

## *Chapter 16*

**T**HE deafening whine of the engine and the egg-sized lump in my throat made conversation with my fellow passengers quite impossible. Judging by the grimaces on their pasty faces, they were not very interested in being sociable either.

I concentrated on the disappointing scenery below—miles and miles of dark forests dotted with hundreds of tiny lakes, broken by ribbons of swift-flowing rivers and acres and acres of swamp lands. It was easy to see why we were called the Swampy Crees. To the right of us was the never-ending blue expanse of James Bay, 150 miles wide and 280 miles long. The scenery was the same as that which I had seen in my limited travels from the island. From the movies I had seen, I had expected great sand deserts with blowing tumbleweed, rugged snow-peaked mountains, gently rolling farmlands with waving blankets of golden wheat, and at least an ocean now and then.

The puffs of clouds that drifted by the window made me wonder what it would feel like if I could reach out and pull one in. “Probably like goose-down,” I thought. I wondered whether Heaven would be visible if we could soar above the blanket of billowy clouds. The light would probably be too blinding for us to get a definite look at anything or anyone, I decided.

The combination of the constant buffeting of the small plane, which seemed to be wired and taped together, my own fear, and the foul contents of the small bag that the girl next to me was holding was too much for my touchy stomach, and I looked around frantically for a container. My neighbour looked at me sympathetically and thrust an open bag under my chin. I gave her a grateful look before spewing out my breakfast. My violent retching started her off again and we sounded like two competing bullfrogs.

Suddenly, the plane took an unexpected nosedive. “Now we’ve had it,” I thought in utter terror.

“Old Factory,” the pilot announced cheerfully, motioning below to the ground speeding towards us.

I could see nothing but trees. Clutching at my seat and bracing my legs, I prepared myself for the crash, my airsickness completely forgotten. The plane levelled off and I saw the river below. We circled and came in for a bouncy landing, a solid sheet of water on either side of us. We taxied up to the tiny wooden landing on shore.

A band of waving and smiling Indians waited on the shore, and as soon as the plane had been secured, one of them poked his head through the open door. “oo-wan jee-wow?” he asked.

We told him our names and he called them out to the others. An old woman came over and beckoned to me. “ahwah jee Geniesh, Juliet oodanse?” she asked. I nodded. “wasa, Geniesh!” she cried, throwing her arms around me and clutching me to her ample bosom in a painful bear hug, showering me with wet, sloppy kisses.

It was bewildering. I did not have the vaguest idea who she was. The name she gave meant absolutely nothing to me. To add to my confusion, other toothless, old women, not one of them under two hundred pounds, and bent, sinewy old men hugged and kissed me like a long lost relative, asking about my mother and grandmother, and wishing me a speedy recovery. I did not bother explaining that I was not on my way to the sanatorium but to high school.

At the other plane stops, Eastmain and Rupert’s House, I got the same warm reception. People I had never met or even

heard of hugged and kissed me as soon as they heard my mother's name. I had no idea that she was so popular all over the world. She had lived in or visited each settlement during the first few years of her marriage fifteen years ago, and the people still remembered her with great affection.

I was somewhat disappointed in the people. They looked and dressed the same as the Indians on my island. The only difference, a very slight one, was the dialect. I had expected Indians in buckskins and feathers like the ones I had seen in the movies.

From Rupert's House, the site of the first Hudson Bay Company post in the early 1670's, we headed west across the bay on the final leg of our trip to the twin cities of Moose Factory and Moosonee in Ontario. Although they were both Indian villages, the railway ended at Moosonee, and a huge modern sanatorium had been built at Moose Factory, so that put them into the category of cities as far as I was concerned.

My stomach felt as if it had been turned inside out by then, and although I was still retching every few minutes, nothing came out. "World, you'd better be worth it," I thought.

Four hours after we had lifted off from the waters of the mighty "jeesah-seebee", we landed in the muddy brown waters of the mighty Moose River. I could see why my mother had warned me against drinking the water. I staggered off the plane and looked around for a familiar face. Except for two Indians who were unloading the plane, there was only one person waiting, an elderly woman with white hair. "Janie and Samson?" she asked. We nodded. "Come with me."

We followed her past the huge, sprawling, modern sanatorium, past the neat row of two-storey houses for the doctors and nurses, along a wide dirt road to a modern elementary-school building which was every bit as big as the sanatorium. I was very impressed. She took us inside the school to a small office.

