

Chapter 14

ONE warm evening, several of my friends and I went down to play on the airplane loading dock—a wooden platform held afloat by two empty oil drums. As we jumped up and down on the dock, the waves produced by the action gave us a nauseating ride. Laughing gleefully, we clung to the oil drums on the dock for support, pretending not to notice the man’s head which bobbed up occasionally from behind the drums on the river bank. In the gathering dusk it was difficult to make out who it was.

Slightly seasick and dizzy, we left the dock to stagger home before dark. Because we were extremely nervous about disturbing and waking the dead, we quit laughing and spoke only in soft whispers when we neared the graveyard. Suddenly, a dark and gigantic shapeless figure sprang from the solid hedge of shrubs to the right of us, sending us shrieking and scampering in all directions. Our immediate thought was ghosts.

“Come back here!” a human voice bellowed. It was Reverend Montgomery.

We looked fearfully at the graveyard and slunk back to where he stood, thinking how dumb white men were sometimes. Nobody went around screaming and hollering near a graveyard at night.

“I followed you girls this evening,” he yelled. “I saw you down at the river. You girls should be ashamed of yourselves! Running around at night when you should be in bed. Don’t you have any morals?”

He had a special lecture for me. “And you, Janie! I thought you had more sense than that. I am ashamed of you! At your age!” I was younger than the other girls by a year at the most,

and if jumping up and down on a loading dock was immoral, then I was guilty. I began to squirm under the barrage of unjust accusations.

“It was a good thing I was there to watch over you,” he ranted. “There’s no telling what might have happened if I hadn’t. I knew you girls were up to no good when I saw you heading down there. I fooled you though. The boys you were expecting didn’t dare to show up while I was there, did they?”

It would have been useless to try and convince him that we had no ulterior motives in mind when we went out for the evening. It was the custom in our tribe for all young, unmarried people to stroll around night after night. It was true that this was the only time the older ones could meet their boyfriends or girlfriends without having interfering and spying parents around, but then they had interfering and spying children around to keep them on their toes. No part of the island was safe from inquisitive children and prying ministers. But we did not defend ourselves.

“Get on home, all of you!” Reverend Montgomery ordered. “I don’t ever want to see you out at night again! Go home and pray for forgiveness. Shame on you.”

“That does it! I am not going to live at the school this fall!” I exclaimed as soon as we were out of his hearing range. I was so tired of Reverend Montgomery’s suspicions, his belief that there was only one thing on our minds: sex. Every act, according to him and the staff, was motivated by our lustful desires.

I had been thinking more and more seriously of not returning to school in the fall. I could see no sense in it when my family lived year round on the island. Why I could not live with them and still attend classes was beyond me, especially when the white-status Indians were doing just that. I preferred to spend my last year on the island with my family. I had tired of living by myself at the school, and after three weeks of it, I had moved in with my Aunt Edna.

When school opened in August, I did not show up to register. I failed to show up the next day, or the next. On the fourth day, Reverend Montgomery came storming into our

cabin while I was reading a book. My aunt Edna gave a little shriek. Feigning calmness—I was terrified and my stomach was tied up in knots—I went on reading, bracing myself for the barrage.

“Why aren’t you in school?” he demanded. “I have been waiting for you for three days now. What have you been up to?”

I gulped. “I am not going to live at the school.”

“*What!* You are going right now even if I have to drag you down there. Do you hear me?”

Everyone along the coast of James Bay must have heard him. “I am not going,” I answered belligerently, quivering all over with rage and fright.

“Don’t you talk back to me! I know why you don’t want to return to school. You want to be free to sleep and fool around with the boys.”

“No. I want to live with my family before I go to high school next year,” I answered as quietly as I could.

“*You are not going to high school!* You are not going to set foot in any classroom unless you live at the school. I will not have any pregnant girls in my school, and that is exactly what will happen to you if you do not live at the school.”

“How come some of the children can live at home?” I muttered.

