

Chapter 15

THE school year of 1955-56 was one of numerous improvements in our dilapidated building. The shower had been installed in our washroom; bunk beds replaced the old cots, which after years of use sagged in the middle like hammocks; a commercial mixer replaced the washtubs we had used to make bread, saving us many hours of hard kneading. In the kitchen, a large gas-stove was added to be used in conjunction with the old wood-stove, which was no longer big enough for our ever-growing school population.

One Sunday morning while the cook was busy preparing lunch, she asked me to light the griddle on the new stove. As with every other mechanical appliance, we were usually not allowed to touch it except to clean it. It was only recently that we had been allowed to turn the light switches on and off by ourselves.

I had watched the cook light the stove several times so I knew how it was done. But instead of turning one knob at a time for the three rows of elements under the griddle as I had seen her do, I tried to save time by turning on all three before lighting. (There were no pilot lights on the stove.)

There was a loud hissing sound as I lit the match. I bent over to see where the jets were, then stuck my arm in to light them. The mild explosion which followed sent me sprawling. Laughing nervously, I picked myself up, and after prying my blistered eyelids open and inspecting myself for damages, I realized that all the hair on my face—my bangs, my eyebrows, my eyelashes—and the hair on my right arm had been singed off. My right arm, my eyelids, and the tip of my nose were blistered. The sight of myself made me laugh even harder, more from fright than from humour.

“Are you stupid, girl? You could have been seriously hurt. This isn’t a laughing matter!” barked a voice behind me. I spun around to see a strange man at the door.

After he left, I asked the cook who he was. “Oh, that’s the American who’s here to fish and hunt,” she replied.

“That was an American?” I asked incredulously. It was the first time I had ever seen an American and he certainly did not fit the image I had of Americans. “Is that what they look like?”

She looked at me with a puzzled frown. “Of course. What did you expect?”

D’Artagne. If not him, then at least the swashbuckling Errol Flynn, whose movies had begun to replace Hopalong Cassidy’s.

It was a terrible period in my life, a time when while all the other girls seemed to be growing gracefully into their teens, I felt like an octopus, all arms and legs. I did not like making public appearances, and with the loss of my self-confidence, I had lost my long-standing function of giving speeches at the end of all school gatherings. I had been demoted to writing them for my successor.

One day during our Christmas holidays, Miss Foster sent word that she wanted to see me in our washroom. Climbing

the stairs slowly, I tried to think of any rules I might have broken recently, but I could not think of any. When I entered the washroom I was relieved to see a smile on Miss Foster's face. "Sit down, Janie. I have to cut your hair," she announced pleasantly.

"Why?" I protested. "I'm a senior now and I can let it grow."

"I know, but the staff decided you look much better in bangs, so I'm going to cut your hair."

My bangs had grown out just enough so that I could hold them back with a barrette, and my hair was almost down to my chin. "No! You can't!" I cried, my visions of walking into high school in long flowing hair shattered.

"Oh! Don't be such a baby! It's only hair!" she snapped, starting to hack away at it.

Yes, but it was my hair, and it was very precious to me. While she continued cutting, I held back the bitter tears which threatened to come to the surface. "Now that looks much better," she said when she was through.

After supper, as I was furiously scouring pots and pans in the kitchen, the matron came up to me. "Well, I see you got your hair cut," she said. "I think you look so much prettier in bangs, Janie. Don't ever let them grow out again."

I did not answer. I kept on working out my anger on the pots. "Do you want to know something?" she said cheerfully. "Mamie Eisenhower wears bangs, and she's a very important person."

I did not care if Mamie Eisenhower wore bangs! I had never even heard of her, but I was willing to wager that nobody had forced her to wear them.

"What did she say to you?" one of the girls asked after the matron had left.

"She told me to wear bangs all my life, and she told me that Mamie Eisenhower, a very important woman, also wears bangs."

"Who's Mamie Eisenhower?"

"I don't know. I never heard of her," I answered bitterly.

"She probably made up the name to make you feel better," she said. (We did not take modern history, nor did we have

television, newspapers, or listen to the radio.)

I graduated in June, still wearing my detestable bangs. Our teacher had remained healthy throughout the year, unlike Mr. Woods, and Violet and I graduated with honours. Our fears of having to repeat grade eight a third time were over.

