

**T**HE FIRST TIME SADIE MORIN WAS AWAKENED BY THE SCRAPE of her landlady's key was in early October when she was in bed with her little sister, Flora. The bed had a rickety iron frame with an ancient spring that groaned if either of them moved a fraction of an inch. Sadie felt a mattress button digging into her hip but she didn't dare move. If she moved, her sharp-eared landlady, Mrs. Hatch, would hear and Sadie didn't want to give herself away, to alert her to the possibility that she might be listening. She heard the key turning in the lock of the mystery room door across the hall. Sadie thought of it as the mystery room because a month ago, soon after she and Flora began boarding with Mrs. Hatch, she told them that the room across from theirs was out of bounds and that under no circumstances were they to go inside. As if they could—Sadie had tried the door handle several times but it was always locked.

Now Mrs. Hatch was opening the door and closing it behind her. Odd that she should be going into the room so early in the morning. What time was it anyway? Sadie lifted her head and looked at the clock ticking on the dresser, but it was too dark to read the time. Judging by the greyish light seeping beneath the blind, she thought it might be six o'clock, maybe six-thirty. What was Mrs. Hatch doing inside the room at this time of day? Was there someone inside? If there was, wouldn't Sadie hear the person moving? Wouldn't she hear Mrs. Hatch and the person talking? But she heard nothing, not even the whisper of a voice or the creaking of a floorboard. With the absence of sound, Sadie's alertness waned and soon she felt herself drifting away from wakefulness toward the dozy world of sleep.

## *Willicott's Lane*



**W**hen Sadie woke again it was to the clunky sound of their landlady shovelling coal from the scuttle into the kitchen stove directly below the bedroom. There was a grate on the floor through which air from the stove was supposed to heat the bedroom but it took forever—this was in 1926, before most householders in St. John's could rely on furnaces for heat. If only she could stay in bed for another half hour, the room would be warm enough for her to dress without shivering. Sadie shifted her hip from the mattress button, the springs complaining beneath her weight, and looked at her little sister, who was curled on her side, thumb jammed into her mouth, the other hand clutching the blanket edge—her habit was to hold the blanket against her nose while she sucked her thumb. Though Flora was eight years old, Sadie thought of her as a baby, a sweet-faced baby with round cheeks and rounder eyes. When they were open, Flora's eyes were bright blue, a Dutch blue, their mother used to say. Before their

mother died in Ontario a year and a half ago, Sadie and Flora had slept in twin beds, but after her death they had begun sleeping in the same bed, facing each other, their arms entwined until they fell asleep, after which they moved away, into their own dreaming spaces.

Warily Sadie swept a hand across Flora's side of the bed. Good, it was dry. Wetting the bed was another change that had taken place since their mother's death. Not every night, just sometimes. Relieved, Sadie shifted to her other side so she could look at the time—it was now light enough to see the clock face with its mechanical robin marking each second by tugging on a worm. Her mother had given her the clock two years ago on Sadie's twelfth birthday. It was seven-thirty, which meant there was no lying in. In fact Mrs. Hatch was already coming up the stairs. Sadie waited her out, counting the creakings of wood: ten, eleven, twelve . . .

"Girls!" Their landlady's voice was like the screech of chalk being dragged across the blackboard. "Get up, girls!" She'd say it again if Sadie didn't reply, "We're getting up!" One good thing about Mrs. Hatch—and there didn't seem much that was—was that she didn't come into their bedroom if it could be avoided, preferring to shout through the door.

"Time to get up, Flora." Sadie reached over and kissed her sister's forehead, the way their mother used to when she came into their bedroom to wake them for school. Flora mumbled something in the scrambled language of sleep, and Sadie swung her legs off the mattress and, sitting up, groped for her slipper socks, pulling them on before standing on the cold linoleum floor. She put on her plaid flannel bathrobe, picked up her facecloth, towel, soap, toothbrush and powder, none of which, their landlady insisted, could be left in the bathroom as they would in a home, and padded downstairs. Passing through the

kitchen on her way to the bathroom beside the back door, she said "good morning" to Mrs. Hatch, who was stirring their breakfast on the stove, her hair still tied in torn cotton rags. There couldn't possibly be anyone inside the mystery room, Sadie thought grumpily, because if there was, their landlady would frighten them to death. "I suppose it is," Mrs. Hatch conceded and continued stirring the potage that Sadie was convinced only a fairytale witch would expect them to eat. Sadie had used the word "potage" in one of her letters to her father. She had hunted up its meaning in the school dictionary after the headmistress at school had used it in class. It meant "mess," which was the right word to use to describe the porridge Mrs. Hatch expected them to eat.

