

Chapter 11

FORTUNATELY, at this low point of my eleventh year on earth, I discovered Nature. It happened one Saturday spring morning on my way to the nursing station to deliver a message from the matron to the nurse. As I bent over to retrieve a can that I had been kicking, I noticed a few shoots of green grass pushing their way through the soil. It was the first time I had ever noticed anything *growing*, and I took it as some sort of miracle. I glanced at the shrubbery and discovered to my utter amazement that it too was sprouting green growth. A whole new world opened up for me.

Normally the walk from the school to the nursing station took about two minutes, but that day it took me two hours. I inspected every blade of grass, every shrub, and every tree along the way, marvelling at the perfection and the intricacy of everything. Fortunately I had completed all my chores and so I was not missed.

I noticed, also for the first time, that the whole island bloomed with vibrant-coloured wildflowers, from the delicate blue violets to the tall magenta fireweed. I wondered

where all this colour had suddenly come from. And the smells! I walked around with delicately scented pink twinflowers shoved up my nostrils. I was in paradise!

I spent most of the summer vacation on my stomach, totally absorbed in the wonders of nature. My family began to wonder about my sanity. They had always laughed good-naturedly at my abnormal—for an Indian child—curiosity and my sometimes eccentric behaviour, but they did not know what to do about me crawling around on all fours from sun-up to sundown, day after day, my nose buried in flowers.

“She’ll outgrow it,” they predicted dubiously, in the same tone that they used to predict I would outgrow my clumsiness.

This miraculous discovery made life more tolerable at the school when I returned in the fall. That, coupled with the fact that Miss Moore had left us to make life miserable for other Indian children in another school. It was a day of rejoicing when we registered in August and found that Miss Moore had been replaced by a short, chubby, white-haired grandmotherly type named Miss Foster.

There were other changes as well. Our school population had grown to about seventy children, and our one classroom was no longer large enough to accommodate us all—not even seated three to a desk. So, for the first time in the island’s history there were two teachers and two classrooms.

Mrs. Holland had finally admitted that she was too old to be teaching and had retired, or so we thought until we heard that she had gone out west to teach in another Indian settlement. She was unbelievable! Imagine my surprise when twenty years later I heard that she was still devoting her life to teaching underprivileged children.

In her place were two younger women, both about twenty-one. Miss Livingston taught the lower grades, kindergarten to grade three, and Miss Cooper taught grades four to seven. Not one child from our island had yet made it to grade eight.

The problem of another classroom was solved when the Parish Hall, a meeting place and dance hall for the Indians, was confiscated. The Hall had never been finished inside; not

even rough planking covered the bare studding. The rough wooden floor was quite worn in the centre by the shuffle and stomp of hundreds of square dances. Once the desks and the blackboard were moved in, however, the Hall looked more like a classroom and less like a storage shed.

We entered through a small porch which served as a coat-room and wood shed. It was up to the boys to keep the huge wood-burning stove going at all times during the winter. Many a morning when the fire would not start, we would sit wearing our parkas in sub-zero weather, trying to write with numbed fingers. When the teacher could no longer stand the cold, we all trooped over to the boys' or girls' playroom to hold classes until the classroom had warmed up sufficiently.

The thrill of getting a desk by one of the windows, where I could see everything that went on outside, wore off when winter came. There was no insulation around the windows—there was no insulation anywhere in the Hall—nor were the windows framed in. This meant that polar winds howled through the cracks between the walls and windows whenever we had one of our frequent blizzards. And great snow-drifts piled up against the building, hiding everything from sight. How I wished then that I had a seat near the stove.

However, the children seated near the stove had their own problems. The only fire which could almost heat the whole room was one that turned the stove glowing red, and sweat poured off their faces. These clouds of vapour enveloped those of us seated along the walls, and joined our own warm breath in turning to frost on our eyebrows and bangs. Our pores stood at constant attention.