It was the first graduation the school had ever had, and while there were only two of us, it was still a big occasion. (We had entered the first grade with about twenty other children, but some had dropped out; others were several grades behind when they returned from the sanatorium.) We were dressed in white confirmation dresses. One of the staff members presented us with white lace handkerchiefs, another gave us each a pendant, while yet a third pinned nosegays of artificial flowers on us. Reverend Montgomery gave us honourable mention in his prayers and officially announced that we were going to high school.

We were permitted to visit the Indian village to show the people what graduates looked like, but everybody was more impressed by our white dresses than they were about the fact that we had achieved the impossible—graduating from grade school and going on to high school.

My grandmother, as usual, cried when she saw me, and, as usual, her unrestrained emotions embarrassed me acutely. Eight years of having to stifle and hide all feelings at the school had made me incapable of coping with the slightest show of emotion. Tears were streaming down her face when I raced out the door.

We even had a movie that evening, a new one entitled *Alexander's Rag-Time Band*. While the children sat on the floor, Violet and I sat on chairs by the projectionist.

The excitement of the day and the thought of spending my last night in the school I had entered with such great expectations, but that had turned out to be a prison, left me too tensed up to sleep. When I walked out of the school forever the next morning, the unhappy memories greatly outnumbered the happy ones, but the thought of leaving all my friends behind, girls with whom I had spent eight years, eight unsuccessful years of having the Indian educated out of us, left me with a great feeling of loss. My future was so uncer-

tain. I did not know if I would ever see them again.

This sense of doom was heightened by the depressing behaviour of my family, who sat around moaning, “wasa, wasa,” as if they were mourning my death, which as far as they were concerned, was certain if I could not be talked out of leaving the island. With this constant wail going on at our cabin, I stayed away more and more.

“Why can’t you spend a little more time with us?” my mother complained.

“Because you all act like I’m dying. I can’t stand it.”

“We’re just preparing ourselves. Why can’t you stay and get a good job at the school? Reverend Montgomery told me he offered you one. Why don’t you take it?”

“Because I don’t want to work there and make five dollars a week. And I’d have to work nine hours a day, six days a week for that. No thanks!”

“But think of all the people who don’t make any money at all. Don’t you realize how lucky you are to be offered a job at the school?”

“I don’t want to wash smelly old clothes for the rest of my life. I want to finish high school and become a nurse.”

“Wasa!” she sighed. “Why can’t you remember that you’re an Indian and you can’t do things like that?”

“I know I’m an Indian, but that doesn’t mean I have to stay here, get married, and have a baby every year until I get too old to have them. I’ll never be happy unless I go to high school.”

“Wasa,” she moaned. “I’ve lived here all my life and I’m completely happy. I have no desire to live anywhere else. Why can’t you be like that?”

I could not explain to her that as much as I loved the people and the way of life, I still felt that something was missing from my life. People like her and my grandmother, with very little or no education, were totally content with the simple life. They did not feel the urge to change or to explore other ways. I envied them their naiveté and their happiness. Education had robbed me of this inner peace and contentment.

Sometimes she tried to scare me into staying. “You know how terrible those white men are,” she’d say.

“How do you know they’re terrible?” I’d argue. “You’ve only been involved with one, and from what I’ve heard, he wasn’t so terrible. You listen to the minister too much. Look at all the time you spent in the city without getting killed. And look at all the children who’ve returned from the sanatorium. Nothing ever happened to them. The only ones who died out there were those who were too sick.”

“It’s different in a hospital . . . you’re protected. You won’t be though. You’ll be living among the white people. I’ll worry about you getting run over by a car or starting to drink.”

“I’ll just have to be careful about where I walk. And I’m not interested in drinking.”

“But the minister says that all Indians who leave their reservations drink, and that they end up worse than the white men.”

“Oh, he’s just trying to scare the people! I don’t have to act like that. Besides, I think ministers lie sometimes.”

“*Wasa, Geniesh!* Don’t say things like that about the ministers!” she said, appalled at my disrespect. “They are sent by God.”

I had heard that phrase countless times, and while I had believed it when I was younger, I had begun to doubt it. I wondered how, if God was supposed to be so loving, He could send such people—people who treated us with utter contempt and repulsion. It did not make sense. Of course, not all of them were like that, but there were a few who you just knew were sent from the other side.

