

SIX

Champion-Jeremiah — he was willing to concede that much of a name change, for now — sat with his black-covered scribbler, his stubby yellow pencil, and the mud-caked fingernails he was anxious that nobody see. Twenty-nine other Cree boys and girls his age sat in rows around him, thirty little wooden desks dappled with late-September sunlight filtering through the yellow, brown, and orange leaves of birch and poplar trees. This golden light culminated at the front of the room, the usual domain of the fearsome grade-one teacher, Sister Saint-Antoine. In her place now stood the even more fearsome principal of the school. As he spoke, the oblate scraped a metal-edged wooden ruler across a large paper chart on which was drawn — in complex detail and swirling, extravagant colours — a cloudy place that he referred to as heaven. Champion-Jeremiah suspected that this might be the same locale Father Bouchard called *keethigesisigook*.

Heaven had a substantial population of beautiful blond men with feathery wings and flowing white dresses, fluttering about and playing musical instruments that Champion-Jeremiah had never seen before: some resembled small guitars with oval contours and humped backs, others oversize slingshots with laundry lines strung across them. The caribou hunter's son noted, with stinging disappointment, that accordeons were nowhere to be seen. The men with wings played and sang all day long, so Father Lafleur appeared to be explaining, and escorted people from their graves beneath the earth to one side of an ornate golden chair on which sat an old, bearded man.

Among the people rising from these graves to heaven, Champion-Jeremiah tried to spot one Indian person but could not.

Taking a chunk of white chalk in hand, Father Lafleur printed "GOD" on the black slate beside the chart, evidently intending that the meaningless word be copied down.

"But to see God after you die," he lectured on, pointing to the old man in the chair, "you must do as you are told." The words swept over the students like a wind. Champion-Jeremiah peered at the image of God and thought he looked rather like Kookoos Cook dressed up as Santa Claus except that his skin was white and that, for some reason, he was aiming a huge thunderbolt down at Earth and glaring venomously.

Slowly, laboriously, Champion-Jeremiah scrawled the word "GOD" on the left page of his scribbler and finished off his

handiwork with a great black period. The word loomed large and threatening; he felt an urge to rub it out.

"Hell," the priest yanked Champion-Jeremiah out of his doleful rumination with his stabbing emphasis, "is where you will go if you are bad."

Hell looked more engaging. It was filled with tunnels, and Champion-Jeremiah had a great affection for tunnels. A main tunnel snaked from just below the surface of the earth to its very bottom and others ran off to each side in twists and knots and turns, not unlike the Wuchusk Oochisk River and its unruly tributaries. Champion-Jeremiah thought of the tunnels he and Gabriel made every winter in the deep snow of Eemanapitepitat, then realized that Gabriel would have to make tunnels by himself this winter.

Skinny, slimy creatures with blackish-brownish scaly skin, long, pointy tails, and horns on their heads were pulling people from their coffins and throwing them into the depths with pitchforks, laughing gleefully. At the ends of the seven tributaries were dank-looking flame-lined caves where dark-skinned people sat.

Aha! This is where the Indians are, thought Champion-Jeremiah, relieved that they were accounted for on this great chart. These people revelled shamelessly in various fun-looking activities. One cave featured men sitting at a table feasting lustily on gigantic piles of food: meats and cakes and breads and cheeses. In another, women smoked cigarettes and sashayed about in fancy clothing, and in a third,

men and women lay in bed together in various states of undress. In another, people lay around completely idle, sleeping, doing absolutely nothing. There appeared to be no end to the imagination with which these brown people took their pleasure; and this, Father Lafleur explained earnestly to his captive audience, was permanent punishment. Champion-Jeremiah was hoping to find an accordion player in at least one cave but, to his great disappointment, there was no place for musicians of his ilk in hell or heaven.

"And this," Father Lafleur crowed, "is the devil. D-E-V-I-L. Devil." He scratched the word on the blackboard at least a foot below "GOD" and finished with such force that the chalk broke and fell to the floor. Excellent student that he intended to be, Champion-Jeremiah copied the word, slowly, painstakingly, on the right-hand page of his scribbler: "DEVIL." The *L* took such effort that he completely forgot to add a period.

In the largest, most fiery, most fascinating cave of all, on a huge black chair of writhing, slime-covered snakes with flicking tongues, sat the being with the biggest horns of all, the longest tail, the most lethal-looking pitchfork, his head crowned by a wreath of golden leaves. Champion-Jeremiah wished that he could understand what the priest was saying, for this king was absolutely riveting. He narrowed his eyes to slits so that he could peer into the eyes of this shameless, strutting personage to whom, apparently, modesty was unknown. He took careful note of the fact that the king — "Lucy," the priest called him — was not glaring venomously. King Lucy was grinning. King Lucy was having a good time.

"And the sins that will get you there," said Father Lafleur in a tone that Champion-Jeremiah was sure had a tinge of something not unlike enjoyment, "are called the seven deadly sins."

Champion-Jeremiah looked down at the word on the right-hand page of his little scribbler and found the *D* of "DEVIL" not quite perfect. He reached for his eraser. "And these seven deadly sins are called . . .": Champion-Jeremiah applied the eraser to the *D*, "pride, envy, gluttony . . ." — erasing was such a waste of time — "sloth, covetousness, anger, and . . ." Champion-Jeremiah hated making mistakes, "lust." The word burst forth like a succulent, canned plum. The priest wiped his brow with a crumpled white handkerchief. Champion-Jeremiah seized the moment to look down at his scribbler: "EVIL" was right there at his fingertips.

He thought it rather pretty, especially the way the *V* came to such an elegant point at the bottom, like a tiny, fleeting kiss.

A cold wind came sweeping down over the vast field of gravel that was the boys' playground, a six-foot, steel-mesh fence holding at bay the surrounding forest of pine and spruce, birch and poplar and willow. If you stood on the monkey bars or flew high enough on the swings, you could see Birch Lake in the distance, down the hill behind the school building, transparent emerald, unlike the opaque blue of Mistik Lake.

"The winds of late October . . .," said Champion-Jeremiah to himself, then stopped. His Cree must not be heard or he would fail to win the prize: the boy who acquired the greatest number of tokens from other boys by catching them speaking Cree was awarded a toy at month's end. Last month, the prize had been an Indian war bonnet; this month it was to be a pair of cowboy guns. Sitting in the gravel with his back against the orange brick wall of the school, Champion-Jeremiah suddenly didn't care whether he lost or won the guns. "The waves on Birch Lake must be climbing higher and higher and there will soon be ice. Later than on Mistik Lake." On the gravel between his knees, he placed eight pebbles in one neat row with a rectangle of wood at the end.

"*Mush!* Tiger-Tiger, *mush!*" whispered Champion-Jeremiah as he made the pebble at the head of the line jump up and down. In the make-believe windswept distance, the caribou were flying across his invisible ice-and-snow-covered northern lake.

A wisp of snow flew by, the first that Champion-Jeremiah had seen this fall. He half-heartedly tried to catch it, but it's hard to catch a wisp of snow, even with mittens.

Cree boys small and large — some almost young men — were scattered like leaves across the yard, near and not so near, even way to the other end of the fence, a good quarter of a mile away. Girls had their own yard on the other side of the giant building, out of sight, away from the view of lusty lads who might savour their company, so Champion-Jeremiah was to learn in the nine years he would spend here. Even his sisters