My annual case of tonsillitis was worse that year, possibly from my being constantly semi-frozen. Normally, as long as I was able to drag myself around, I did not bother reporting sick, but all my noble efforts failed and I was sent to bed for several weeks.

When my throat no longer resembled a raw hamburger, I asked Miss Foster to let me out of bed, but she refused. With nobody to talk to, day after day, I was getting extremely bored, so I decided to take matters into my own hands and

cure myself the first chance I had. The white-man's medicine was taking too long.

One evening, Miss Foster slipped on the icy path to the nursing station and broke her ankle. She had to be flown back to civilization to get the care white people deserved. On the day she left, I stood by the window and watched as the children pulled her along on a toboggan to the waiting plane. This was the chance I had been waiting for. The school was completely empty of spying staff.

Wearing nothing but a nightgown, I opened the window, leaned out, and opened my mouth wide to the cold wind. I stuck my tongue out so there would be no obstruction to my throat. Since we were always being told how good fresh air was for us, I had decided that it was what my throat needed. I stood in the freezing wind for about five minutes to give my tonsils the full benefit of the cure, then I crawled back into bed to defrost.

My treatment seemed to work because Miss Quinlan told me that very evening that I was well enough to get out of bed the next morning. I cursed myself for not thinking of the simple cure before.

I felt a little weak the next morning, but I was able to get up with everyone else. By mid-morning, however, I began feeling faint and nauseated. When I started vomiting at recess, I did not say anything to Miss Quinlan, who was replacing Miss Foster as our supervisor. I felt worse and worse as the long day progressed.

I blacked out just as we finished saying Grace at supper-time, collapsing into my seat during the "Amen". Still I did not say anything to the meal supervisor. I distributed my food around to the other appreciative girls, then, as soon as we had been excused, I went straight to bed without informing any of the staff.

Miss Cooper, our teacher, hearing that I had gone to bed, stopped by after supper to see how I felt.

"I feel better," I lied, not wishing to spend another day in bed.

"Then why are you in bed?" she asked.

"I almost fainted at the table, but I feel much better now."

My teeth were chattering, and my whole body was shivering. Even though I was perspiring profusely, I felt as if I were encased in a block of ice.

“Do you hurt at all?” she asked gently, feeling my forehead.

“Just a little.”

“Where?”

“Oh, all over,” I cried, breaking down. Trying to pretend I was not sick was too much effort.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. She returned a few minutes later with Miss Quinlan, who also felt my forehead.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Janie,” Miss Quinlan said worriedly. “You’ll be better in no time.” Turning to Miss Cooper, she said, “Send one of the girls to get the nurse. Her forehead is like a furnace and her bed is soaking wet.” I huddled under the covers trying to find some warmth.

When the nurse arrived, she took my temperature. Without saying a word, she took out a hypodermic, filled it with white medicine and jabbed it into my rump. I was hurting so much all over that I did not even feel the stab.

“That’ll make you feel better,” she told me unconvincingly. “I want her moved into the isolation room right away,” she told Miss Quinlan.

I knew immediately that I was on the verge of death because the only other girl who had been moved to the isolation room had died, but my impending death did not frighten me at all. In fact, I was rather looking forward to it so I could be one up on the other girls. The fact that I would not be around to brag about it never occurred to me.

After they had me settled in bed, Miss Quinlan and the nurse left the room. I could hear them whispering out in the hallway.

“She’s a very sick girl,” the nurse whispered. “Frankly, I don’t hold much hope for her. Don’t let any of the other children near her. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

“She’s been in bed with a sore throat,” Miss Quinlan told her.

“Well, it’s more than a sore throat now. Keep an eye on her. If she gets worse, call me. If she doesn’t, I’ll come by

tomorrow to check her and give her more shots. That's all I can do for her."

