

Chapter 17

AS I followed Daisy up six flights of stairs to the dormitory for high-school girls on the fourth floor, I had the uneasy feeling that I had walked into a trap. The unpainted cement and steel construction of the building was oppressive. The feeling quickly passed when I saw our dorm, a large

square room which would have housed thirty or more girls at my old school, but which contained only twelve metal cots. There were even separate lockers for each bed. The room itself was dreary, the cement walls and high ceilings were painted a dingy pink and looked like they could use a good scrubbing, but the tiny white porcelain sink with hot and cold running water, and the flush toilet, with real toilet paper, behind a battleship-gray enclosure in one corner made me feel as if I had just checked into the Queen's quarters at Buckingham Palace.

Pictures of Elvis Presley and Sal Mineo were plastered on the walls and inside some of the lockers. I had not heard of either of them, so I assumed they were very popular boys at the school.

There was no supervisor around to tell me what to do, but Daisy, noticing my hesitation, told me I could choose any vacant cot and locker. It was not too difficult to determine which beds were already taken; open suitcases and wrinkled clothes were strewn all over them. "As soon as we've unpacked, I'll show you where the bathroom is so we can both have a bath before supper," she said.

I welcomed the suggestion. The dirt and grime imbedded from forty hours of dusty train travel would take hours to soak off. We went down to the depressing, gray-cement playroom on the bottom floor. There were two small rooms off of it; one a shower room, the other a washroom.

Half of the bottom floor was underground so that the huge, permanently closed windows in the washroom were level with the ground. Along the wall opposite the windows were four tub enclosures, each with a door that could be locked from the inside.

I marvelled at the luxury of it all. Complete privacy at last! I filled the tub to the brim; then I sank luxuriously up to my stiff neck in the hot water, leaning back and closing my eyes, soaking blissfully, letting the heat gradually relax each taut muscle. I was on the verge of dozing off when Daisy knocked on the door.

I climbed out of the tub reluctantly. When I had dressed

in clean clothes, I followed her back up the eight flights of stairs to our dorm. After three days of sitting on trains, my aching legs felt each step.

From the small room which separated the intermediate girls' dormitory from ours emerged a large woman, obviously over sixty years of age, with braided gray hair wound tightly around her head. Daisy introduced her as Miss Brady, our supervisor.

"Welcome, Janie," she greeted me in her booming army-sargeant voice. (I later learned that she had indeed been an officer in the army.) The smile on her face did not extend to her granite-gray and granite-cold eyes. I knew immediately she was one of the crusaders, one of those who had had a call from above to go out and save us poor unfortunate savages.

"She's a real witch," Daisy whispered after Miss Brady had disappeared back into her room for the keys to the storeroom.

After Miss Brady had given us our Sunday outfits, I was glad to learn that we had to supply our own school and play clothing. I knew absolutely nothing about fashion, but I knew instinctively that these gray flannel tunics, baggy cotton blouses, maroon flannel blazers and blue tams were abominably unflattering, making us look dowdy and in our final month of pregnancy.

When the buzzer rang, we went back down the eight flights to the playroom, where we fell into line behind the other high-school girls. There were two other lines: one for the juniors, and one for the intermediates. There were about eighty of us altogether. Whispered welcomes greeted us.

"Quiet!" ordered Miss Brady. "Now march!"

We marched through a dark, narrow corridor into the long gray dining-room. There were ten massive wooden tables, five against the south wall for the boys and five against the north wall for us. The atmosphere of distrust which had pervaded the old school also prevailed here.

I stared at the unappetizing mess in front of me; two golf-sized brown balls, some green paste, and two pieces of white sponge. Most of the girls shoved aside their plates as soon as they sat down, but I managed to eat the hard but greasy meatballs without cracking my jaw, swallow the soggy and

tasteless vegetables by washing them down with the watery milk, and choke down the store-bought bread which I had bit into enthusiastically and expectantly. I did not dare leave anything on my plate. Years of being called back to the table to finish the green and putrid meat we had tried to hide under a pile of bones had trained me to eat everything placed in front of me.

I finally got to meet some of the girls after supper. Most of the intermediates and juniors were Crees from Waswanipi, the Indian settlement in Central Quebec. Their dialect was a cross between the harsh guttural Cree of the east coast of James Bay and the light sing-song Moose Cree of the west coast. There were also Ojibways, Chippewa, Blackfeet—their feet were the same colour as everybody’s—and even a couple of Eskimos from Aklavik in the Northwest Territories.