The young white man at the desk introduced himself as the principal. "You'll spend two days here," he informed us, "before you leave on the train Friday morning. Miss Hudson will show you to the dorms."

“You wait here while I take Janie to the girls’ dorm,” Miss Hudson told Samson. She led me up three flights of stairs to a large airy room with forty steel cots. “Take any bed you want and make yourself at home,” she told me before disappearing. The school had not opened yet and there was nobody around.

I dumped my suitcases on the cot nearest the door and lay down to unwind. I could not sleep, however. My stomach muscles ached, my neck was stiff, and there was a persistent buzzing in my ears.

After a few minutes, a beautiful, hazel-eyed, auburn-haired little girl, about seven or eight years old, walked in. She looked at me quizzically, then started jabbering away in a soft, lilting, sing-song dialect which I brilliantly deduced to be Moose Cree since I was in Moose Factory.

“Eh?” I asked.

“Parlez-vous Français?” she replied, switching to French.

“Boy, this Moose Cree sure is a funny language,” I thought. “Eh?” I repeated.

“You speak French?”

“No,” I answered, relieved that we had found a common language, English.

“I’m Micheline. You?”

“Janie.”

“Oh. Indian?”

“Yes,” I answered, surprised that she even asked when it was surely obvious.

“Yah?” she asked, surprised. “Me too.” I was even more surprised. She certainly did not look like an Indian. “I’m from Waswanipi,” she added, mentioning an Indian settlement in the central interior of Quebec.

“I’m from Fort George,” I said.

“Your father white?” she asked. I nodded in embarrassment. “Mine too,” she announced proudly.

I felt an immediate deep affection for her, and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her too. Being part white had not bothered me either when I was her age, but now I resented it. Being a half-breed was shameful and sinful. Although I felt totally Indian, there was always somebody around to remind

me of my mixed parentage. I hoped that she would continue to be proud of hers.

I managed to glean from her limited English that her mother did not want her and she had to live at the school the year round. She did not know where her father was. How I pitied her. I had never known an abandoned child before. She did not seem very upset, however. In fact, she seemed quite proud of her background.

While we were talking, two tall, slim Indian girls walked in. "Janie?" they asked, coming towards me with outstretched arms. I nodded. "I'm Lillian; this is Ruth," said the tallest one. "You remember us?"

"How could she remember us?" Ruth said. "She was only a baby."

I knew who they were, however. They were my stepfather's youngest sisters. It was a good feeling knowing that I had relatives scattered all over the world.

"Come on. We're going to take you home. We want to hear all about the family," they said, and I followed them eagerly.

Their house was large and comfortable. They even had electricity and running water. They offered me cake and ice-cream, a rare treat indeed. I had eaten ice-cream only three times before.

They were extremely kind and friendly, but I was still uncomfortable. Their father was an ordained minister, and although he was a relative and an Indian, sitting and chatting with a man of the church was not my idea of a relaxing evening. When Lillian and Ruth offered to show me around the village, I was very relieved.

The Indians here also looked the same as the ones I had left back home. The only differences were that they were better dressed, the women wore make-up, and they lived in decent homes. Having heard all my life about how the Indians of Moose Factory and Moosonee drank all the time, I stared at everybody we met and tried to determine whether or not he was drunk. I had never seen a drunk before and I did not know how a drunk was supposed to act. Everybody seemed quite friendly and normal.

Later on, the girls took me to a movie, a love story. It was

a little too torrid for my prudish tastes. At the first kiss between the hero and the heroine, I gasped and lowered my gaze. I could feel my face burning. The only kissing I had ever seen before was between a cowboy and his horse. I couldn't help thinking of Reverend Montgomery. I was certain he would feel quite needed in this community, this Sodom of the north.

On the way back to the school, Lillian cleared her throat several times before blurting, "You know, Janie, you shouldn't wear those thick stockings. In the city you'll have to go bare-legged like everyone else if you don't want to appear too different."

Me? Go bare-legged? Why, it was unthinkable! It was sinful and indecent! She might as well have told me to walk around naked. I could not believe that she, a minister's daughter, would tell me to do a thing like that. I told her I would try, but I did not promise.

Once I was back in the dormitory, alone, all the homesickness and loneliness I had managed to fight off all day overcame me, and I cried. Berating myself for crying at my age, I wiped the tears away angrily. I remembered the first time I had entered boarding school eight years before. Surrounded by thirty or more friends, my homesickness and loneliness had been no less than it was now when I had only an unfortunate little girl named Micheline around.

