

Chapter 10

AFTER three years in the junior dormitory, I finally graduated to the intermediate dorm for the ten to twelve year olds. There were two advantages to this move. First, we could stay up until seven, and second, food was more accessible.

Our one cup of food per meal was just not enough for growing children and we were constantly hungry. Being an intermediate, however, meant getting assigned to the staff dining-room, kitchen, or bakery detail, and it was a simple matter of nipping into the pantry and pilfering a few handfuls of dried fruit while the staff were eating.

The most lucrative, in terms of food, was the staff dining-room detail. The staff had all the good foods we could not have—fruit, juice, eggs, all kinds of desserts, real butter, bacon, ham, and anything else they desired. The left-overs were carefully sealed for later snacks, but what was left on the plates was ours.

My favourite meal was breakfast, and filling the juice glasses was my favourite task. As soon as the cook became engrossed in stirring the vat of cereal or shovelling more firewood into the stove, I would turn the juice can upside down and chug-a-lug half the contents. After wiping the top thoroughly so my germs would not be passed on to the vulnerable staff, I would fill the can to the top with water. None of the staff ever complained of their watered-down juice.

Another little trick of mine when slicing the breakfast

oranges was to *accidentally* knock every fifth or sixth slice off the counter onto the floor. Of course once the food hit the floor, the cook insisted on throwing it out, and I, being an obedient child, threw everything into my waiting pockets. My natural clumsiness was a blessing because the staff had learned not to expect too much from me in the way of poise and grace, and I was able to get away with little things like that.

There were times, however, when I was afraid that the staff would banish me from the island and from the world for my clumsiness. My first day on staff dining-room duty was one of those occasions.

Mrs. Wilson, the cook, was our trainer in the art of serving—our probable destiny. She was old, as was everyone on the staff, and thin. How anyone with constant access to food could be so skinny was beyond me. She took time out from her busy schedule to show Helen, the other girl on staff dining-room detail, and me what to do.

She led us into the dining-room, a small square room with green walls, maroon linoleum, and a light fixture instead of the usual bare bulb in the centre of the ceiling. The highly polished walnut dining table was covered with crisp white linen; the silver gleamed and the glasses and china sparkled at each setting. To the right of the setting at the head of the table sat a small silver bell. Eight walnut chairs, one at each end and three on each side, surrounded the elegantly set table.

“Please note carefully how the table is set,” she said. “I want it set the same *after* each meal. . . . Miss Quinlan sits at the head of the table. The vegetables are placed in front of her; the tea and teacups are placed on her right. Reverend Dawson sits at the other end. The meat is set in front of him, and the condiments are set in the centre of the table. All this must be done just before the staff get here. Before the meal, you will take the plates off the table and put them in the warming oven. When you put the meat and vegetables on the table, put the warm plates in front of the principal. When Miss Quinlan rings the bell, that is your signal to come in and remove the dirty dishes” On and on she droned. My mind

reeled with information after her thirty minute lecture. I knew I would never remember everything she had told us. “Janie, you will wait on us at dinner, and Helen, you’ll wait on the supper table,” Mrs. Wilson concluded.

By dinnertime, I was nervous and jumpy, unable to concentrate on anything, and feeling even clumsier than usual. When the bell rang, I stood by the dining-room door for several agonizing moments, wiping off my sweaty palms and swallowing hard.

“Go on! Go on!” Helen kept hissing at me.

“I can’t!” I whimpered. “I’ve forgotten everything she told us.”

“Go on! You’re going to get punished if you don’t get in there.”

“This is worse than any punishment I can think of,” I cried. The bell rang again. I put on a weak smile and walked in.

“What took you so long?” asked Mrs. Wilson.

I did not answer. I was too busy trying to remember from which side I was supposed to remove the dirty dishes. “Well, there is only one solution,” I thought. I removed Miss Quinlan’s plate from the left at the same time I was removing Mrs. Wilson’s from her right. One of them had to be correct.