When she and Flora were in their school uniforms: navy blue dresses with detachable white collars and cuffs, and were seated opposite each other at the kitchen table, Mrs. Hatch plunked two bowls of porridge on the mustard-coloured oilcloth.

"Here you are," she said grandly as if she was presenting them with a feast. She took a bottle from the icebox and poured them each a tepid glass of milk. The first week they began boarding with Mrs. Hatch, there had been a pitcher of milk and a bowl of brown sugar on the table in addition to the glasses of milk. The second week the pitcher disappeared, and the third week, the brown sugar. They hadn't had sugar on their potage for two whole weeks. The milk was slightly sour, but stirred into the porridge, it was just possible to force the potage down.

Flora picked up her spoon and poked holes in the porridge before adding the milk, stopping to watch the way it bubbled in the holes. She put her elbows on the table and, holding her head between her hands, said, "If only we could have sugar."

Mrs. Hatch was at the stove pouring herself a cup of tea. She never sat with them at the table the way a normal family would for meals; instead she ate by herself, usually before they did. "There'll be no more sugar," she said. "Sugar is a luxury you can live without. If I gave you girls whatever you wanted, you would eat me out of house and home."

*We wouldn't*, Flora mouthed between her hands as Mrs. Hatch picked up her tea and carried it through the doorway separating the kitchen from the front room where the cheap floral curtain had been rolled around the rod to allow the warm kitchen air to pass through. Their landlady's black laced shoes were the last part of her to disappear through the doorway.

Mrs. Hatch had a small pointed head that she swung in front of her as she walked, as if she was testing the air. She reminded Sadie of a ferret she had seen three years ago tied to a lamppost in front of Polanski's General Store in Copper Cliff where Sadie had gone to buy a pound of lard for her mother's pie crust. The ferret had a rope harness tied around its middle that allowed it to raise the upper part of its body. When Sadie passed the ferret, it lifted its head and thrust its nose in her direction, as if it couldn't see very well and had to locate her scent. After she had made her purchase and was outside on the wooden step, she saw the ferret's owner untying it from the post. He was a prospector with a bird's nest beard and a backpack to which he had tied a tin cup, frying pan, pot and plate that clinked together when he moved. He gave Sadie a foolish scarecrow grin and, lifting his hat, wandered down the dusty street holding his pet on its rope leash, the ferret swinging its head back and forth as it moved.

After Sadie finished eating, she carried her bowl and glass to the sink and washed them in the basin of soapy water left for

that purpose. The porridge felt like a gluey lump stuck partway down her stomach, which was not the way her father would describe it. "It sticks to your ribs," he would likely say, meaning that by eating porridge she wouldn't feel hungry until noon.

"Sadie," Flora said in a small, plaintive voice. She was still playing with her spoon. Sadie knew what was coming. Her little sister wanted her to throw her porridge into the garbage but that wasn't a smart thing to do because their landlady would find it and a lecture would follow. Sadie leaned toward her sister's ear and hissed, "Eat it!" Then in a louder voice intended to reach Mrs. Hatch's ears, she said, "I'll go upstairs and make the bed. We have ten minutes before we leave for school."

By the time Flora finished eating, Sadie was waiting for her at the back door with their bookbags. "We're leaving," she called to Mrs. Hatch as she and Flora stepped onto Willicott's Lane, a wide path that ran at right angles between Gower Street and Victoria Street and was flanked on one side by the back brick wall of the Masonic Temple, and on the remaining sides by tiny back gardens, most of them overgrown. Sadie waited for Flora to run through the Collinses' garden and knock on their back door, a signal that they were waiting for Peggy. Within minutes a small dark-haired girl Flora's age appeared. Peggy was in Flora's class in school and though they had met only after the Morins had moved to Willicott's Lane, they had already pledged themselves friends forever.

Sadie's friend Teddy Dodge was waiting for her at the bottom of the lane on Victoria Street. They had met a month ago when she, Flora and their father were staying at the Crosbie Hotel where Teddy's parents worked, his father as assistant manager and his mother as the supervisor of the housekeeping staff. The Morins had stayed at the hotel until a boardinghouse

and school could be found for Sadie and Flora. The sisters attended Bishop Spencer College, a girls' school; Teddy attended Bishop Feild, a boys' school that was a stone's throw away from Spencer. As usual Teddy's books were balanced against his hip and his glasses were partway down his nose. Two years older than Sadie, he had adopted a custodial manner toward her, as if she needed looking after, when it seemed to her that he was the one in need of being looked after, at least in the manner of his uniform, which was usually rumpled and not always clean. This morning, for example, there was a yellow spot, possibly egg, on his tie and his jacket looked as if it had been slept in. Though he had only been living in St. John's for four years, Teddy knew the city well and was friendly with most of the people he and Sadie regularly saw on their way to school. Whenever the milk wagon passed them on Gower Street, as it did the same time every morning, Teddy waved to the driver and shouted, "Good Morning, Mr. Walsh!" and Mr. Walsh doffed his cloth cap and returned the greeting.