While we had always ignored the rule about speaking only English at my old school, I found I had no choice here. Aside from Samson, who was in a different and completely separate part of the school, I was the only one who spoke my particular dialect. My English was still limited and I was too embarrassed to practise it on the others who spoke it fluently. I answered in monosyllables when I was questioned, but I did not volunteer any information. All the other girls seemed to know each other and they were busy renewing old acquaintances, which made me feel even more alone.

I was glad when the supervisor called us in at eight-thirty. Having gone without sleep for two days, I fell asleep immediately and slept soundly until the sound of horns woke me up. In the red glow of the night light I peered at my watch—a parting gift from one of my uncles—and was horrified to see it was only five o’clock.

I stumbled out of bed and started to get dressed. The others were still sleeping soundly. The girl next to me stirred. She lifted her head off her pillow and blinked her eyes. “What are you doing?” she mumbled.

“It’s time to get up,” I whispered. “The horn just blew.”

“What horn?”

“There it is again. Did you hear it?”

She laughed. “Those are foghorns on ships out in the

river,” she informed me. “That goes on all night. Now go back to bed. You’ll know when it’s time to get up—Miss Brady won’t let you sleep in.”

I climbed back into bed and listened to the lonely, mournful moo of the foghorns from passing ships. The sound added to my loneliness and homesickness. All the excitement I felt before leaving my island was gone. There was only an empty, hollow feeling.

Miss Brady marched in at seven o’clock and snapped the lights on. “Come on, everybody up!”

As soon as I had washed and dressed, I went over to one of the small windows to find out more about those foghorns. There were big battleships all over the place. I turned to a girl standing next to me. “Is there a war?” I asked fearfully. I had come looking for excitement and action, but this was not the type I had expected.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“All those boats out there.”

“Oh, no! Those are freighters. Didn’t you know this is part of the St. Lawrence Seaway? There are ships coming and going all the time. After a while, you won’t even notice them.”

“What about those over there?” I asked, pointing to some gray ships on the other side of the river. I had seen enough war movies to know they weren’t luxury yachts or freighters.

“I think those are battleships; there’s a big military base over there. That’s the U.S. on the other side.”

“The U.S.? What’s that?”

“The U.S.A.—America, you know,” she replied, frowning at my ignorance.

“*The* United States of America?” I exclaimed, the old excitement returning.

“That’s the one,” she said.

I could not believe it! The United States of America! Land of the “Long-Knives”! Land of cowboys and Indians! That exciting land full of blowing sand and tumbleweed. I wrote my mother the same day and told her I was practically living in the “Land of the Long-Knives”, as she and I knew it, and told her that as soon as I had the courage, I would go across

and take some pictures of cowboys to send to her. I could not think of anything else during breakfast or the morning service in the auditorium.

“Mr. Stewart wants to see you,” I was told after the service.

“What did I do?” I automatically asked. I did not think I had been in the school long enough to break any rules, but apparently I had.

“You didn’t do anything,” she said. “He always talks to the new children.”

I was relieved to hear that. His office was on the second floor by the main door. I knocked gently on the half-closed door. Mr. Stewart peered around it. “Oh, Janie. Come in, come in. Sit down right here,” he said, pulling up a chair to his desk.

I sat down and cracked my knuckles nervously. He smiled. “Please don’t do that,” he said softly, shuddering slightly. “Are you happy here?” he asked.

It was difficult to say after less than twenty-four hours. “Yes,” I mumbled.

“Speak up a little louder, will you? I can’t hear too well.” I had forgotten about his hearing. “First of all, what course are you going to take in high school?”

“I’m not going to high school,” I answered sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“My teacher told me that I had to take grade eight, or maybe even grade seven, over again.” I had been presented with this distressing bit of news just before leaving the island.

“Why, for heaven’s sake?”

I shrugged. I tried to explain to him as best I could what the teacher had told me. Because nobody from our island had ever gone to high school, the grade eight they taught there was not good enough to get us into high school. It was incomplete, and was called a termination course. She had told me to expect another year in grade eight and not to be too disappointed if I was put back into grade seven.

“Didn’t you finish grade eight?” Mr. Stewart asked, obviously failing to understand my explanation.

“Yes, I did.” I did not tell him that I had already spent two

years in the same grade. It would be too difficult to explain and he would probably think I had failed it the first year.

“What’s the problem then? Just show me your report card.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Did you leave it at home?”

“No. We never got them. We didn’t get report cards in my school.”

“What do you mean? All schools give out report cards!”

