

SHEILA PRITCHARD

1949. Newfoundland joins Canada—another province and capital to memorize for social studies. “God-forsaken chunk of rock, good for nothing,” my father said. He should know nothing all right. Blew his veteran’s grant on an equally worthless 160 acres just south of Oxbow, Saskatchewan and dragged us all down there from Regina. We lasted four long years.

I hated moving, although I should have gotten used to it. When the farm went under, my father worked his way back to Regina wherever they would hire him. One year I went to three different schools; each change a dreaded social gauntlet.

The fights were the worst. Always on day one, morning recess. Sometimes I was lucky and got beat up by the first kid, settling the whole thing. Other times it took two or three.

We finally made it back to Regina and I thought it would be different. We left there when I was eight and I remembered it as a big city where I had best friends and didn’t have to fight. But it wasn’t different, especially the north end, the asshole of the city where we ended up.

Kitchener Elementary School—more like Prince Albert Penitentiary. Tough kids, immigrants’ kids, pissed off at people looking down at them and ashamed of the shitty jobs their fathers did.

A lot of Indian kids went there too, and they had to fight the most—their fathers didn’t work at all. Somehow, dumping on them kept the bottom of the ladder just a tiny bit further away.

Kitchener was a one-fight school. Little runt beat the absolute tar out of me. Never seen moves like that before. His name was Danny Pritchard and I couldn’t have been pummeled by a nicer guy.

He did the strut thing, of course, but when the crowd dispersed, he came over to me and offered his hanky. All kids had hankies in those days. Mine unfortunately was saturated by blood from my spurting nose.

“What grade are you in?” he said.

“Five,” I answered, my voice distorted. Nose still bleeding.

“Same as my sister. She’s in Miss Thompson’s class.”

“Me too,” I said.

“You’ll like Miss Thompson,” Danny said. “Sheila says she’s the best.”

The bell rang.

I hadn’t paid much attention to my classmates on the first day of school, when Miss Thompson made us all say our names. I did notice Sheila, though. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

She had her hair done up perfect—shiny black, pulled back into a wreath that framed her face. Black eyes, and full lips that always smiled. Tall for a girl and already filling out—something I’d just started to notice.

I decided then and there that Danny Pritchard was going to be my very best friend. I invited him to come over to our place after school.

The visit went okay. Mom gave us lemonade and ginger snaps which we ate outside so we wouldn’t spread crumbs, the Mennonite in my mother strong. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” a favourite saying.

Danny thanked her politely, but that was all he said. Strange, I thought. He talked a blue streak in the schoolyard, but maybe his parents had some rules about speaking to adults. He didn’t stay long and I got the impression he didn’t feel comfortable in our house. I had no idea why. Our shanty looked just like everyone else’s in the neighbourhood.

“Sure good to get a friend so soon,” I said, after Danny left.

“He’s a half-breed,” Mom said, like a put-down.

A half-breed? I’d heard my father use that term many times, always in a bad way, but Danny wasn’t bad. And how did Mom know anyway? We’d just moved into town. Also, it was September and all the kids were super-tanned. If anything, I was darker than Danny or Sheila.

“So what?” I said in a rare moment of defiance, but I’d been shocked by the remark, especially coming from a woman who brushed mosquitoes off her arm rather than swat them. “God has a purpose for all living things,” she’d say.

A visit to Danny's was totally different, and I tried to do that as often as I could. Sheila seemed to spend a lot of time in her room, but when she did come out, I felt good all over. She'd give me a smile that went right down to my toes and said "Hi" in a voice so soft I could touch it.

Mrs. Pritchard was a full-blood Cree: a big, jolly lady who laughed a lot and talked to me like I was somebody. Her skinny, white husband never said much of anything, but I think he was a kind man and he always said hello to me. He played chess, too, and sometimes watched Danny and me play, after Danny taught me how, but he never gave advice, which I liked. My father gave advice all the time, mostly in the form of orders.

That first winter back in Regina hit really hard—record cold and snowfall. Our pipes froze and we had to use chamber pots. I guess the Indians probably laughed at us because they had outdoor toilets that never froze up.

You could hardly tell who was who on the way to school. Parkas, scarves and toques pulled down as far as they'd go to protect every inch of skin. But Sheila never covered her face, and if anything, she glowed in the cold weather.

My love for Sheila went unrequited. No wonder. I was short, freckled and had to wear wire-rimmed glasses; a toad compared to her. But I liked to think we were friends. Not boyfriend-girlfriend friends, just friends.

