

Chapter 13

MY dreams of catching TB as a way of escaping the confining island—not so much to escape our way of life as to satisfy my insatiable curiosity—began to dissipate as the doctor’s visits each winter found me in disgustingly good health. My only other apparent hope—a persistent breast abscess—disappeared when the doctor cured the infection by prescribing hot salt-water compresses. Not having reached the mature age of fifteen, I was not considered old enough to wear a bra, and my scratchy wool sweater and the copper rivets on my “union-made” bib overalls rubbed constantly against my breasts, making them raw and infected.

By then, however, I had another plan for getting off the island. I was going to graduate from grade school and go on to high school. Only two students had ever completed grade eight—the half-day sessions made it necessary for some

students to spend two, or even three years in one grade—but their parents had refused to allow them to go on to high school. But at least they had been offered the opportunity, they had even been allowed to attend classes all day instead of working in the afternoons like the rest of the older children. All I had to do was work on my family until they gave their permission for me to leave. It was going to be difficult, but I knew they would give in sooner or later.

Our teacher, Mr. Woods, had a lot to do with my decision. He was the best teacher we ever had. Not only did he make learning enjoyable, he also helped us realize that we were human beings.

After a few years in the boarding school, we had all begun to believe that we were subhuman and not very intelligent. Our standard response to a request was, “I can’t.” If somebody ordered us to do something, we did it without hesitation; but when someone *asked* us if we could do something, we replied, “I can’t.”

After putting up with our defeatist attitude for several weeks, Mr. Woods gave us a stern lecture. “Why do you always reply ‘I can’t’ when I ask you something? You children are giving up before you even start. Each one of you is capable of accomplishing anything if you put your mind to it! Some of you are smarter than most white children I have taught. So, from now on when I ask if you can do something, I don’t want to hear ‘I can’t’, but ‘I’ll try’. Just remember, if you make up your mind to do something, you can do it!”

He made a large drawing of a grave with a tombstone inscribed: “Here lies ‘I can’t’, long forgotten.” He tacked it up in a place where we could not help but see it whenever we raised our eyes from our desks. It worked; we tried harder for him than we had for any other teacher.

He was a disciplinarian when he had to be, but he always took the time to listen to both sides of any story before determining who was at fault. This was something we were not used to and we appreciated him all the more for it.

Learning was a pleasure with Mr. Woods as our cheerleader and coach. He urged us to ask questions, to take an active part in class instead of sitting back and taking his word

for everything. He taught us to question the How, Why, and What of every statement; in short, he tried to teach us to think. Thinking was an alien process to us after several years in the boarding school. We had given up asking questions after years of hearing, “Because I told you so.”

Under Mr. Woods’ guidance, we became actors, acting out stories instead of reading them monotonously from dull textbooks. We read *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and I got the part of Long John Silver because I was the only one bold enough to hop around on one leg on top of a table bellowing, “Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!”

On warm Friday afternoons, Mr. Woods would move us all outside for our art classes. “Paint whatever you want, whatever you feel,” he told us. “Get some feeling into your paintings.”

Lacking artistic ability and imagination, I always painted the straight-angled, I-shaped school with its long, narrow windows, its red Cross of St. George emblazoned across the center-top, just under the eaves, and its wooden fire-escapes which jutted out from the ends like supports.

One Friday afternoon as we sat scattered all over the school yard, Miss Foster opened a narrow window and leaned out to see what we were doing. She shook her head. “Tch, tch! What is that crazy man up to now?” I overheard her say to someone beside her. I disagreed with her. Mr. Woods may have been unconventional, but I only wished we had had more teachers as “crazy” as he was.

Aided by Mr. Woods’ constant encouragement and his faith in us, I convinced myself that I was as capable as any white child of going on to high school. The only problem was how to go about it.

One wintry day, the grade eight students—all four of us—were called into Reverend Montgomery’s office. We answered the call nervously and reluctantly. A call from the principal did not come unless extreme measures were called for to handle an impossible child.

“Girls, you come on in first,” he called pleasantly. Violet and I relaxed, realizing that we hadn’t broken any rules after all.

Pulling up two chairs to his desk, he told us to sit down.

“You girls will be graduating from this school in June,” he said. “I called you in here to discuss your future. David and Samuel can leave because they’re both sixteen, but you two cannot leave for two more years. Legally, you’re supposed to stay in school until you’re sixteen.

“So, what I had in mind was for both of you to live and work here at the school. Violet, you could work in the kitchen, and, who knows, maybe someday you could work yourself up to assistant cook. Janie, we could put you in the laundry, and maybe someday you’d be in charge. But since you cannot legally quit school for another two years, you’ll have to continue with your lessons. I was thinking of ordering some correspondence courses, say, cooking, for instance. That way you can earn money while you’re learning. We’ll start you off at five dollars a week. How does that sound?”