“Not ours. We never got them.” We had received them the first couple of years I had gone to school, but never again. It was probably considered a waste of good paper.

Mr. Stewart shook his head, totally confused, and muttered something under his breath. “You did finish grade eight though?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s see. You’re fifteen?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll send you to grade nine and see what happens. All right?” I nodded happily. “Now, what course are you going to take?”

Course? What was that? I did not know anything about courses. I had thought that all I had to do was just start attending classes. “I don’t know,” I answered.

“Well, are you going to take the commercial or general course?” he asked patiently.

I had never been given a choice on anything before. I went where I was sent and I took what I was told. “I don’t know,” I replied, ashamed of my ignorance.

“Let me put it another way, Janie. What are you going to be when you grow up?” he asked slowly, as if talking to a little child.

“A nurse,” I answered immediately.

He coughed. “That’s very commendable. That means you’ll be taking the general course at Sir James Dunn. However, the school is still being built, so you will have to attend classes at the Tech from one p.m. to six p.m. The regular Tech students will be in school in the morning. It’s

a big inconvenience for the teachers and the students, but it'll only be for a year."

"Let's see now," he continued, leafing through some papers on his desk. "Ah, here we are. This is the schedule and list of subjects you will take. There's French, Latin, English literature, English composition, home economics, science, math, history, music, physical education, and health."

The number of subjects I was required to take was staggering. Back home, I had taken arithmetic, history, penmanship, reading, and religion. Half of the subjects he had just read off were unknown to me. I could see that I would really have to slave in high school.

"Now, Janie, you will be going to school with the white children of this community. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yes," I thought, "it means I don't stand a chance." Nobody had warned me about attending an all-white school, and the thought of it was terrifying. I knew immediately that I could never compete with such superior students.

"It means, Janie," he said, breaking into my pessimistic thoughts, "that you must try harder than you would if you were going to an Indian school. We don't want people to continue thinking that Indians are stupid. So, don't let boys or fun interfere with your studies. You came here to learn and that's what we expect you to do.

"School starts on Tuesday. Monday, as you know, is Labour Day, so there is no school. We will supply you with all the texts and notepaper you need, but you will have to get whatever else you need downtown. The other girls will tell you what to get." He got up and smiled. "Good luck," he said, shaking my hand.

Before I could start high school and face the white community, however, the girls decided I needed a couple of improvements. One was to sand off the excess hair on my legs. Never having paid much attention to my legs before, the only difference that I could see was that they had turned from white to red, but the girls assured me it was a vast improvement.

The other procedure was more painful. Two girls, one on either side of me, plucked away at my bushy eyebrows while I lay squirming on my bed. When they were finally through, I could hardly stand the sight of myself in the mirror. Each eyebrow was only about half an inch long and the width of a pencil lead. I almost cried.

“Sorry, Janie,” they apologized, “but we just couldn’t get them even. Don’t worry though. They’ll grow out again, then we’ll do a better job.”

Nobody was going to touch my eyebrows again. I did not care if they did resemble two fuzzy caterpillars. The white community, not even high school, wasn’t worth such torture.

My first day in high school was a disaster. Mr. Stewart had obviously neglected to inform the high-school principal that I would be attending classes because when the student and staff meeting was over and the other seven-hundred or so students had been assigned to their classrooms, two other Indian girls and I were still sitting in the empty auditorium. I panicked. I assumed immediately that it meant I was not going to high school after all and that I would be shipped back home.

Only one other person, a gray-haired man with a kind face, was in the room. He had introduced himself at the start of the meeting as Mr. Weir, the vice-principal. “Are you girls in grade nine? You’re from the Indian school, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“If you’ll just give me your names, I’ll tell you where to go.” We did. “Janie,” he said, “you’ll go to Room 103.” He wrote my name down on one of the numerous sheets of paper that he carried. “Your home-room teacher is Miss Horten.”

When I walked into Room 103, Miss Horten was just starting the roll call. “Take a seat,” she said, without taking her eyes off the list. Looking over the sea of pale faces, I saw two familiar brown ones in the far corner, and I joined them. Miss Horten continued calling the roll, but my name was not on it. I waited until the class had been dismissed before drawing the oversight to her attention.

“For heaven’s sake! Why didn’t you say something before?” she asked impatiently.

“I was scared,” I mumbled.

“What’s to be scared of? All right, I’ll need your name, where you’re from, and the name of the school you last attended.” When she had all the necessary information, she handed me a sheet of paper. “That’s a schedule of your classes,” she explained. “You’re scheduled for a music lesson right now. Room 110 on this floor at the end of the hall. Next time, don’t be afraid to speak up.”