“No! No!” whispered Mrs. Wilson, looking towards the end of the table at Reverend Dawson.

Then I remembered. I was to remove Miss Quinlan’s dirty dishes first, then Reverend Dawson’s. But I already had two dirty dishes in my hand, so I took them out to the kitchen. I still did not know whether to remove the dirty dishes from the left or from the right.

“Quick! Tell me which side you serve from and which side you take the dirty dishes from,” I begged Helen.

“Wasa! Don’t ask me!” she said. “I was hoping you’d be able to tell me.”

I went back in, deciding to play it safe by removing Reverend Dawson’s dishes from the left while taking those of the person on his left from the right. I could not understand why they could not stack their dishes in the centre of the table as we did.

“From the right!” hissed Mrs. Wilson as I walked past her.

“Take the dirty dishes from the right,” I informed Helen, who was busy filling the creamer and brewing the tea.

I cleared the table, then placed the china teapot on Miss Quinlan’s right, along with the sugar, cream, and teacups.

“The condiments,” Mrs. Wilson whispered as I started to leave the room.

As I reached for the condiments in the centre of the table, I caught the creamer with my elbow and upset it, spilling cream all over Miss Moore’s skirt and all over the floor. I stood there petrified, waiting for her to knock me senseless with an uppercut.

“For goodness sake, Janie!” she yelled, bolting out of her seat. “Do you have to be so clumsy?” Had we been alone, she probably would have throttled me.

I stood rooted to the floor, blinking back my tears. “Get the mop and clean up the floor!” Miss Quinlan ordered. “And fill up the creamer again.”

I raced out, wondering how I could go back in after making such a fool of myself.

“What happened?” Helen asked, noticing my tears.

“I spilled the milk all over Miss Moore.”

Miss Moore brushed past me with a withering look. I knew immediately she was not through with me yet. I cleaned up the floor, sniffing to myself, wishing I could vanish into thin air.

I was right. Miss Moore was not through with me. Miss Moore always had a scapegoat, someone to ridicule or embarrass for weeks, sometimes months, whenever she was in a bad mood, which happened quite frequently. I knew it was my turn.

She began by ignoring me completely, refusing to answer my questions or acknowledge my presence. I did not mind because I knew the worst was yet to come. A few days later, a Saturday, she began her attack.

I had awakened early, just as the sun was rising. Climbing onto the metal frame of my bed, I looked out the open window and saw that it was going to be a warm day. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the mighty river was like a mirror reflecting a few puffs of pink clouds in the azure sky.

Across the river, a flock of Canada geese had stopped briefly on their annual spring migration further north to swim around lazily and feed.

I giggled quietly as I thought of what had happened to my sister Sharon, who was spending her first year at the school. A shower of goose droppings had rained down on her bare head and down her back the day before. An incident like that was enough to keep us amused for months. The peaceful snores of the other girls intermingled with the occasional calls of the geese. I thought, "What a great day to be alive!"

Hearing a faint step behind me, I started to turn around. "Janie Matthews! How dare you get up at four o'clock in the morning and disturb the whole school! Get back into bed right now!" It was Miss Moore.

I fell over backwards onto my bed, hitting my head on the wall with a sickening crunch. The rudely awakened girls bolted out of their beds.

"See what you've done!" she screamed. "Now everyone's awake! I shouldn't let you go home to visit your family today, but I'll give you *one* more chance." She stormed out of the dorm.

Since I was on my best behaviour all morning long, Miss Moore was forced to let me visit my family. "Well! I hear you've been a bad girl again," my mother greeted me. "Miss Moore said you woke everyone up at four o'clock this morning."

"I did not! I was just standing there looking out the window when she came charging into our dorm screaming. She was the one who woke everybody up. I wish they'd get rid of her. I hate her!"

"Wasa! Don't talk like that about white people. You'll get into trouble."

"I don't care. I'm always in trouble anyway. I try so hard not to break any rules, but they're always making up more every time they want to. I wish I'd never gone into that school."