It sounded fantastic to me. Five dollars a week was a lot of money, more money than I ever saw in one month. It was a tempting offer, but high school was more tempting. I took a deep breath and gulped. “I want to go to high school,” I whispered.

“High school?” he asked, surprised. “Well now, I don’t know. As you know, we were going to send Gracie and Sammy to school last year, but things did not work out. But anyway . . . I think you two are too young to go outside by yourselves. You know what it’s like out there with all that drinking. Indians just cannot stay away from liquor, and I think that you two are much too young to be thinking about things like that. We’re very fortunate that there is no drinking on the island, but if we let you out, the next thing we know, the whole island will be as evil and as corrupt as the white people and other Indians outside.”

Liquor had been the furthest thing from my mind when I had mentioned high school, but it seemed as if I had corrupted my people before I had even lifted one foot off the island. I could not figure out his reasoning.

“I’ll tell you what,” he continued. “If you still want to go to high school when you’re sixteen, we’ll talk about it again.”

“I want to go to high school this year,” I said a little more defiantly.

“Me too,” added Violet.

“Oh dear . . . I won’t promise anything, but I’ll see what I can do.” He sighed. “Don’t be too disappointed if nothing happens. These things take a long time to arrange.”

“I don’t want to work in the laundry all my life,” I told Violet as we returned to our classroom. “I’m going to high school even if I have to sneak on the airplane.”

“You can’t do that. You don’t even know where the high school is.”

“I’ll find one,” I answered confidently. “I’m sure there’s more than one high school in Canada.”

In January it looked as if my dream of going to high school was just that, a dream. My mother’s X-ray report had come back positive—there was a hint of a shadow on one of her lungs—and she was leaving on the first plane out.

“It’s just not fair,” I complained. “Why did you have to get TB and not me?”

“Wasa! Don’t say things like that!” she scolded. “Why do you want to get sick?”

“I told you I don’t want to get sick. I just want to get TB like you. You’re so lucky!”

“gahjeeshp-shahgah!” she muttered.

The plane left while we were in class. As the pilot dipped the big bird’s wings and buzzed the school before disappearing into the vast unknown horizon, I prayed that my mother would come back alive. For once, I was not thinking selfishly of myself. Without my mother at my side when I made my plans known to my family, my chances of leaving were very slim, but that was not the reason I wanted her to come home.

Mr. Woods came down with a bone infection, and his departure left us without a teacher. March was too late in the school year to get a substitute teacher, so Reverend Montgomery put Violet and I to work as teachers until the end of June. With Mr. Woods gone and my mother in the sanatorium, my chances for going to high school seemed just about zero.

Each of us took over one half of Miss Lindsey’s grade-one class, and we held classes in the playroom; Violet’s group in one corner and mine in the opposite.

I was a terrible teacher, taking out my disappointment on six young students, three Eskimos and three Indians. The Eskimo boys were not from our island. They had stepped out of a northbound plane one wintry day and were grounded until June when the planes could fly them to whatever isolated settlement they had come from originally.

The three Eskimo boys and I could not communicate. They could not speak Cree, and the only word I knew in Eskimo was “chewing-gum”. Their knowledge of the English language was much more limited than mine had been when I first entered the school. I began to realize how difficult it was for white teachers to try and teach us. It was frustrating.

One of the boys, Simeonie, developed a mad crush on me. He was nine years old and the oldest in the class. It was very disconcerting. I’d be trying desperately to explain something to the class, and he’d be staring at me with his bright black eyes, wearing a big vacuous grin on his face. If I managed to divert his attention to his numbers or letters, he would look up every few minutes, give me a big happy grin, and giggle. I did not know how to handle such open and unrestrained adoration, and I could only wait impatiently and uncomfortably for the school year to end.

Finally, it ended and Miss Lindsey gave Violet and me bouffant crinolines with layers and layers of white tulle. We thought this was an extremely generous payment, especially since the other girls, who had spent four months scouring, sterilizing and polishing every inch of the school, did not receive a thing, not even a thank-you.

With my mother away at the sanatorium during the summer and living conditions being overly crowded at my grandmother’s—in addition to taking in my two-year-old brother during my mother’s absence, she had *adopted* two more children, one a motherless nephew of hers, and the other a fatherless grandson—I decided to accept Reverend Montgomery’s generous and irresistible offer of working at the school and helping his maid in exchange for a bed in one of the dormitories. Food was not included in the arrangement, but with my countless less-than-eager but willing relatives, it was no problem.

