when he poured water

into the bucket. Then he pulled out a big box from under his desk. From the box, he started handing out different coloured shiny balls and the kids were shaking them, not knowing what they were, and then *ping, ping, ping* they started breaking in their hands. Teacher had to explain that they were to be hung on the tree branches. That was very funny!!

Friday, December 17

We kept seeing faces at the windows all morning at school. Mothers were looking inside to see the tree that all the kids were talking about! They were making faces, squinting and shading their eyes to see inside. It was really funny when another face popped up at the window! I was laughing so hard, I couldn't write! We were supposed to be writing a big test that I had been studying for, but I couldn't concentrate every time another kid squealed with laughter as another face popped up at the window. Finally Teacher came and collected the papers, saying that we would write the test this afternoon.

Monday, December 20

I had a good mark on the test!

Grandma and I went ice fishing this afternoon. Teacher let us out early because he had to catch the train back to his home somewhere in the south. We headed out along the shoreline, following an old

trapper's toboggan trail. But we stopped by a rock cliff along the way.

Grandma cut two holes in the ice with her chisel while I went to the shoreline to cut some spruce boughs to sit on. I also cut two sticks for our fishing poles. Grandma caught one trout and then we went to shore and built a fire. In a short while, lunch was ready and we had nice hot tea with our bologna sandwiches. After that, we packed the lunch box away again and went back to fish some more. I got one big trout and then Grandma caught another one too. Three trout! I had a lot of fun but I was tired coming back.

Wednesday, December 22

The four Residential School kids got off the train this afternoon. Their families were there at the station to meet them. They are home for Christmas. There are three girls and one boy. They are all in their teens and they are dressed differently from us. The girls have long coats that button up at the front and they are wearing skirts, beige stockings and short boots. Those boots are not going to be very good here with the deep snow! The boy wears a short coat and black slacks and his boots are short too.

They came into the store where Grandma and I were. They looked very smart and I got shy when one of the girls came and spoke to me. Her name is

Emma and she is Tall Mike's sister. She said, "Hello, Violet. So, you're living here now." I replied, "Yes, I live with Grandma now."

It was strange to be called Violet, but I guess she doesn't know me well enough to call me Pynut, like everyone else here does.

After the parents picked up some groceries, they all headed for home. Emma's cabin is at the other side of the train tracks. Tall Mike wasn't there to meet her. He probably had to babysit his younger sisters.

Maybe I can go and visit Emma. I want to find out about the Residential School, because if I pass my grades this year, I will be going to it in the fall.

Thursday, December 23

I went to visit Emma this afternoon. Her dad had to buy her a pair of high winter boots and thick pants. There are lots of kids at her house. She is the oldest and then there's Tall Mike and two brothers, Jimmy and Ken. The boys are in Grade Two and Grade Four in our classroom. Then there are the two little girls. They are two and four years old. Emma is fifteen years old and she has been in Residential School for two winters.

Her mother gave us a slice of bannock with butter and jam to go with our tea. She's nice. I see her at the store sometimes.

Tall Mike wasn't there. Emma said that he went

to get firewood with their dad. I could see why Tall Mike never gets his homework done.

I didn't get much chance to ask Emma any questions, so I invited her to come and visit me before she goes back to Residential School.

Saturday, December 25

It is Christmas today. But nobody celebrates Christmas here and no one gives presents. Grandma gave me a bag of Christmas candies for a treat anyway. They were all in colours of red, green and white. There were some that looked like a wavy ribbon. Oh, they were good! I will try to make them last a long time.

Tuesday, December 28

Emma showed up at the door just after supper today. We sat at the table and Grandma served us some cookies with our tea. Grandma asked more questions about Residential School than I did. Emma told us that I was not to dress in new clothes to go there, as they are taken away and burned the minute you arrive. I would be given other clothes that were the same as all the girls in the Residential School. My hair would be cut the same as hers — just below the ears, and she has bangs. They are not allowed to wear pants, only skirts or dresses. There is a bell for everything. When to get up, when to get dressed, when to go downstairs for breakfast, when to get

your coats on for school. Then you have to walk to a city school together. The same thing happens when you get back. There is a bell for supper, cleaning up, homework, television and then bedtime.

I don't think I will like the place. Emma will be there though. That is, if they send me to the same place. I could be sent somewhere else too. Everyone knows that some kids have died running away from those schools, trying to get home. So, that was not an option.

January 1, 1966

Grandma warned me last night that there would be gunshots going off at midnight. I wasn't prepared for the noise that woke me up though. Every person who owned a gun — which was pretty much every man in a village of hunters — shot off their gun into the sky! Then today is the “hugs and kisses” day. People go around from cabin to cabin, hugging and kissing everyone. I don't think I want any smooches from old fogies. Grandma and I smiled at each other at breakfast and decided to go ice fishing for the day.

Oh, too late. Here comes Ol' Moses!

Moses just left. He hugged and kissed Grandma and Grandma kissed him back on the cheek. She was making faces at me over his shoulder. I got a hug and kiss too but I did not kiss him back. We are going to hurry and pack our fishing stuff before someone else comes.

Friday, January 7

Grandma came home from the store and she says that the new foreman's family got off the train. She says now she understands why the beige dog took so much interest in me. The girl is about my age, same height, same weight, same long black hair to the waist, and no bangs. Grandma even said she has her hair parted down the middle like mine and braided at the back. The only thing, Grandma says, is that her nose is a little big and she has very black eyebrows, and they do not speak Ojibwe! I hope I see her at school on Monday.