“Because they’re white status. You’re an Indian, which means you can’t live at home! Now, you can either return to school to complete grade eight, and go on to high school, or you can live at home and forget about it. Which will it be, Janie?”

I did not have to think too long. “I’ll go back,” I hissed through clenched teeth. I had never despised anyone so much in my life.

“I knew you would see it my way. You can sleep here tonight,” he said magnanimously, “and come in and register first thing tomorrow morning. I’ll see you then.”

Turning to my trembling aunt, he smiled pleasantly. “Bye Edna. Baby all right?” he asked, patting his stomach.

Edna nodded and muttered an uncomplimentary remark under her breath. She could not understand what had been

said, but she did not need to because she had predicted exactly what would happen.

I went alone to the school to register because none of my family felt like facing Reverend Montgomery just yet. “Oooo, Geniesh, is he ever mad at you,” the girls greeted me on my way to the office.

“I don’t care,” I answered nonchalantly.

Reverend Montgomery greeted me pleasantly. “Glad to see you made it. You know what to do,” he said, crossing my name off the list.

I went up to the dorm as I had done seven times before. Miss Foster was waiting. “Look what we have,” she said proudly, pointing to a steel coffin standing on its end in one corner of the washroom. It had a curtain in front of it. “It’s a shower,” she announced.

“That’s nice,” I answered, not having the faintest idea what a shower was.

Pulling aside the curtain, she reached in and water gushed out of the side. Ingenious! “No more baths. You just step inside, lather up, rinse, and you’re all clean. Isn’t that wonderful?” she said.

It certainly was. No more lugging pails full of scalding hot water up from the kitchen to fill the tubs. No more parboiling for the few unfortunates who happened to be first. No more freezing for those who were forced to bathe in the icy dregs of twenty other girls. But the best thing was that we had a moderate amount of privacy, not as total as I would have liked, but a vast improvement over what we had had—eagle-eyed, shrill-voiced supervisors hovering over us, constantly harping, “You missed your ears. You forgot your neck.”

“I’ll leave you alone while you have a shower,” Miss Foster said brightly. Her forced friendliness was annoying. “I have your clothes laid out for you. Oh! By the way, do you want a haircut?”

“No, I’m going to let my hair grow,” I answered, taking advantage of the one privilege granted me as a senior.

When I had finished my shower and put on my school

clothes, I went out to the playground. “What did they say?” the girls asked excitedly, crowding around me. “Did you get punished?”

“Nobody said anything,” I answered. “Everybody was trying so hard to be nice.”

“You just wait,” they warned. “You’re not going to get off that easy.”

They were right. A few days later, another girl and I baby-sat for Mrs. Montgomery, who had just returned from her vacation. After paying us each a dime, she handed me a brown paper bag. “I almost forgot to give you this. It’s just a small token of my appreciation for looking after the baby while I was away.”

I reached into the bag and pulled out a gaudy, imitation beaded-leather belt with “Canada” emblazoned across it. It certainly was a small token. “Thank you,” I mumbled, disappointed.

“Do you like it?” she asked. “I bought it especially for you.”

“Yes,” I lied. I had put in over one-hundred hours of work for a cheap tourist souvenir.

While we were preparing for bed that evening, some of the girls asked to see my belt. I held it up for everyone to see.

“What’s going on here?” Miss Foster demanded, breaking into the group.

“We were just looking at Janie’s belt,” someone answered.

“What belt? Let me see that!” she snapped, grabbing it out of my hand. “Where did you get it from?”

“Mrs. Montgomery gave it to me,” I answered.

“For what?”

“For baby-sitting this summer.”

“And you took it?” she asked incredulously. “Did Mary get one?”

“No.” Mary was the girl who had helped me baby-sit that afternoon.

“If Mary didn’t get one, you had no right to accept it. It’s not fair for you to get one, is it?”

“She paid us money for baby-sitting this afternoon,” I explained. “The belt was for the baby-sitting I did this summer.”

“I don’t care what it was for! You shouldn’t have accepted it. I want you to return it.”

“I can’t!” I cried. It would be too humiliating. Besides, a belt for a summer’s work was better than nothing.