I awaited my death like a good little Indian. When death appeared to be taking its time about claiming me, I became very impatient, wishing I would either die quickly or get better. The boredom of lying in bed day after day, staring at the ceiling and the walls, with nobody to talk to was unbearable. The nurse came by twice a day to give me injections, and Miss Quinlan brought my meals, but neither of them stayed around long enough to ease my boredom and my loneliness. I began fighting back. When the girls were allowed to bring me my meals and Miss Cooper started sending each day's lessons to my room, I knew I was on the road to recovery and the land of the living.

Some of the girls believed I owed my life to them. "We were told you might die, and we prayed for you every morning and every evening. Now you're getting better, so it must have been our prayers."

I was skeptical. "Remember how we prayed for my grandfather when he was sick, but he never got better?" I reminded them. "I don't think it was your prayers that made me better."

"Well, there are more of us now than when your grandfather got sick, so our prayers were louder."

"If the minister hadn't told you to pray for me, you'd never have thought of it," I told them.

"Wasa! You're so ungrateful!"

I was grateful for my illness because I thought I would be sent "outside" to the hospital, where I could finally see what the white man's world looked like. Getting tuberculosis and spending a few years in the sanatorium was my big ambition in those days. I had begun to doubt the minister's warnings about the evil nature of the white man. I wanted to see and experience the outside world for myself.

"Someday I'm going to get TB and leave the island," I told my family repeatedly. "Then I can see what goes on out there. Maybe this year the doctor will send me out."

"Wasa! Don't talk like that! Why do you want to get sick?" they would ask, appalled.

“I don’t want to get sick. I just want to get TB,” I would explain patiently. The children who returned from the sanatorium were always telling us about all the movies they saw, all the juice they drank, and all the good food and fruit they ate. All they did was lie around all day eating good food. And they told us that the white men did not go around attacking women, killing people, and being drunk all the time. They only did that once in a while.

I looked forward to the doctor’s arrival that winter. He arrived, as usual, in the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) snowmobile—an event we looked forward to eagerly each winter, because we all got a turn riding in the snowmobile (a large, enclosed vehicle with caterpillar treads, bearing no resemblance to the snowmobile or ski-doo of today.) Since the Indians had not yet discovered liquor, and there was no crime on the island, the Mountie had nothing else to do while he waited for the doctor to examine everyone. Although the area under his jurisdiction was thousands of square miles in size, he found that a yearly visit to each settlement was sufficient.

Our yearly check-ups consisted of walking back and forth in front of the doctor twice while we were completely naked, a quick look in each ear and down our throats, and a chest X-ray at the Catholic mission. The doctor examined everyone in one week. Before racing off for the next settlement along the bay, he left a list with the principal of all the children who were to be flown out on the first plane. Sometimes it would be the same week and other times it would not be for several months.

For two or three months each fall when the river was freezing up and two or three months each spring when the river ice was breaking up, the bush planes stopped flying to our island, leaving us completely isolated from the rest of the world. We did not even have telephones then.

After the doctor had left, Reverend Dawson read off the names of the lucky children who would be sent to the sanatorium. Mine was not among them. I was so disappointed! Whatever I had had was obviously cured.

My best friend Annie, however, was on the list. “You’re so

lucky,” I told her when we were saying good-bye.

“*You’re* lucky,” she said. “My mother doesn’t even know I’m leaving.”

When we had entered the boarding school, we had become wards of the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and it was not their custom to inform our parents of any moves they made concerning us. As it often happened, the parents would return to the island after spending ten months in the bush, eager to see their children, only to discover they had been sent out for several years.

We were usually allowed to accompany the children to the plane if we were not in class. Fortunately, Annie’s plane arrived during the dinner break and I was able to bid her a tearful farewell before she boarded. She waved from her seat by the window. Then the plane roared off, sending great clouds of whirling snow around us. Even though the plane was invisible, I continued waving, thinking how ecstatic Miss Moore would have been if she had been there. Her fondest dreams of having Annie and me separated by hundreds of miles had finally come true.