

Silas Gordon sold everything he had, boarded a heavily masted sailing ship and went to Saint John. In the inside pocket of his jacket he carried a royal blessing — a deed to a hundred acres of land in a place called Dungarvon.

In the year 1821, Silas Gordon built a house, store and a mill, fourteen miles west of a place called Blackville, and promptly named the three buildings “Gordon.” The wagon trail that led from Blackville to Gordon was named “The Gordon Road.” Gordon was three miles upstream from what was later called Brennen Siding.

Silas Gordon did not have it easy. There was an unlimited amount of massive pine needed for the building of ships, but his location was bad. He not only had to pay men to cut and yard the lumber to what was called “Silas Landing,” but also had to pay men for the drive.

The prop was pulled, the large logs tumbled into the spring waters of the Gordon Brook, floated two to five miles to the Dungarvon, another fifteen miles downstream to the Renous, ten miles down the Renous to the Miramichi, and then on to Newcastle fifteen more miles away. He was barely breaking even.

The sawmill was losing money. It was too small. He needed a pond and more settlers to buy his plank and shingles. Silas Gordon didn't have it easy, but he was optimistic. His optimism crumbled, however, in October 1825, when a fire lit in Juniper swept a hundred miles of Miramichi forest out of existence. It burned down everything from shipmasts to fenceposts, houses to sawmills. It burned down everything from Juniper to Silas Landing. It burned the store, the mill and every house, barn and outhouse in Gordon.

In 1827, Silas Gordon froze to death trying to find his way cross-country from Gordon to Renous. Because of the frozen ground and the lack of digging implements, they buried him in the soft clay of the spring.

Silas Gordon did not whoop.

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Buck Ramsey got his name from the fact that he only showed up once a year, like a buck deer in mating season, made love to his wife Shirley, then headed back to Fredericton to his full-time woman. Buck Ramsey sired eleven children that way.

“He’s just like an old buck . . . ,” said Lindon Tucker, remembering that someone had said it many years before.

“An old buck, yeah. An old buck, yeah, yep. Buck the buck. Yes sir.”

“Every time he comes home, he adds a point to his antlers,” said Bert Todder. “Tee, hee, hee; ha, ha, ha; sob, snort, sniff.”

When Bert Todder laughed, he sounded at times like he was crying. Bert’s mother, Maud, had had the philosophy that it was not good to laugh too much. She believed that for every time you laughed, you cried; so she always laughed and cried simultaneously. The only time that Bert was ever seen to cry in his adult life was when Maud died. At the gravesite he went, “Tee, hee, hee; ha, ha, ha; sob, snort, sniff,” and everyone thought he was laughing.

“Boys, I went into Shirley’s to get the mail and she stunk some bad,” said Dan Brennen.

“Poor bugger Shad sets beside some o’ them young lads in school and, and, and I guess they’re pretty coarse. He said that at times he kin hardly stand the smell o’ that Dryfly and that, that, that Palidin,” said Bob Nash.

“Well they never took a bath in their life!” said Dan.

“They jist smell like a jeezless rag barrel,” said Bert Todder and laughed . . . or cried.

“That Shirley don’t look after them, ya know,” said Dan.

“They claim that Buck’s makin’ all kindso’ money in Fredericton,” lied Stan Tuney.

“Boys, if he is, he ain’t spending it on her!” said John Kaston.

“No, no, no. He ain’t spendin’ it on her, is he, John old boy,” commented Lindon Tucker. “No sir. He ain’t spendin’ it on her, that’s fer sure.”

The post mistress, Shirley Ramsey, and her family were always a favourite topic of conversation at Bernie Hanley’s store. The only time that the men didn’t talk about Shirley was when one of the Ramseys was there. The Ramsey boys seldom frequented Bernie Hanley’s store; they couldn’t afford to.

“That Shirley Ramsey’d be a good woman for you, Lindon,” said Bert Todder. This was a way that Bert had of making fun of Lindon and Shirley at the same time.

“I, I, I, I, I, I don’t want want nothin’ to do with the likes o’ that old bag, so I don’t. Kin git meself a better woman than that if I want, so I kin.”

“Tee, hee, hee, ha, ha, ha . . .”

“Ya don’t think she’d look too good in the mornin’, do ya, Lindon?”

“Couldn’t stand the smell o’ her!”

And so went the conversation. When they exhausted Shirley Ramsey, the conversation drifted to the price of pulp, gold in the Yukon, cars, and whether or not they had enough potatoes in their bins to last them until digging time. Then, one by one, they reluctantly (the most reluctant of all was Bert Todder) sauntered off home.

Dryfly lay crying on the mattress amidst the coats and rags. They could not make him go to school. He would not go today, tomorrow or any other day. He would never go to school again.

For the tenth time Shirley yelled, “Git out here, Dryfly! Git out here ’n’ eat yer breakfast before it gits cold.”

“Who ever heard of bread and molasses gittin’ cold!” yelled Dryfly in a fit of temper, caught himself and moaned, “besides, I’m too sick to eat. I’m poisoned, so I am!”

“Sick, me arse! A little bit o’ rabbit shit never hurt nobody! If ya don’t git out here and go to school, I’ll give you to old Nutbeam and you kin live in the woods and be a hermit jist

like him. Is that what you wanna be? Ya wanna be a hermit fer the rest of your life?"