Instead of hitting me over the head as I expected, she muttered grudgingly, “All right, but don’t ever let me see that belt in this school. Take it home with you on Saturday.”

Which is exactly what I did. I gave it to my little brother. Staying out of trouble was more important than a lousy belt if I expected to go to high school.

It was not easy though. When Miss Foster could not find anything else to nag me about, she would criticize the way I walked. “Don’t wiggle your hips when you walk!” she’d yell. “I bet you spend hours practising to walk like that just so the boys will notice you.”

It was doubtful that the Indian boys on our island ever looked at that part of a girl’s anatomy except when making fun of a particularly large one. Beauty was judged on two things, chubbiness and a pretty face. Boys were not interested in a big bosom, a shapely figure, nice legs, or a well-rounded bottom. They did not get a chance to see these things because the women and girls were always bundled from head to foot in layers of clothing.

I tried to walk like a robot without moving my hips. I had never been aware of how I walked, and neither had anyone else, but now the girls told me, “You know, you do wiggle when you walk.” I found it impossible to change the way I walked, and eventually everyone forgot about my hips.

The next thing Miss Foster found to nag me about was toothpaste. After eight years of brushing my teeth morning and night with Lifebuoy soap, I had finally switched to toothpaste, paid for with the nickels and dimes I earned babysitting.

“Well, lah-dee-dah,” Miss Foster remarked when she saw it. “Aren’t we getting fancy.” When one of girls asked me jokingly one night why I had bought the family-size tube,

Miss Foster snidely said, "Because she's going to have a family soon if she isn't careful."

I could not think of any reason why she would make such a remark, so I glared at her. Except for the time I had been a bridesmaid, I had never been near a boy. The closest I had come to having a boyfriend was when one of my sisters delivered a package to me from an admirer. In the package were five packs of gum and a note which read: "I will give you a package of gum every week if you will be my girlfriend." I had sent my sister back with a message that I did not wish to be his girlfriend, but I wouldn't mind a package of gum every week.

The year had barely begun, but I could see that it was going to be a difficult one. As if having to put up with Miss Foster's unjust treatment was not enough, I was troubled with frequent, gnawing stomach pains, sometimes so intense that I doubled over crying and clutching at my stomach, trying frantically to dislodge what felt like a pack of wolves chomping at my insides. (Years later when I could afford a doctor, I learned I had ulcers, thus giving me the dubious honour of being the first one of my tribe to get this high-pressured white-man's affliction.) When I reported my problem, I was accused of trying to get out of my share of the work load, so I never complained again.

I merely plotted all kinds of revenge—scalping, a quick shove down the fire-escape or stairs, getting out my bow and arrow or slingshot and "accidentally" piercing the heart of any white person I happened to despise at the moment.

Only my mother's long-awaited, unexpected, safe return from the outside world in late September prevented me from doing something drastic that could get me expelled from school, and lose my one chance to leave the island. Surprisingly enough, my stomach pains diminished in both frequency and intensity after her return.

"What's it like out there?" I immediately asked when I finally saw her five days later.

"Oh, terrible!" She shuddered. "I hope I never have to go out there again. There are cars all over the place. And they go so fast! I got to ride in one and I've never been so scared

in all my life. I kept my eyes closed the whole time. I was so sure we would crash.

“And you should see the police. All over the place. With guns on too. I kept waiting for one of them to shoot me. . . .” On and on she talked about the horrors of the outside world while I listened spellbound. I suspected she might be exaggerating slightly to frighten me, and when she presented me with a stack of crime magazines showing gory pictures of unfortunate victims, and romance magazines with such shocking stories as “My Husband Ran Away With My Sister”, or “The Night My Best Friend’s Husband Attacked Me”, I was convinced of her intentions.

The magazines did not change my mind about leaving. My friends and I found them extremely fascinating, although they did tend to verify the minister’s warnings. We read them over and over until they were banned from the school. We were told we did not need such filthy garbage to flame our already-lustful desires.