The Montgomery's had adopted a beautiful half-breed baby girl in March, and Mrs. Montgomery, finding motherhood too strenuous even with twenty-four-hour maid service, was taking off alone for a relaxing summer vacation in that evil and dangerous outside world in which only white people were safe.

She had asked me to baby-sit before she left, so the baby and I could get acquainted. Not wishing to be fired from my first lucrative job—I had been promised a quarter—I arrived fifteen minutes early.

“Am I glad to see you! Come in! Come in!” she said impatiently, pulling me into the kitchen. “I’ve had a terrible day! I don’t know what possessed me to let Martha have the day off when there was a party at the school tonight! I’ve had to take care of the baby and do all the work by myself! Listen, Janie, do you mind washing a few dishes for me?”

“No.”

“Good! The soap is under the sink.” She spun around. “Are my seams straight?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Zip me up, will you? Thanks. Listen, Janie, when you get those dishes finished, would you run the sweeper over the carpets downstairs and dust everything quickly? I just haven’t had time to do it today.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t say Okay; say Yes.”

“Yes.”

“That’s better. I certainly appreciate all this. Oh! It’s been a terrible day! I don’t know if I’m coming or going. Listen, Janie, I’ve put some cleanser and a rag upstairs in the bathroom. If you have time, could you rinse out the tub and the sink?”

“Yes.”

“And run the mop quickly over the kitchen and the bathroom floors?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Do I have any hairs or dust on my dress?”

“No.”

“Fine. Oh, by the way, if the baby wakes up, let her cry

until ten o'clock, then change her and give her the bottle that's on the table. That's all you have to do. Don't play with her; I don't want her to get spoiled. Now, I left some cookies and a glass of milk on the table for you. Oh yes! One more thing. If you have to use the toilet, don't use more than three squares of toilet paper. And when you're finished, push down the little lever on the side of the tank to flush it. All right?"

"Yes."

"You can listen to the radio if you want. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes." I wondered how I was going to have the time to sit around listening to the radio when I had so much work to do.

"All right. I hate to rush off like this but my husband is waiting for me at the school. How do I look?"

"Fine."

"Thank you. I don't know what time we'll be home. Just make yourself at home. Bye now."

"Bye." I sighed as the door slammed shut behind her.

Before doing any work, I sat down for a few seconds to gulp my milk and gobble up my cookies, not wasting time to relish each tasty nibble. I cleaned the kitchen thoroughly and put away the mountainous stack of dishes and pots that I had washed. Next I tackled the luxuriously furnished living-room. Then I dusted the gleaming mahogany table and chairs in the dining-room and ran a dust mop over the heavily waxed linoleum floor.

When the downstairs was clean, I trudged up the stairs, running the dust cloth over the banister as I went. I looked in on the baby, who was sleeping peacefully on her stomach, sucking quietly on her thumb. It was past ten o'clock, but she was still sleeping soundly. I covered her gently and left her.

I scoured the bathroom. I pressed the lever on the toilet and the water swooshed down the hole. "Ingenious," I thought. "Only a white man would think of something like that!" I dared not use it, however. I did not want to break it. After I finished cleaning the bathroom, I looked in once more on the baby, who was still sleeping peacefully. I let her sleep. I was ready for it myself.

It was eleven-thirty when I collapsed wearily into one of the armchairs and sank gloriously up to my waist in the cushion. I turned on the radio and listened to the monotone, spine-tingling voice of Jack Webb on *Dragnet* confirm the dire warnings of the ministers, and I wondered why I wanted to leave my island sanctuary and risk my precious life by going out into that raping, murdering, plundering world outside.

The program was just ending when the Montgomerys walked in. "Oh, you were listening to *Dragnet*," Mrs. Montgomery remarked, glancing around to see if I had done any work. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes."

"Now do you see what I keep telling you children about the outside world?" Reverend Montgomery asked.

"Yes."

"And you still want to go to high school?" He smiled.

"Yes."

"Oh, honey! I think it's great that she wants to go to high school," interjected Mrs. Montgomery. "Pay her and let's get to bed. I'm so tired! I've had a hard day!" Turning to me, she said, "I don't know what I would have done without you, Janie. The house looks good. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Did you have any trouble with the baby? I see her bottle is still full. Didn't she wake up?"

"No."

"Well, thank God, one of us had an easy day!" she exclaimed. "I've got to go to bed. I can't keep my eyes open for another second."

Reverend Montgomery walked me to the door. "Good night, Janie, and thank you," he said as he dropped a quarter into my palm.

"Thank you," I said. Twenty-five cents was not bad for five-hours work. It would buy me two chocolate bars at the Bay.