I spent the following morning with her in the playground. She jabbered away in Moose Cree and I marvelled at how anyone her size could master such a difficult language. I caught a familiar word now and then, but most of it was totally alien to me. She paid no attention to my silence. I imagine she was quite happy just to have somebody around. And I was content to have another Indian around, no matter how young she was or how strangely she talked.

That afternoon, an Indian girl, one about my age, came over to where we were. "Janie Matthews?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Daisy Faries. I was sent over by the Indian agent to help you pick out some clothes at the Bay. I'll be going to the same school as you."

I liked her immediately, and I admired her self-assurance.

She seemed so at ease, so sophisticated—a woman of the world—while I quivered and shrank every time somebody spoke to me. I admired her quick smile and friendliness and the way she walked, proudly and naturally. She was everything I wished to be.

I decided to rely on her judgment as to what clothes were appropriate for the outside world. I was shocked at her choice—short-sleeved blouses and a tight black skirt. Like my legs, my arms had never been bare, and I thought that only loose women wore tight skirts. (I eventually became accustomed to wearing short sleeves, even becoming so brazen as to wear sleeveless clothes at times, but I never could bring myself to wear the tight skirt she had picked out and I finally gave it to her.) I did insist on buying one skirt I especially liked, a red plaid, my one symbol of security.

Afterwards, we went to see the Indian Affairs agent who was stationed in Moose Factory. “Now,” he said sternly, “you are the first one from your island to go on to high school, so I don’t want you getting into any trouble while you are in the city. If you can set an example to the people in Fort George, we may be able to get more children out. We’re depending on you. Study hard. Stay away from liquor. Stay out of trouble. And when you’ve completed your education, go back to help your people. Show them what Indians can accomplish.

“You’ll be leaving on the train tomorrow morning. Your tickets will be ready for you. There will be other children on the train who are going to the same school, so you don’t have to worry about anything. Someone from my office will pick you up at the school and take you over to Moosonee.” Shaking my hand, he dismissed me.

I was awakened at six o’clock the next morning for a quick breakfast of cold cereal and milk. Samson was already there, yawning and rubbing his eyes. When I tiptoed into the dormitory to get my tattered old suitcases, Micheline sat up in bed. She waved. I waved back.

The man from Indian Affairs was waiting for us when we got downstairs to the principal’s office. “Samson and Janie, I presume. Off to the bright lights, eh? Follow me,” he said.

I did not know what he meant but I grinned and nodded. It was always best to agree with a white man, even if he did not make any sense.

He took us down to the river. We climbed into a power boat and skimmed across the river to Moosonee on the mainland, where we had to trudge about half a mile along a dirt road to get to the railway station. Several dozen Indians were milling about on the platform, and inside the waiting room about a dozen white people sat on long benches. Daisy was already there with her parents. But there was no train in sight.

Seven-thirty, departure time, came and went. Still no train. Finally, at eight o'clock, a long line of rusted cars puffed, screeched, and squealed to a stop in front of the station. Sparks shot out from the metal wheels. "Ontario Northland" was emblazoned across each dilapidated car.

It seemed as if the engineer could not decide where he wanted to go. The train chugged back and forth on the tracks. Finally, he chugged to a stop and the conductor yelled, "All aboard!"

The Indian Affairs man thrust an envelope at each of us. "These are your tickets," he said. "Don't lose them. Good luck."

The conductor stood by the door and showed us where to go: Indians to the right, whites to the left. The dining-car separated us. Our dusty car was almost empty. I took a filthy velvet seat by a grimy window so as not to miss a thing. Daisy sat opposite me. I was glad she was there. My heart was pounding furiously, my ears were ringing, and I felt quite nauseated again.

When the train jerked forward, I grabbed my seat. We rumbled off into the great unknown. I prayed silently that the swaying did not mean anything, that the rattling and creaking did not mean the car was falling apart at this suicidal speed. Having walked and travelled by canoe all my life, I thought this slow-moving train was moving at the speed of lightning. Gradually I relaxed and looked out the window as mile after mile of pine trees whizzed by. I was beginning to think that the whole world was covered with them. The

mountains, oceans, and deserts were just a myth.

It was a clear, warm day. Inside, the car was stifling. Despite the “No Smoking” sign, most of the Indians were smoking. The smoke and the dust only aggravated my nausea, and although I had had a shower that morning, I felt as if I hadn’t bathed in months.