My mother and I argued all summer long, but I was deaf to all her arguments and pleas. There were times, of course, when she came very close to convincing me I should stay.

Finally the big day—August 25, 1956—came, the day I had looked forward to for so long. Reverend Montgomery permitted me to use the shower at the school and even issued me some clothes to wear on the plane—a red plaid dress, beige wool stockings, pink bloomers, and oxfords. One of the

staff members presented me with a pair of sheer lace panties, which I accepted with a red face. Not wishing to be caught with such lewd apparel, I rolled them up and hid them in my bloomers until I could be alone to stuff them into my suitcase. Without my heavy fleeced bloomers, I could never feel completely dressed.

Crying and blubbering relatives gathered early at our house, but instead of sitting or mingling with them, I went into another room to choke back my own tears. I kept telling myself I was not going to cry, no matter what.

At the sound of the plane in the distance, I busied myself gathering up all my belongings into one small suitcase and a larger one tied together with string. My mother and grandmother grabbed me, sobbing, while I stood like a statue, afraid to look at either of them. I had nagged them for years to let me leave the island and I was determined not to break down.

We marched down to the river in a funereal procession, everybody but me crying and carrying on. Before I got on the plane, I was grabbed, hugged, and kissed by just about every adult Indian on the island. My relatives shoved money into my pockets, and when I counted it later, I was shocked to discover I had fifty dollars, the most money I had ever seen in my life. My mother and aunts followed me down to the plane, while my grandmother, afraid of capsizing the loading dock with her great weight, remained on the river bank.

Violet had not made it after all, which did not surprise me too much. Her parents refused to let her leave, but she had hoped right up to the last minute to change their minds. I had three travelling companions, however, two girls on their way to the sanatorium and a sixteen-year-old boy, Samson, who refused to give up an education just because he was considered too old. He had just completed the sixth grade, but he had been forced to leave school when he turned sixteen.

“Be careful. Look out for cars. Don’t trust any white man.” My mother choked out her last warnings. “Behave yourself and write often. We’ll think of you always.”

I climbed into the plane and the door closed behind me.

From my window seat I could see my family and my friends, and the tears I had held back so valiantly, overflowed and ran down my cheeks.

The pilot started the engine. The noise was deafening and the clouds of exhaust hid from my view the huddle of weeping women, their wool plaid dresses hanging down to their ankles, their bent heads covered with boldly coloured scarves.

We taxied slowly up the river, almost the length of the island, before the pilot turned the plane around and revved the engine up to full throttle. We sped down the river towards the bay at full speed, and the plane sounded as if it were falling apart. Sheets of white water hit the windows as we bounced over the gentle waves. Finally we were airborne and flying over the bay.

I smiled weakly as I swallowed my stomach and clutched at my seat. We had not been in the air more than one minute and already I was feeling quite nauseated.

The pilot turned the plane around and flew over the beaver-shaped island. Looking down, I got my first aerial view of it: the heavily wooded west end with its pines and spruce; the Catholic mission with its residential school, priests' quarters, and tiny blue and white church on the edge of the forest; the little creek that separated the mission from the Coaster village with its conglomeration of tar-paper shacks and white "mahkee" camp tents attached like nursing pups to the huge brown tepees; the red and white buildings of the Hudson Bay Company compound; the dismal little graveyard which separated the compound from the Anglican mission with its gray-shingled buildings; the few 'white-status' Indian shacks on the southern fringe of the Anglican mission; the Inlander village with its three shacks and numerous tepees; and, finally, the tapering east end, its grove of poplar trees and tall shrubbery growing to replace the pine forest that had burned down the year I was born. All of these became indelibly marked on my mind.

The pilot dipped the wings of the plane as we flew over the waving crowd of Indians still down at the river bank. He glided into another turn and finally headed south into a world

that was unknown and suddenly terrifying to me.

I wondered if I had made the right decision. For fifteen and a half years I had never travelled more than twenty miles from the island, and if someone had given me a choice right then between the island and high school, I would have chosen the island without the slightest hesitation. If the plane had developed engine trouble and had been forced to land, I doubt if I would have had the courage to climb back on; at least, not right then.