When I walked in, the music teacher, Mr. Kelly, demanded to know the reason for my tardiness. I explained that I had stayed behind to speak with Miss Horten. After a brief lecture on the importance of punctuality, he told me to find a seat. Once again, I found a seat at the rear.

Mr. Kelly informed us that we were to be in the school choir, not that we were musically talented, he added. There was only one other music class, and that class and ours would make up the school choir.

“Before we start on any lessons, I’m going to go down each row and I want each of you to give me your name and tell me whether you sing bass, tenor, alto, or soprano,” he said.

I had never had a music lesson in my life and I had no idea what he was talking about. All too soon, he was standing beside me. “Your name?” he asked.

“Janie Matthews.”

“Alto or soprano?”

I was glad that he had narrowed it down to two choices, but I still did not know what he meant. “I don’t know, sir,” I whispered, shrugging my shoulders.

“What do you mean ‘you don’t know’? You do know what music is, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me put it another way, do you sing high or low?”

That was simpler. Boys sang low and girls sang high. “I sing high, sir,” I answered, squirming in my seat. The class snickered.

I discovered rather quickly that I was no soprano. My

voice cracked whenever we reached the high notes. I solved this problem by mouthing the words or standing next to the alto section and singing along with them. Fortunately, Mr. Kelly never asked me to sing a solo.

From that day on, it seemed as if Mr. Kelly was picking on me deliberately. How easy it might have been if I had told him the truth, that I had never studied music before, but I did not want him to think that I was just a stupid Indian. I guessed at most of his questions, and fortunately I was right more often than not. I don't know who was more surprised at the end of the year when I got a "B" in music, Mr. Kelly or I.

My next class was home economics. When the teacher informed us that we would take up sewing for the first semester, I did not anticipate any problems as I had been sewing ever since I could remember.

Taking a seat, I stared at the unfamiliar electric machine in front of me. We had never been allowed to use the treadle machines at my old school, but I had often used my mother's, the kind that had to be cranked by hand. There was no treadle or crank on the machine in front of me.

With one hand on top holding the scraps I was supposed to stitch together, I groped around underneath with the other one for something to make the machine run. As I bent down to study the underside, my knee brushed against something accidentally, and suddenly the machine whined and raced at full speed. An agonizing stab of pain knifed through me, and I looked up to see blood spurting from my middle finger which was neatly skewered to the throat plate. I freed it, wiped the blood off the machine, and went quietly about my sewing. My finger was red and swollen for days, and the excruciating throbbing almost drove me crazy, but the important thing was that I had learned to use the machine without showing my ignorance. My foolish pride was intact.

Other classes were just as bewildering. Latin was completely hopeless as far as I was concerned, but everybody assumed that since I was from Quebec, I should be so proficient in French that I should be able to teach the subject. The truth was that aside from the phrase *Bon jour*, I had

never even heard the language. It was as confusing to me as it was to anyone else. I was having enough difficulty trying to express myself in English.

Science, another new and strange subject, might just as well have been another foreign language with such unfamiliar words as condensation, evaporation, saturation, cumulus, and nimbus.

When the six o'clock bell rang, signifying the end of the day, I raced back to the security of the Indian school. In my eagerness to get away, I tripped on something in the middle of the street and I skidded across the rough pavement. I got up in pain, both physical and mental, pretending not to notice the laughter around me, and looked down sadly at my brand new pair of expensive nylons hanging in shreds from my equally shredded and bleeding knees and legs.

As I limped home the three blocks from the bus stop to the Indian school, one of the Indian boys thrust his books at me. "Here, carry these," he ordered.

"Why?" I asked. My arms were full of my own texts and notebooks.

"It's the custom for the girls to carry boys' books," he answered. The others giggled. "So, from now on, I want you to carry my books for me."

I thought it a strange custom, but being totally ignorant of city ways, I told him I would. I carried his books to and from school for a week before his cousin took pity on me and told me that a boy was supposed to carry *my* books.

My classes went more smoothly after the first day. The only subject I could not master was gymnastics. I loved sports, but not gymnastics. I was too unco-ordinated and clumsy. I considered myself lucky to be alive at the end of the year.

