

Halcyon Days (work in progress)

Joey went first.

The Sergeant took him into the room where the Mountie was waiting. They closed the door.

We waited outside on the benches, too scared to talk. Jane, Mikey, George and me, we were all lined up against the wall. We looked like scared rabbits. We tried to hear what was going on inside: a chair scraping, a table creaking, murmurs, then a thump:

-Speak up, boy!

-I don't know anything!

-Don't you know it's against the law to lie to the police?

We looked at each other. This was bad. We didn't know what the adults wanted from us. All we knew was that our teacher, Miss Wallace, was gone and the police wanted to ask us about her.

It happened on Tuesday, March 6, 1933. School had just opened again after the winter break. It was a cold, cold day. Even with the stove lit, you could see your breath in the classroom. Everyone, even Miss Wallace, wore their coats inside. Some of the older kids were pretending they were smoking. Miss Wallace called on the pretend smokers to come up and write on the board.

They were doing the seven times table when there was a loud knock on the door. A big man in a Mountie uniform came in without even being invited. He had two men with him and they walked right up to Miss Wallace. "You'll have to come with us," they said.

The kids at the blackboard looked at Miss Wallace as if to say, what should we do? The rest of us drew in our breath in one big gasp and one of the smaller kids started to cry.

Miss Wallace stood up from her desk and said, "Good morning, officers! How can I help you?"

One of the men went behind her and put handcuffs on her. "You're under arrest," said the Mountie. Then, so quietly that only us kids in the front row could hear, "Come peacefully. Don't make a scene in front of the children."

She looked him straight in the eye. "On what charge?"

"Treason and sedition against His Majesty the King."

She took a deep breath and looked down for a minute. Then she looked back up at him and said, "Very well, officer."

She turned to the class. "Children, class is dismissed for the day. Gracie, can you ask Mr. Howard to take care of the stove and lock up? I will be back as soon as I can."

Then they took her away in a police car.

I ran to the store and told Mr. Howard what happened. I asked him what was going on, but he didn't know. He went down to the school right away and I went home. I asked my mom what was going on,

but she wouldn't tell me anything. She just said it was for the best. She said Mrs. Thurston would be the substitute teacher till the end of term.

After lunch, I went back to the school and found most of the kids in the playground, not playing, just wandering around. We started talking. Some of the older boys said the Mounties had taken her to Weyburn and that we should go and bust her out of jail. Jane said we should go see Reverend Douglas. He would know what to do. We were all just really sad. Finally, we went home.

Later that night, when my parents thought I was asleep, I heard them talking. Loose morals. Meddling where she had no business. Dangerous ideas. Trusted her with our children.

The next morning, mum told me that the police wanted to ask me some questions. "Don't worry," she said. "You haven't done anything wrong. Just sit up straight and tell the truth."

The truth was that we loved Miss Wallace. She was fun. She made a game out of everything. Kids that couldn't learn before were getting good marks. Our team won games against the other schools. Everyone said that we put on the best Christmas pageant ever. We wanted her to come back. What did she do that was so terrible, we wondered.

It seemed like Joey was in there forever. When he came out, he was crying. He went and sat in the corner by himself. "Don't move," said the Sergeant. He crooked his finger at me to come in.

I made a deal with God that I would tell the truth if he helped me not to throw up.

Reconstructed from the testimony of Gracie Thompson, May 16, 1933

It's been more than eighty years since that day. None of us talked about it after the trial. Occasionally, our eyes would meet in a moment of shared guilt, but as the years went on, we drifted apart. Joey's funeral was this morning, leaving me, Grace Thompson, the last surviving witness for the Crown. Memories long suppressed now overwhelm me. I go to the back of my spare room closet and pull out everything I saved about the trial: the transcript, my scrapbook, Miss Wallace's journal.

I begin with the transcript. The Court had instructed the lawyer to retrieve the copies he sent to us, but for some reason I can't explain, I lied and told my mother that I had burned it. Somehow, my missing copy was overlooked in the chaos and confusion surrounding the trial, and it has remained with me, hidden and unread, ever since.

Today, I am ready to read it. It is hard going. But it soon becomes clear that the words of a handful of intimidated children were only a tiny part of the government's case against Miss Wallace.

It's time to set the record straight.