Monday, January 10

Sure enough, the girl and her brother arrived at the school and they were introduced to the class. Her name is Jennie and her younger brother is Jack. She sat down in the desk in front of me. We are in the same grade too! Jack sat in an empty seat behind Jimmy in the Grade Three row. At recess I told her my name was Violet, and we spent the time talking by the doorway. The kids were running around chasing each other to the outhouses and back again. We saw Jimmy throw Jack into a snowbank and keep pushing him down when he tried to get up. Jennie made to go and help, but I held her back because I caught sight of Tall Mike striding up to Jimmy and yanking him off his feet by the back of his jacket collar. Then Jack took off around the corner of the school.

Wednesday, January 12

Yesterday Jennie wanted to know why people call me Pynut instead of Violet. She laughed when I told her that there is no *V* or *L* in the Ojibwe language. I spent a lot of time with Jennie and her beige dog, Chuck. She explained to me that he's a purebred Labrador retriever. I had to ask Grandma how to spell that word, and I had no idea that there were such things as purebred dogs. I felt stupid.

We spend a lot of time playing cards at her place. I can't get over how close her house is to the railway tracks. The kitchen cupboards rattle each time a train goes by. The house is made of boards, like everything that is owned by the railway. I asked Jennie how she can sleep at night when a train goes by. She said she was used to it and sleeps right through. We walk together from school where the path from the hill joins mine down below. At lunch and after school, the dog is always there on the hill, waiting for Jennie, and he comes running down when she gets there and runs home with her beside him. He really loves that girl. He doesn't pay much attention to me now that Jennie is back with him.

Wednesday, January 19

At lunch today, Jennie came running into our cabin crying. Chuck got hit by a train and he is dead! There was no one home when Jennie found the dog.

She was so upset that Grandma had to walk her home when she thought Jennie's mother should be back from the store. Jack was probably helping his mother with the groceries.

I cried too. Chuck was a wonderful dog. He was the only dog that I had ever got to know. I told Teacher what happened to Jennie's dog when I got to the school.

Just got home

I am still shaking. I can hardly hold my pencil. Grandma is not home. I found a note saying she has gone to check her rabbit snares. I will start from the beginning.

I heard the train come in after lunch and I was waiting for a letter from Mother today.

So after school I ran into the store and down the back to the mailroom, and, sure enough, the clerk handed me a letter from Mother. I was so excited that I ran out of the store and down the hill. As I ran by the trapper's shack, his brown dog lunged at me, all teeth, and he landed on my back and knocked me down into the snowbank. I could feel his massive jaws clamping down onto my parka hood! Then suddenly his weight was off me and a dogfight started behind me.

I scrambled up and saw that Blackie was down on the ground, fighting for his life, and I got to my feet and ran to Blackie's cabin screaming for help and

by then, I met Bill and he had a piece of wood in his hand. My knees collapsed at his porch step and I turned to see that the trapper was now pulling his dog by his broken chain. I watched Bill pick up his poor dog and he brought him home and set him down in front of me.

Blackie was just trembling from head to foot and his head was drooping down. I put out my hand and stroked his head while Bill checked him over. Finally he said, "No harm done. He has such thick hair that he's probably just bruised."

I told Bill that Blackie saved my life. He just looked at me and said that Blackie is always just all noise and had never been in a fight before in his life.

I was *so* scared!

Friday, January 28

Jennie did not come back to school until a couple days ago. Now she has a new puppy. It is another purebred beige Labrador retriever and her name is Lucy. She is three months old. Her uncle from her hometown had just got the puppy when he heard about Chuck, so he decided to give it to her.

We have a lot of fun with her, and Jennie is still trying to train her.

Grandma doesn't like it when Lucy leaves a puddle on our floor, so I spend a lot of time at Jennie's house. It is really strange that Blackie now greets me

with his tail wagging and follows me a little way when I come and go past his cabin. It's like he is escorting me safely through his property.

Saturday, February 5

Grandma and I took the early train to town. They always have rummage sales on Saturdays at the church and Grandma wants some fabric that she can get from full skirts and dresses. When we arrived at the church, we went down a dark set of stairs and there were a lot of women there. I held a paper bag while Grandma shoved whatever she picked into the bag. Then we went to the table by the door where a woman stood. She was very nice and she emptied our bag and counted up the cost and Grandma paid her. We caught the afternoon train back.

Sunday, February 6

When we got home yesterday afternoon, Grandma unravelled some full skirts that had yards of fabric on them, and washed them and the two flannel sheets she had bought. I hung them out on the line for her. This morning, I watched her fold one of the flannel sheets and one of the skirts, which was now just yards of green fabric with little yellow flowers. She said the young mother she'd helped would make something out of that, and the sheet was for the new baby. She put them into a bag and left to deliver her gift.

I am sitting here thinking.

Chuck saved me from Blackie. Then Blackie saved me from the trapper's dog. Now Blackie is my friend.

Jennie told me that her dad had paid a lot of money for Chuck, and I guess her uncle did too for Lucy. I do not understand. Puppies get killed here when no one wants them. Otherwise there would be too many dogs that belong to no one and have no one to feed them.

Then I thought of Grandma sharing the little she could afford from the rummage sale.

Everyone here has no money. They hunt and trap to feed their families. There are the fortunate few men who work on the railway. I wonder just how much Lucy cost.

I am realizing that life is a very complicated thing.