On my first jump over a horse, I froze in mid-air. Since I was extremely afraid of heights, having to jump the four feet down from the top of the horse to the floor was like being asked to jump out of an airplane at 50,000 feet without a parachute. My fingers closed like steel bands around the bars, but my body, carried by the momentum of my leap, continued on over, crashing down on my arms. I flipped over and

landed with a terrible thud on my head. I was stunned temporarily, and for a while it looked as if I might have broken an arm, but I recovered. On my first attempt at the splits I pulled something in my leg and I was unable to walk for two days.

Another of the impossible feats we had to master was leaning over backwards until our hands touched the floor and holding that pose for several seconds. I got the brilliant idea of asking one of the Indian girls to assist me while I practised this exercise in our playroom. I told her to hold on to the front of my apron, thus keeping my back off the floor. I leaned back confidently and slowly lowered my head and arms. Just when I could see the floor below me, one of the apron strings broke, and I crashed down onto the cement floor on my head. The girl collapsed on the floor beside me and rolled around, laughing hysterically, while I staggered up and tottered over to the bench to unscramble my brains.

The only subject I hated worse than gymnastics was oral composition. Having to stand up in class and answer questions was painful, but having to stand in front of the class to make a short speech was sheer torture.

Our first oral assignment was a television-news broadcast. Each row of students was to form a news-reporting team, one student giving the sports news, another the weather report, another the society news, all fictitious, of course. The anchor-man on my team assigned me the local news.

Having never watched television before, I did not know what was expected of me, so I did not prepare any news. I was certain the teacher would understand. On the afternoon our assignment was due, our team gathered before the start of class to discuss our presentation. "What's your news?" the anchor-man asked me.

"I don't have any," I answered.

"You don't have any? Not one?" I shook my head. "Don't worry. I'll make some up for you," he chuckled.

I thought it was extremely kind of him. When my name was called, he slipped me a folded piece of paper. After I had seated myself in the teacher's chair, I unfolded the paper and

read it silently to myself. “That rotten little white boy! I’ll kill him!” I thought.

“Come on, Janie,” Miss Horten urged.

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “How! My name is Janie Heap-Big-Feathers,” I mumbled.

“Louder please,” Miss Horten said.

“How! My name is Janie Heap-Big-Feathers. I am coming to you live from my tepee on the shores of Kitchigoomee. Marilyn Monroe paid an unexpected visit to this little settlement yesterday. Her boat sank unexpectedly and she had to swim ashore. When she staggered out of the water, it was noticed that all her beauty spots had been washed off. I turn you now to the weather report. How!”

Miss Horten did not say a word. She just stood in the back of the classroom with an embarrassed look on her face. I slunk back to my desk. There were a few half-hearted attempts at laughter from the class, but the boy responsible for my shame and disgrace was laughing hysterically in his seat. He held up his right hand, palm out. “How!” he howled. I would gladly have scalped him. I decided never to trust a white kid again.

A few weeks after school started, all the new students were required to take an IQ test. I was shocked when one of the white students kept asking me for help. It wasn’t the fact that he was asking me to help him cheat that shocked me, but the fact that here was a white boy asking me, *an Indian*, for help. Apparently, one of the Indian boys had been bragging about my brains and the white boy was taking this opportunity to test me and show how broadminded he was about Indians. His repeated questions were very distracting.

I could not have helped him even if I had wanted to. I was having difficulty myself trying to figure out what the test was all about. I did not know what an IQ test was. All I knew was that most of the questions dealt with subjects I had never encountered before on my isolated little island. Working in strange surroundings, trying to change from one way of life to another, switching from one language to another—all these worked against me. I knew I would fail miserably and be sent

back to grade eight, or worse, back to the island.

A few weeks after the test I was summoned to Mr. Weir's office for something concerning the test. I thought I was about to be expelled for having failed it.

"I want to congratulate you on the mark you got on your IQ test. We never tell the students how they scored, but I'm happy to say that your test showed you have an above-average intelligence," he said. What a relief! I had not failed after all.

"You're the one we need to help us change a few prejudiced ideas people have about Indians. You can show the people of this town that Indians, if given the chance, are just as smart as other children." He was placing a big responsibility on my shoulders. I preferred to be inconspicuous, not in the limelight.

"If you ever have any problems and feel the need to talk to somebody, I'm always here. I want you to look upon me as your friend," he said, putting his arm on my shoulder as he led me out the door.

I did not believe a word he was saying, of course, but, during the years I spent there, he proved that he was sincerely interested in helping me. He encouraged me whenever I felt like quitting. Nobody at the Indian school had taken such an active interest in me and I came to look upon him as my second grandfather. He resembled him in a way. Unfortunately, offering encouragement was all he could do because only the Indian school and Indian Affairs had any say over me.