



In *Children of the Day*, Giller Prize-nominated author **Sandra Birdsell** has created a portrait of a marriage on the knife-edge of disaster, in the tiny, mythical town of Union Plains, Manitoba



children *of the* day

Emilie watched as Manny and Simon latched on to Oliver's hands, her older brothers slouching along on either side of him. Ida clomped on ahead of everyone in a pair of Sara's shoes, the blue wedgies she'd dug out from a corner of the porch because her sandal strap had broken. The wedgies were Sara's garden shoes, and although Ida had wiped them with a wet cloth before leaving the house, the shoes looked used up. Likely they pinched Ida's toes, but the heels made her taller and so she felt older, or so Emilie judged from her sister's self-important walk. When Ida thought no one was looking, she tilted her face to peer down the neck of her blouse, admiring her new freckled breasts. Barf city, disgusting, Emilie thought.

Her family turned at the corner, their murmuring voices fading, while Emilie went towards the oldest residential street in Union Plains. Its grown-up trees formed a canopy of greenery that shaded the boy from Arizona as he straddled his bike in front of his grandmother's prim-looking house. Emilie hurried towards him, the day expanding like a book opening flat against a table.

He waved and dismounted, the tree branches reflecting in his eyeglasses; the wedge of sand-coloured hair lay against his forehead like a hand. A robin called out, its cheery sound suiting the June sky. The coronation coin was a spot of heat moving against her thigh, and she thought to tell him that the Queen of England had sent it to her in the mail, but she knew he wasn't just any kid she could tease.

Charlie was wearing a white

T-shirt and jeans that looked to be new, and an expansion bracelet engraved with his initials. Something I wouldn't be caught dead wearing, Sonny Boy had scoffed, when Emilie described it. The veranda curtains were drawn, as they always were, inviting the suspicion that Charlie's grandmother spent most of her day spying on people. She turned the lights off on Halloween, too, as though the town kids didn't already know to avoid her house. The clipped look of the yard and the lack of flower beds suggested stinginess. Sonny Boy said the woman was so tight, her ass squeaked when she walked.

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The Queen of England must have sent one to everyone then, because I've seen other kids with the same thing, Charlie said.

The veranda door of the grandmother's house opened, and Charlie's older brother came down the stairs, a tall, ginger-haired young man who walked like a cat, and whom Emilie had seen only fleetingly, when he drove past her house in the car.

So, where do you guys think you're going? he called.

What's it to you? Charlie replied, and Emilie was surprised at the unpleasant tone of his voice.

The brother wore grey-blue trousers flamboyantly wide at the knees, and a silver belt that looked like crinkled metal. He circled Emilie and Charlie as they stood on



Don Hall

the street, the bicycle between them. Emilie felt shabby, her red checkered pedal-pushers worn at the knees; the tails of The Other One's cast-off shirt were so long she'd knotted them to hang like moth-eaten rabbit ears from her waist.

The brother said to Charlie, So, how old is your girlfriend, anyway?

None of your business, Ross, Charlie answered.

Ross glanced back at the veranda before speaking. I was just wondering, see. Dad's going to let me have the car for the day. We could drive to Winnipeg. Maybe Emilie here would like to show us around?

Emilie felt Ross's eyes pass across her body, glance away and then back again, and resisted the urge to cross her arms in front of her chest. She didn't want to admit that she didn't know Winnipeg, except for the several blocks on Portage Avenue between Eaton's and Hudson Bay department stores. She might also be able to find her way to the zoo, but that was it. I'll have to go to the hotel and ask my dad, she told Ross,



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confident that permission would not be granted.

Ross can go sightseeing on his own, Charlie objected, and Emilie said, It's okay. There's nothing but art and phys ed at school today, anyway.

Charlie gave Emilie a ride downtown, his shoulder blades see-sawing with effort beneath his white T-shirt. Who are you? he'd wanted to know days earlier, when he appeared out of nowhere, coming up behind her on his bicycle. He hadn't asked, Which one are you? Or stated matter-of-factly, You're one of the Vandals, as though there were nothing more to be said or learned. She was Emilie, she told him. He introduced himself as Charlie, from Arizona. He'd driven up with his parents and brother to help their grandmother pack up her house and move to an apartment in Winnipeg.

He dismounted from his bicycle to walk beside her that first day, and when she spoke, he crooked his head to look into her face. His arms were downy with sun-bleached hair and his skin deeply tanned for early spring. No, she hadn't heard of Arizona, she replied to his next question, although of course she had. She was rewarded by a flare of pleasure in his face

as he went on to recite the various statistics about Arizona, ending by saying that when he returned to Phoenix, he'd send her a horned toad in the mail to prove they existed.

Charlie had since talked about guided intercontinental ballistic missiles whose trajectories would one day carry them beyond the atmosphere and back to earth, where they'd obliterate an entire city in Soviet Russia. Push of a button, he said. Emilie didn't mention that Russia was the country of her mother's birth. Aunt Katy received letters from relatives and friends still living there, and brought them with her when she came on a visit. Letters crying out with requests for prayer, for clothing, for rescue. Katy replied to those letters, although she said she had nightmares of being kidnapped and spirited out of Canada. Of being sent into forced labour in a Siberian gulag.

That's what happens to people over there who believe in God, Aunt Katy declared. Which Emilie thought was stupid—they should just say they didn't believe, and everything would

be copacetic. That doesn't mean God stops believing in them, she said, voicing her opinion in Sara's presence and being reminded swiftly to watch her mouth, as there was such a thing as an unpardonable sin. The entreaties Aunt Katy translated from the soft grey paper hung around like weary ghosts, and often sent Emilie to a field beside the schoolyard, a large open space where she could practise running. She wondered what could be more unpardonable than a cleverly concealed gopher hole, the possibility of breaking an ankle.

What she appreciated the most about Charlie was that he ignored the fact that the back of her hand was never without a bandage of some sort, and she didn't need to explain that there was a colony of warts underneath it. He didn't seem to notice that she was female, either, and that left her free to take him in. To grow to love the flashes of pleasure in his caramel eyes, the wetness of his small mouth, the light beaming in his face when she told him something he didn't already know. **R**

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