

This is version of Chapter One of Mud Run is the next-to last version. In my computer, that is listed as Draft 6, but that may not count a few I threw away and did not save. Mud Run was nominated for the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award the year after it was published.

Chapter one

The new school

Matthew Thompson did not like his new school, even though he had never set foot in it. He didn't like the way the basketball hoops had been stripped of their netting. He didn't like the hopscotch markings painted on the pavement between the portables and the main school building. For that matter, he didn't like the portables either.

Matt had moved to Courtice, Ont. from London (Ontario, not England) during the summer. The move had ruined his vacation. Maybe his life. As though he were a pet goldfish, his parents had plopped him into a new neighbourhood, in a strange house, near a strange school, to start the eighth grade in a school full of strangers. They hadn't even asked.

Ignored at home that Monday afternoon of Labour Day,

Ganaraska Gold:

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Matt walked over to his new school to see how much he really did hate it. The walk took four minutes: two to saunter four doors down to the park entrance, and two to cross the combined park and playground.

Matt had just turned thirteen years old. He wore a blue and white Maple Leafs baseball cap to cover a haircut he wished were more stylish. He was average height, slim to almost skinny, with a dimple in his left cheek that he practiced on in the bathroom mirror sometimes. Ever since Lillian Fredericks a long time ago, in a school far, far away, had whispered to a Grade 7 classmate that she thought the dimple was cute and Matt had overheard. Embarrassing.

Matt was alone in the late afternoon sun-filled schoolyard, deserted except for a gust of wind which whirled around the corner like a saucy baby tornado, blew sand in his face and disappeared. Heat from the still-summer sun rose from the black asphalt. He kicked at small pebbles and listened to the echoes

dribbling off the row of windows at the back of the school. Back home in London, now, he would have been playing two-on-two basketball in Adam Robert's driveway, or putting together a road hockey team with his friends, or checking out websites with any of his many friends.

He kicked at one rock, bigger than all the others, and watched it skip and bounce across the pavement, taking one last hop before it settled into the far corner of the quadrangle.

“Watch this!” said a voice behind him. He turned to see a smaller boy with a dirt-stained face, perhaps eight years old and small for his age, rise up and kick an even larger rock into the same corner. That is, the younger boy tried the kick, as though he were booting a soccer ball. The rock wouldn't co-operate— it couldn't, it was too large — and it rolled lamely for a metre and a half before coming to rest.

Meanwhile, the boy hopped forward, holding his right foot in his left hand, his crumpled cap in his right, his face twisted in

pain, his mouth held in a tight straight line to keep sound from escaping.

“I’m watching,” Matt replied flatly.

“I’m Gavin Richards,” the kid replied. “You’re new. I’ve never seen you before. You gonna be going to this school?”

“Maybe,” Matt replied. “I’d rather move back home.”

When he said the word ‘home’, he realized that home for him was still back in that subdivision in Lambeth, near London, Ontario.

“I’ll bet you can’t do a slam dunk,” Gavin said, finally releasing his foot and skipping over to the basketball nets.

The basketball hoops, minus nets, hung between the portables and the main school building at the end of the flat paved area. The basketball nets had long ago vanished, and the one remaining hoop bent forward, tipped toward the ground as though ashamed.

Gavin bounded toward the small basketball court from behind one board, jumped to catch the metal pole in his right

hand. He twirled once around, landing on his feet.

“Bet you can’t do that!” he yelled with a grin.

“Go home and tell your mother she wants you,” Matt said.

But he followed the boy anyway.

Gavin’s jeans were ripped at the knee and stained. His t-shirt looked as though it had been worn for several days, his face unwashed. He looked exactly like the last day of vacation.

“Betcha can’t climb up on the roof of the portables!”

Gavin cried again, bounding with a grin into the narrow passage between two of the portable classrooms. The portables sat in a row at the edge of the black pavement, strung together by a nest of hydro wires and cables slung from two wooden poles.

Matt followed the younger boy into the dank space separating two portables.

“Betcha can’t catch this!” Gavin yelled. He stood on the small railing around the platform at the back of the portable. As Matt emerged from the damp shadows between the portables,

Gavin reached down, grabbed the baseball cap from the older boy's head and flung it overhead.

Matt watched his favourite hat float upward in an arc, and then descend slowly, caught finally by a wisp of an orphaned breeze before dropping onto the portable roof.

Matt lunged at Gavin, missed, and the boy bounded away with a cackling laugh. Matt knew he could catch the kid, but pulled up after half a dozen strides. Why bother? The kid was a brat, but what would he prove?

He turned back to the portable. The hat had fallen out of sight on the flat roof.

His Uncle Jim had given him that hat the year before on his birthday.

“Betcha can’t get up there,” Gavin said from the packed sod of the soccer field. “Betcha can’t climb it. Only the high school kids can climb that!”

Matt looked up again. He had never climbed a portable

roof before, had never even thought of it. Knew he shouldn't try.

He hopped up on the small entry platform and then swung up on the makeshift railing made of two-by-four lumber. From there he could reach the lip of the roofline. With his one foot braced against the frame of the door he lifted himself high enough to get his left elbow over the edge.

Slowly, he pulled himself up on both elbows. He could see the flat, black gravel and tar roof. With a quick lunge he flung himself forward and rolled onto the sun-warmed surface. His hat flapped in the breeze and rolled over once, a metre away. He pulled himself up and looked around.

The heat of the sunshine had softened the tar. Matt noticed he had already stained the left knee of his jeans. His parents would not be happy. He retrieved his hat. Below him out on the field, Gavin strained to see, still hopping up and down, still shaking the numb out of his stubbed toe now that he thought no one was watching.

“Betcha can’t get down!” Gavin shouted, gleefully, and then disappeared. He re-appeared on the other side of the portable, crossing the paved quadrangle between the portables and the main building. Laughing, he ran limping toward the nearest door. Ten feet from it he released a rock in an overhand throw.

The rock thudded against the metal door to the main school building, then echoed in the paved quadrangle. Matt leaned over to see better when the door opened

A thin man in need of a shave held the door open with his right hand and looked left, then right, just in time to see Gavin’s heels slip around the corner. Had he looked up, five degrees of elevation, he would have seen Matt. But he didn’t.

“I saw you,” the older man said to Gavin’s now-gone heels. “I’ll report you.”

The custodian — for that’s who it obviously was — hitched at his green work pants, rubbed his tired eyes and shrugged. He was old: maybe forty-five, fifty perhaps, Matt

thought. Older than most teachers. Tired looking, thin, with a leathery tanned face. The man made no attempt to chase Gavin.

Matt quietly lowered himself flat to the roof and waited for sounds that told him the custodian had gone. He heard nothing: no footsteps, but no door closing, either.

Wheels clattered and echoed in the quadrangle. Matt peeked just enough to see the custodian closing the exterior door of an outdoor storage unit. He locked the door, using the nest of keys at his belt, and then turned to his cleaning cart, which he began pushing across the tarmac.

Matt ducked, barely daring to breathe. He heard the rattle of keys, and the whole portable rattled as the custodian opened the door and entered the room below him.

Matt lay flat on the roof, tar and gravel now pressing into his left cheek. All he had to do now was wait until the custodian left. He didn't know how long that would be. He could be in for a long wait, he thought.