The train screeched to a stop. Looking out the window, I saw nothing but trees. I was convinced there was something wrong, but the door opened and a small band of Indians climbed on and went into the dining-car. They came out, laughing and chatting, drinking cokes and eating ice-cream cones. They looked us over and whenever they saw a familiar face, they rushed over to shake hands and sit down for a brief chat. When the train whistle blew, they left, laughing and lapping at their ice-cream cones. This scene was to be repeated over and over again.

I began to resent these unnecessary delays and wish that the Indians would do their visiting and shopping at some other time. The car filled up rapidly, and I was soon wedged in with three other people. My first train ride was rapidly turning out to be a great disappointment.

I could not carry on a conversation with my fellow passengers. I was too self-conscious, and my mind refused to translate my Cree thoughts into English. Everybody must have wondered how I had made it this far in school with my limited English.

Ten exhausting hours after we had boarded the train at Moosonee, we stopped at Cochrane, where we were to spend the night and make our first train change. When Daisy suggested that we eat at the station before finding a hotel room, I followed her example and ordered a hot dog, pie a la mode, and a pop—and suffered terribly from heartburn all night.

After registering at the nearest hotel, I went down the hall to take a long, relaxing bath, but I had not even climbed into the tub when somebody started pounding on the door. I did not answer. “What’s the matter in there?” a man’s voice demanded. “Are you dead or something?”

Every ten seconds or so, he would pound on the door,

demanding to know if I had died. I took a quick bath and dressed hurriedly. When I opened the door, I found myself face to face with a filthy, unshaven old man with bloodshot eyes, rotten teeth, and foul breath.

“Hi, honey,” he said as he staggered by me. Thinking he was mentally deranged, I shrieked and fled to the safety of my room.

Later on, when Daisy and another girl visited some friends, I tagged along. I did not want to go, but after my experience in the bathroom, I did not feel like staying by myself. I was offered an ale, and thinking it was ginger ale, I accepted. When I took a sip, I gagged at the most vile concoction of garbage I had ever tasted, worse than any of my grandmother’s home remedies. Months later I learned what I had been drinking that day.

After spending another restless night with my heartburn, I got up at the crack of dawn and made a daring decision. I was going to bare my legs to the waiting world. I did feel out of place with my thick stockings. But without them, I felt even more self-conscious and was sure that everybody was staring at my glaringly white legs.

When we climbed aboard the train, Daisy informed me that we had another day and a half and two more train changes before we reached our destination. I was shocked and dismayed; dismayed because by now I hated trains, and shocked because I had not realized how huge the world was. Looking at the globe in our classroom, I had always believed that I could paddle around the world in a few weeks.

We travelled all day. The ever-present pines and spruces served as constant, painful reminders of the forests I had loved at home and the loved ones I had left behind. It was a depressing day. I had had my fill of the outside world and I was ready to return home.

We arrived in North Bay at midnight, where we not only had to change trains, but rail lines as well. It was pouring rain. We took a taxi across the town and climbed aboard the Canadian Pacific just in time. I was too tired and too emotionally spent to get excited about my first car ride. We stopped in Sudbury at eight o’clock and changed trains again.

I had gone without food and sleep for twenty-four hours. I tried to choke down some coffee but it only aggravated my motion sickness.

Finally, at four in the afternoon, five days and approximately a thousand exhausting miles after I had left Fort George, I staggered off the train at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, my final stop.

We were met by Mr. Stewart, the principal of the Indian school in town. Daisy introduced us. "He's a little deaf," she whispered in my ear.

He was short, about five-feet-two, extremely thin, and elderly. His spine was bent, making him appear smaller than he really was. He was a monochromatic man, wearing a gray suit that matched his gray hair, gray eyes, and gray complexion. Dark gray hairs, stiff and bristly, stuck out from his wide nostrils and large ears. He loaded our bags into a sedan and drove us through town. Once again I was too tired to feel any excitement. I wondered if I would ever feel any emotion again.

I couldn't help but be impressed, however, when I caught my first glimpse of the boarding school. It was an imposing four-storey brick building on a slight hill overlooking the St. Mary's River, surrounded by a forest and several acres of well-kept lawn. The school grounds separated the town from the exclusive country club to the east. As we drove through the gate and up the long gravel driveway, I thought that nothing could ever go wrong in such beautiful surroundings.