"You're the one who insisted on living there," she reminded me.

"You should have stopped me."

“Ah, gahmahmahgee,” she said, indicating that the subject was closed.

That night after all the lights had been turned out, I had to sneak into the washroom to use the facilities. The toilet pails were wedged in so tightly under the counter that it was impossible to get one out without making a lot of noise. Just as I sat down in blessed relief, Miss Moore came bursting in.

“You again!” she shouted, livid. The veins on her neck stood out so far that I was afraid they would pop. “Get off there right now and get back into bed!”

She was asking the impossible! It would have taken a cavalry to pry me off the seat at that moment. “I can’t,” I said.

“*How dare you disobey me!* You know darn well you are not to use those toilets until I bring them in to you. I don’t know what I’m going to do with you. You are getting to be so bad! For this, you will go to bed without supper for two weeks, and you will stay home two Saturdays instead of one. Get into bed!”

Some days it did not pay to be alive. Fortunately, I did not have to put up with this treatment too much longer, for the school year was drawing to a close.

My poor friend Annie was also under constant attack, although it was nothing new to her because Miss Moore had picked on her from the very first. Annie had a mysterious skin ailment that cropped up at the start of each school year and got progressively worse as the year wore on. Only when Annie’s hair had to be shaved off because of massive sores all over her scalp did the nurse suggest that she might be allergic to Lifebuoy soap. The nurse had her switch to another brand, which Annie had to buy for herself at the Bay.

“Don’t think that just because you’re using that kind of soap you’re any better than anyone else,” Miss Moore told her repeatedly.

I felt so sorry for Annie when her scalp sores were cleaned every day. Miss Moore would scrape away as if she were scouring a burned pan, muttering, “You dirty little Indian! If you weren’t so dirty, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

Annie was just as clean as the rest of us; we all washed at least six times a day. She would stand patiently and take her torture stoically.

“Why don’t you kick her when she hurts you like that?” I often suggested.

“Some day I will,” she promised. “I hope she gets a baby. That’ll teach her.” Miss Moore was always telling us we would end up with papooses on our backs if we weren’t careful. Having a baby was the worst punishment we could think of for her.

She had always tried to keep Annie and me separated, but now she tried even harder. She would not put us on the same work detail; she would not let us sit together at the dinner table or in church; she would not let us sleep in adjacent beds; and she would not let us walk together on our Sunday hikes. The only time she could not control us was when we were out on the playground.

She seemed to feel that the two of us together presented a personal threat to her and that we were constantly plotting against her. More often than not, we were.

“Well, what are you two cooking up now?” she’d greet us as we came in from the playground giggling and whispering. “I have told you two not to play together. I should report you to the principal.” She never did because she probably knew she was being unreasonable.

What a relief when the school year ended. On the last day of school, we got back our test papers. We did not get report cards; it was probably considered a waste of good paper. While we were standing around comparing marks, Miss Moore came over to see how we had done. She began praising the other girls for their fantastic achievements, but totally ignored me.

“Why Helen, imagine a seventy-eight in English! That’s great! And Mary, seventy-five in math! I don’t believe it! Those are great marks, girls!”

“Miss Moore, Miss Moore, look. I got eighty-eight in math. Look, look, Miss Moore,” I said, waving my papers around. Even though I knew she disliked me, I was willing to be friends again on this last day of school.

Finally she gave me a look of disdain. “I heard you, Janie,” she said. “You should be ashamed of yourself. Such a low mark is nothing to be proud of.”

“But eighty-eight was the highest mark in math,” I whispered hesitantly, hoping to regain some of the confidence and pride I had felt just seconds earlier.

“That may be so, but for you that is a very low mark. You’ve done much better than that. And you have the nerve to wave your papers around proudly.” She went on mercilessly. “If you keep getting such low marks, pretty soon you’ll flunk out of school.”

I walked away from the happy crowd, feeling like the low man on the totem pole. I actually believed her.