She walked to school every day with Danny, and I made sure to hook up with them. Sometimes I had to wait, freezing my butt off, but I didn't care. Walking beside her made up for it. Danny thought I waited for him, and I let him think that.

Grade five was the only year Sheila and I were in the same classroom. I still walked to school with her and Danny, but I missed not being able to sneak peeks at her sitting at her desk. No chance at recess either. Girls and boys stayed in opposite ends of the schoolyard, but I could see her sitting by herself, reading usually. I wanted to go over and talk to her in the worst way, but she'd be embarrassed, and I didn't think I could have taken the teasing.

Summer holidays were fun with Danny. His cousins came down every year from the reservation for Exhibition. “A bunch of wild Indians” my mother called them. We went every day, and since Danny and I looked just as Indian as they did, we got in free. Indians were automatically classified as exhibitors, and usually they were, with their teepees and taking part in the cowboy events. We entered through the INDIANS ONLY gate and sat in a special grandstand. It was great.

Sheila never went, which didn’t surprise me. We were all too wild for her. But I wished she had. There were girls doing roping and riding and she would have won the Indian Princess Beauty contest hands down. But I guess being a half-breed she wouldn’t have qualified.

Three years went by. I didn’t get any handsomer, but she got even more beautiful and filled out perfectly. We started high school in grade nine back then. Danny was a year behind so just Sheila and I moved up. Lot of the Indian kids didn’t go at all.

I took this as a great opportunity and offered my services as an escort. Her mother thought it a good idea, but Sheila said no. I can’t remember her reason. I was too overcome with embarrassment. Danny told me later it was for my own good because he’d heard that high-schoolers were really cruel to anyone with Indian blood in them. Best I stick with my own kind. I didn’t think anything could be crueler than Kitchener School, but I took his word for it. I was tired of fighting.

I got my nerve up only once after that...at the Frosh Dance in the school gym. All grade nines were required to attend and we did, even Sheila. When I saw her, my heart almost stopped. She had on the most gorgeous dress—red velvet and her shoes were shiny jet black like her hair. I looked down at my second-hand sports coat where my mom had mended a frayed corner. It stood out like an ugly wart.

I huddled with the rest of the grade nine boys, joking and pushing one another, trying not to look over at the girls who were gabbing away pretending not to notice us either. But Sheila stood by herself, looking nowhere it seemed, smiling.

“All right, now. First dance. Everyone chose a partner.”

Mr. Main, the vice-principal.

Every grade nine kid's heart hit the floor. None moved. Mr. Main, obviously experienced in these situations, had predicted the problem. All senior students were charged to go grab a frosh and dance.

I melted into the background and found sanctuary behind a piece of gym apparatus, but I could still see the dance floor. Everyone was up...except Sheila. No one had chosen her.

I beetled around the perimeter until I was by her side.

"Wanna dance?" I said, hoping my voice wouldn't crack.

She smiled, but her eyes looked so sad.

"Okay," she said.

I should have taken her hand, but my brain jammed up. I just stood there like a post. My one dancing lesson from my older brother didn't include how to start the whole thing. She did it for me. In one smooth movement we were together, and I was dancing with Sheila Pritchard.

I was oblivious to everything around me; aware only of the feeling of my hand in hers, the closeness of our bodies and her hair glistening in the lights. We didn't speak. Me, because I was in seventh heaven and she, probably concentrating on dodging my blundering feet.

Nothing I've ever done since ended so soon.

The music stopped and I became a post again. We stood for a moment, looking at one another. Finally, she said, "Thanks for the dance."

I wanted to take her hand. Stay with her. Tell her how beautiful she was...but I didn't. The frosh boys were stampeding to the sidelines and some dumb instinct sent me right after them. When I'd reached the safety zone, I turned around. Sheila had returned to her spot off to the side and stood, as she had before, staring blankly into space.

I never saw her again.

I don't remember when I heard, or even who told me Sheila had killed herself that spring. There was nothing in my head that understood suicide. I couldn't face Danny. I never went over to his house again.

We moved shortly after her death, a big one this time—all the way to the west coast. I was fourteen and blessed with the ability to forget. Hormones surged and girls took on a whole new connotation.

Sheila rarely came to my mind. I don't know why, my feelings had been so deep for her.

But every so often the subject of Indians comes up, and with it, Sheila. I see her face and hear her soft voice. If I don't turn my mind away quickly, my eyes get tight and an empty feeling begins to form in my chest.