And just now when they passed the ice man standing at the rear of his wagon wiping sawdust from a block of ice before carrying it into the house where a woman waited in the doorway, Teddy shouted, "Good morning, Sir Dicky!"

Immediately the elfin man in the knitted cap and sweater shot back, "Good morning, Sir Teddy!"

Sadie heard the Irish lilt in his voice and smiled, pleased at the reminder of Ireland.

Sir Dicky didn't look big or sturdy enough to carry a huge block of ice, but as they watched, he slid a canvas sack over a glistening chunk and hoisted it onto his shoulder, holding it steady with his hands as he staggered toward the doorway and on into the house, one of a row that ran the length of the street. In this part of St. John's all the houses were joined together, but

each was different in some way: a few had dormer windows or bell-shaped roofs and no two were painted exactly the same. Whatever the colour: dark grey, green, blue or wine, the trim was always dusted with black from coal fires whose acrid smell hung in the damp morning air.

"I hope Sir Dicky stops in Willicott's Lane," Sadie said. "The ice box is empty and the milk has gone off." She stood to one side while a woman in a black skirt and shawl hurried past, her gaze preoccupied, downcast. Except for the delivery wagons and children making their way to school, the street was empty, most people having left for work half an hour ago.

"Heard anything more from your father?" Teddy asked.

"Only the letter from Badger." Badger was the place where Sadie's father had got off the train; from there he and another geologist, Gutsy Pike, had to hike to Buchans, a mining camp in the interior of Newfoundland.

"I'm sure you will one of these days," Teddy said kindly.

Sadie said nothing. She didn't want to start the day worrying about her father—once she started worrying, it was hard to stop. In any case, a letter from him would surely arrive this week.

She and Teddy parted company at the corner of Gower and Prescott streets because Teddy's school was on the opposite side of the street from Sadie's, not far from the Bull's Eye Shop, which sold candy, taffy apples and bread. Teddy crossed the street and Sadie walked toward her little sister who was waiting on the school steps—they usually entered the school together.

"Hello, Sadie."

Sadie turned and saw Nelly Goodyear smiling at her. Beside her was Eunice Baird, a tall rangy girl with dark brooding eyes. Both girls were in Sadie's grade-ten class.

"Hello," Sadie said. As soon as she stopped to talk to Nelly, Eunice moved away. She did this every time Sadie came within

arm's reach of her. Did she think Sadie had something contagious like lice? She'd had lice once in Copper Cliff. To get rid of them, her mother had cut her hair and, after smearing her head with a vile-smelling tarry substance, banished her outdoors.

Nelly pretended not to notice Eunice's rudeness and Sadie was too proud to ask her to explain it. Nelly might not tell her anyway—she was someone who wanted to be on the good side of everybody. Sadie knew this from watching her at school. A blonde pudgy girl with a dimpled smile, during recess she went from one person to another, laughing and talking, never stopping for long, spreading her friendship as far as it could go. Eunice, on the other hand, stalked around the classroom and the corridors alone; even when she was with other girls, she walked ahead or off to one side as if she couldn't be hemmed in. She was a tiger inside a cage, not really seeing people on the other side of the bars.

A grade-eleven school prefect came outside and began ringing a bell twice the size of a cow bell, swinging it back and forth in a wide arc. Sadie herded Flora and Peggy inside and downstairs, where they hung their coats in the corridor, each of them having been assigned a hook with a wooden box directly below, on the floor. Millie, Sadie's best friend—so far her only friend at school—was waiting for her. Millie's real name was Jane Miller but no one except the teachers called her that. Millie had already hung up her jacket and was holding her books close to her chest—she didn't own a bookbag. Sadie straightened her collar and cuffs, which always went askew when she took off her jacket. Before she could pick up her bookbag, Eunice came out of the washroom and strode along the corridor at a furious clip, her shoulder jolting Sadie aside. Eunice must have known she had bumped her—she might even have done it on purpose because she didn't say, "Oops!" or "I'm sorry." She said nothing at all.

"Townies!" Millie spat out. "They thinks they's better than the rest of us. They don't need manners."

"Is that because they live in St. John's?" Sadie knew townies lived in the city and bay girls lived in fishing outports. Millie herself was from an outport called Heart's Content.

"Yes, and Eunice is the worst of the crowd because her father's a fish merchant."

"Oh," Sadie said.

"They owns everything," Millie explained.

"I guess that means they can do whatever they want," Sadie said, and picking up her bookbag looked around for Flora, but her little sister had already gone upstairs.