

JIMMY GOES HOME

I'm sitting on the cold steps of the Fort St. James storehouse when a moccasined toe nudges my leg. It's Kuzi, whose smoked moose skin shoes make me sneeze. She's of the local Carrier people and a friend of my mother, Layhulette. Mother is Kwantlen, from *Sqwàlets*, by Fort Langley.

"Time to go," Kuzi says. She wears a buckskin dress decorated with blue beads from the trade store.

"Hurry!" Daisy calls from the dock. Behind her, mountain peaks shimmer with snow. It's April 1851, and the ice has just melted. Daisy is eight. She has Mother's eyes and black hair tied in bunches. My mother was fourteen when she married Father. My father, Hugh MacDonald, is a Scot, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk, who was posted here to Stuart Lake eight years ago when I was four. There are many of us "mixed bloods" now, half native, half white. We speak English with Father, *Halq'emeylem* with Mother, some French, and some Chinook, a mix of native and European languages everybody uses west of the Rocky Mountains.

It's busy on the dock. The brigade is leaving for Langley. We're going with it, home for the first time to *Sqwàlets*, the island settlement by the fort, to visit my grandparents for the summer.

Over the winter, Carrier people bring in furs by dog sled; beaver, mink, marten, muskrat, fox, bear, lynx, wolverine and wolf, to trade for goods from the store – blankets, cloth, tools, tobacco, rope, guns and other items. The furs go by brigade to the coast for

shipping to London. Though there are many furs, the Hudson's Bay Company wants beaver above all else, for making hats. Strange that men cross seas, mountains, rivers and face great danger, for the sake of hats. Yet Father says that's why the fort is here, and the natives have become partners in this. I know they prefer fishing to trapping though, and just trade when they feel like it for special store goods.

Kuzi presses a small hide ball into my hand.

"To play with on the trail," she says. Like Mother, she is married to a white man. Father thinks this is not only good for trade and providing the company with a stable work force, but it helps maintain peaceful relations.

Mother says it builds trust. "Blood binds people together. The natives here, as at Fort Langley, prefer to trade with relations."

Kuzi's husband is a voyageur. He's short, with great shoulders and huge muscles from years of carrying packs. While he's gone, Kuzi will return to her village, *Nak'azdli*. I visited her family's pit house once. It's made in a circle and built into the ground. You must climb down a ladder to get in. Inside it was warm, even though it was very cold outside, but the smoke from the fire nearly choked me. In summer, they move outdoors to camp, fish, hunt, gather berries, prepare hides...

Men on the dock have loaded the last of the furs from the storehouse into boats. "James!" If Father says Jimmy, I can pretend not to hear, but if he says James, I come running. I have a Kwantlen nick-name too, *Little One*, that my mother calls me. I join Father by the voyageurs. They wear moccasins, red caps and shirts, with pants tied below the knee and coloured garters to match their waist sashes. Knives, tobacco

pouches and drinking cups dangle on the sashes. Most are of mixed French and Huron ancestry. They brag more than my Father likes.

“Dandies,” he snorts, but thinks McFarlane, the brigade’s bagpiper, is fine, with his kilt and sporran and Scottish regalia. There are Métis, Kanakas (Hawaiians) and an Iroquois too.

The boats are piled high with skins, wrapped and sprinkled with tobacco juice, to keep the bugs away. Other clerks and their families will travel with us, and the Chief Trader, Mr. Manson, with his beaver felt top hat. The men wear black trousers and jackets with stiff white collars; the ladies long skirts and cloaks. Daisy wears a frock and wool leggings, coat and bonnet. I groan. The boys in the other family are in suits.

“Can’t I wear buckskin?” I ask Mother.

“Not for Langley,” she says. “The Stó:lo don’t wear it. The skin turns hard and shrinks when it dries after being wet.” I have to change.

Then we’re off, eight to a boat, in five boats and birch bark canoes. We’re on the Stuart River heading for the Nechako. We have an *avant* (bowman) in front of our canoe, a *gouvernail* (steersman) at the stern, and two *milieu* (middlemen) paddling. Father pulls out a map. He’s teaching me to read and write English. From Fort St. James we will travel the Stuart and Nechako Rivers to Fort George, and down the Fraser to Fort Alexandria. There we’ll move the packs onto horses, and go overland to the North Thompson River, follow alongside it to Fort Kamloops, and through the Coquihalla mountain pass to Hope, where bateaux will take us to Langley. I can’t wait. We eat so much dried salmon here, but Langley has cattle and pigs also and grows many crops, and there are plenty of berries to pick.

“Your grandparents may give you a new name when we visit,” Mother reminds me. The Kwantlen may do that, give you one name as a child, another hereditary one when you are grown that fits who you have become, and which ancestor you resemble.

“How will they know who I’ve become, after so long?”

“They’ll know,” she smiles. “Your Grandma and your aunts will be able to tell which of your Kwantlen ancestors are working through you; shaping your character.”

“Maybe they won’t recognize me. Or I them. Do they still wear cedar bark clothing, or European?”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

“Where will we stay?” Daisy asks.

“In the longhouse with the family,” Mother says.

“Hooray!” shouts Daisy. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, all live together in a longhouse made of cedar planks, shaped like a shed, with a flat roof that pitches gently so rain will run off.