"Bein' a hermit wouldn't be so bad," thought Dryfly. "It would be kind of nice to live alone in a snug camp in the woods and not be tormented with thoughts of school. And being alone would mean not having to face Shad Nash ever again. What's more, I'd never have to contend wit' the Protestants."

"Is that why Nutbeam lives in the woods?" wondered Dryfly. "Could the giant Nutbeam be living in the woods alone because he'd been picked on by the Protestants?" Dryfly went through the events of the previous day.

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Everything went well until noon hour when the sixteen children who made up the Brennen Siding school were set free by Hilda Porter to eat their lunch.

The March sun had weakened the crusty snow so that it gave way periodically beneath the feet of the four boys who wandered into the woods fringing the little school yard.

On the sunny side of a clump of jackpine the snow had receded several feet, and it was here, sheltered from the wind, on the dried pine needles (pine and spruce needles were locally referred to as sprills) the boys sat to eat.

Max Kaston and George Hanley were both in grade six. Shadrack Nash was in grade five and Dryfly Ramsey was in grade four. They were all the same age.

Max Kaston was fat with tiny shifty eyes that peeked over puffed and shiny cheeks. The style of his hair had obviously been simplified with a pisspot. He wore a blue-checked hunting jacket, heavy green woollen pants and black rubber boots that came to just below his knees.

Max was the son of John Kaston, and perhaps because he was constantly being preached to, he was obsessed with and plagued by mistrust and fear. John knew that he himself would never become a preacher, but he was determined to make one out of Max.

Max had been told to respect and fear God; that Satan was forever present; that God was everything that was good and Satan was everything that was evil. Fearing both God and Satan meant that Max feared everything.

George Hanley's ears, hands and feet all seemed too big for the rest of his body. The size of his ears, indeed, seemed exaggerated, because of the brush-cut style of his black hair. George played with the girls a lot, but because his father ran the store, he was never teased as being a sissy. He was too valuable a friend — he could steal things for you from the store.

Stealing was the only way George could get anything from the store, because Bernie gave him nothing.

Shad Nash had fiery red hair, cut by Dan Brennen for the price of a package of tobacco and a book of papers. He was slightly smaller than the rest and his tiny body was clothed neatly in a black windbreaker, blue jeans and leather-topped gumshoes. He had pale ivy eyes and a cluster of freckles that contrasted with his white skin. Shad was a fast talker and seemed forever in control. These were traits he'd developed coping with his father's frustrations and moodiness. Unlike the others, he'd been to the village, Renous and even Newcastle. He came from the first family in Brennen Siding to own an indoor toilet.

Dryfly was the mystery boy — not weird like his brother Palidin, but still mysterious. Perhaps his mystery came from the fact he was a Catholic and God only knew what God they prayed to. Dryfly was thin, had broken teeth, a long snotty nose and a peaked chin. His clothing never fit him right — hand-me-downs from whoever took pity on him — and he smelled . . . like a rag barrel.

There, on the pine needles (the sprills) a rabbit had taken a meal the previous night, nibbling at the grass and blueberry bushes that yesterday's sun had uncovered. Shad eyed the tiny dung balls the rabbit had left. He bit into a large, round, hard molasses cookie. All the boys, except Shad, drank tea from pickle jars. Shadrack had a thermos with the picture of a cowboy twirling a rope on it. He ate from a square lunchbox that matched his thermos. Max and George ate from Ganong's

hardtack candy buckets. The Ganong's candy bucket had a picture of a Ganong's candy bucket on it, which had the same picture on it, etc. . . . into infinity. Dryfly ate from a chocolate box that had seen better days. The chocolate box with the barely distinguishable rainbow across the top had one soggy piece of bread and molasses in it.

A crow cawed, prophesying spring.

The four boys were saving hockey cards from the five-cent bags of Hatfield potato chips. Shad had found a second Bobby Hull card in last night's treat and knew that Max had two Andy Bathgates. With Andy Bathgate added to his collection, Shad would have the whole New York Rangers team. Shadrack endeavored to trade with Max.

"You wouldn't want to trade your Andy Bathgate for a Bobby Hull, would you Max, old buddy?"

"Can't. I already have Hull and I gave me other Bathgate to Dryfly."

"You gave your Andy Bathgate to Dry? What for?"

"I dunno. Thought he'd like it, I guess."

"I'll give you a Bobby Hull for it, Dry."

"I'm lookin' for a Boom Boom Geoffrion," said Dryfly. "Wanna play cowboy after school?"

"I'll throw in a Moose Vasgo," said Shadrack, "that's a Bobby Hull and a Moose Vasgo for one old Andy Bathgate."

"Nope. I might consider a Gordie Howe, though. Got a Gordie Howe?"

"Just the one," sighed Shad, wondering how he'd go about swinging a deal.

"Sounds like a pretty good deal to me, Dry. I'd trade with him, if I was you," said George.

"Ya wanna play cowboy after school, Shad?" asked Dryfly.

"I dunno. Maybe."

"I'll play," said Max.

"Me too," said George.

"Maybe," said Shad.

"I'll tell ya what," said Dryfly, "you gimme yer Bobby Hull and Moose Vasgo and let me play wit' yer cap gun after school, and I'll give you me Andy Bathgate."