It’s cold in the canoe, so we wrap blankets around us. I count the strokes and listen to the voyageurs, who are full of bravado. We pull ashore each evening to make camp. Cold keeps us awake. We huddle inside bedrolls beneath the propped up boats for shelter. Mother spreads bearskins over us, for the wind bites. My heart pounds when I spot eyes staring at us through the trees. I count eight, shining in the dark, before they disappear. Then reappear!

“Father,” I whisper.

“I see them,” he says, and pats my arm. “Don’t worry. There’s too many of us. And they won’t come near the fires.” The wolves move on but the men keep fires going

all night just in case. Five days later we reach Fort George. They present a gun salute when the Chief Trader enters and this cheers us after many days on the river. Next day we load their furs with ours and paddle on.

Whenever we stop, the other boys visit and we kick around my hide ball. One night it soars into the trees and I run to find it. I come face to face with a bear cub sitting on its haunches eating new green shoots. I'd like to watch him, but know his mother will be nearby. I quietly back through the trees and return to camp. Late that night, Father jolts me awake.

"Black bear on the riverbank," he whispers. I can smell the bear, its so close. It lurches towards the food packs and slices at them with his claws. Tarihonga, the Iroquois, yells and the bear turns away startled, loping towards Mother.

Father shouts a warning and lifts his rifle. Mother stumbles on her bedroll, and Daisy trips too. The bear is nearly upon them. I jump up and howl like a wolf and flap my arms wildly. The bear whoofs and turns my way. Its breath is rank. All I can see is teeth and a snarling face.

"Drop, Jimmy!" Father barks and I fall as the bear swipes my shoulder. I hear two shots, and the ground trembles as the animal falls beside me. My shoulder is bleeding. Father comes running, with Tarihonga.

"Brave lad!" he says. "It's your cub's mother, I think." No-one is happy she's dead. Mother smiles at me as she cleans my cut and Daisy looks on with concern.

The following days are quiet. My shoulder hurts, but I enjoy the look of respect in the eyes of Father and the other men. Daisy, who already looked up to me, now wants to be next me all the time. Thankfully, Mother distracts her by getting her to watch for

eagles and hawks, and pointing out Carrier people along the river. When we reach Fort Alexandria, there's much work as packs come off the boats. The fort has two hundred horses and we need half. I will ride for the first time so Father chooses my horse carefully, a dappled grey mare with a face stripe.

"Always mount from the left," he tells me, so I bounce on my right leg and put my left in the stirrup. As I pull myself up, a shooting pain goes through my shoulder. I wince as I settle into the saddle.

"Keep your hands still. Don't jerk the reins. Squeeze them gently to stop. Lower your heels, stretch your legs and say 'Whoa' softly." I practice all morning, with my sore shoulder throbbing. It's even harder to dismount. I fall a lot before I get it right.

Next day, with two 85 lbs packs tied to each horse, we move on, Mr. Manson in his beaver top hat riding up front, followed by the piper. We head south-east to the forks of the North Thompson. Snow lies in spots, and the horses sometimes slip. At a particularly steep spot, a horse slips and its packs tumble downhill. Two men go after them, swearing in French as they skid down the hill. Later, they tell about another brigade through the canyon, when horses and men fell off a precipice into the river. Thank goodness Daisy can't understand their French, or she'd cry with fright.

Day after day we ride 18 to 20 miles a day, 9 am till 4 pm. It takes so long to unload packs, light fires, make camp, reload again in the morning. I'm so sore and stiff, I can hardly move and my right shoulder won't stop aching. The horses are fine, for there's plenty of water and good bunchgrass. Sometimes the piper plays and the tunes echo along the rocks and hills and it's a wonder that it doesn't scare the horses. We wind

our way slowly south, trailing dust, till at last we reach Fort Kamloops, where we rest and change horses.

We have to take the Kamloops furs with us now so forty local Secwepemc (pronounced suh-Wep-muh) people are hired to carry the packs, walking behind the horses, women among them, toting bedding bundles and supplies. It's slow going, and many days pass before we find the new Hope Trail south to the Similkameen Valley. We head across the valleys of Sowaqua and Peers Creek and Coquihalla River and finally arrive at Fort Hope, at the bend of the Fraser. The brigade is happy now, the dust and sweat of the past weeks behind us. The packs are loaded onto waiting bateaux, big boats 30 feet long.

"How much longer?" I ask Father.

"We're going with a strong current," he says. "About three days, four at most."

A mile or two upriver from Fort Langley, the boatmen start singing. The June sun sparkles on the water and it's a fine day for paddling. Suddenly there it is, Langley dock, awash with people. Mother points out my grandparents. At first they don't see us, but when they do, they break into song, raising their arms in the air in the traditional greeting. Soon we have landed and are buried in hugs. The piper starts playing and Mr. Manson marches into the fort, the men in line behind him. The cannon is fired. Some people wear ribbons in their hats. Everyone is talking and laughing.

Later, sitting at the fire in my mother's longhouse, the bear story is told and retold. Grandfather consults with Grandmother. They call the family together and discuss my re-naming. It is the name of my great-uncle, who has passed away, that Grandmother

says I must “carry”. Later, in the autumn, a proper potlatch will be hosted, witnesses called, gifts distributed, and my new name announced.

I came as Jimmy *Little One*. I leave as *Quick on his Feet*.