

Chapter 18

SATURDAY was our day, the day we could go into town without any chaperones, the day we could do anything we wanted from one o'clock in the afternoon until curfew at ten. The intermediates, who could also go out if they had the money, had to be back at the school by four. The juniors, heavily chaperoned, ventured forth about twice a year.

For fifteen years I had roamed where I pleased, with no thought to traffic or signal lights, and I gave no thought to them now as I repeatedly stepped out into the path of oncoming cars. Strange words—I only knew they were not compliments—were hurled at me by irate, fist-shaking, horn-blowing drivers. It took me only minutes to recall Mrs. Holland’s long-forgotten lessons of when to cross and when not to, but it took me several hours to learn to stop, look, and listen. It was difficult trying to break a fifteen-year-old habit of crossing whenever and wherever I pleased. I broke it though when I saw that to continue it would cost me my life.

Fortunately, one of the girls had offered to act as my mentor and guide. I kept her busy shouting out warnings and pulling me to safety for several hours before she suggested that we see a movie. My tour of the town could wait. She needed to find a place where she could relax and calm her shattered nerves. She suggested seeing a horror movie at the Bay.

We waited in line in front of a girl in a little cage. On the window in front of her were three admission prices: fifty cents for adults, thirty-five cents for students, and fifteen cents for children under twelve years of age. I stood behind Kitty and watched her so I would know what to do.

“One, please,” she said, shoving a dollar under the cage. The girl gave her a ticket and some change.

“One, please,” I said as I shoved a dollar at the girl. The girl looked at me, then gave me a ticket and change.

Counting my change as we walked into the lobby, I discovered that the girl had given me too much. “Kitty, the girl gave me the wrong change,” I whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“She gave me eighty-five cents instead of sixty-five. I’ll have to give her twenty cents back.”

“Wait, wait. Let me see your ticket,” Kitty suggested. I gave it to her. She laughed. “She gave you a children’s ticket. She thinks you’re under twelve. It must be your hairstyle.”

I put up a not-very-convincing fight to return the money to the girl. “Look, you didn’t ask her for a children’s ticket, so it’s her mistake,” Kitty rationalized.

I agreed. Reverend Montgomery’s predictions had been

correct. I had not been in the white man's world for more than a week and already I was acting like one of them—lying and thieving. Drinking and murdering, no doubt, would be next.

“Hey, let's go see another movie,” Kitty suggested on our way out of the theatre. “This time I'll buy the tickets. Just give me your money. I want you to stand beside me when I buy them, but don't say anything.”

We went to the theatre across the street. It was playing *High Society*. “Two tickets, please,” Kitty said, giving the girl a dollar. The girl looked at us. She punched out two tickets and some change.

“Look at that,” Kitty laughed, waving one student ticket and one children's. “It has to be your hair. Don't ever cut it. Just think of all the money you can save.”

“But that's cheating,” I said, sanctimoniously.

“No, it isn't. I keep telling you it's *their* mistake.”

At a time when I wanted to be looked upon as a mature woman, being mistaken for an eleven-year-old was a terrible blow to my already-fractured ego. However, by the end of the third movie that day, I was getting used to it. My materialistic instincts took over. A savings of sixty cents a week would give me more than thirty dollars at the end of the year. “It might be worth keeping this Dutch-boy cut after all,” I thought. And I might have if the other children had not teased me about it by calling me Prince Valiant. So, I had it cut very short in a pixie cut.

Less than a month after my arrival, I lost my privilege of going into town on Saturdays. It was my punishment for “indecent exposure”.

It happened one evening. I was standing on the inside sill of one of our dormitory windows, yelling out the open top half at some girls below. The bottom half was permanently closed to prevent us from sneaking down the fire-escape at night. Miss Brady came in to investigate.

“You're deliberately making all that noise so the boys can come out and look at you while you're naked, aren't you?” she said accusingly. I looked down at the over-sized, shapeless, thick flannel pyjamas which covered me from neck to

toe. "Let me tell you something, young lady. Boys don't respect girls who go around flaunting their bodies like you. If they do take you out, it will be for one thing only."

She went on and on about my low morals, my evil mind, and my nudity. A brazen hussy like me ought to be locked away so as not to influence the innocent children who surrounded me, she warned.

"Your punishment will be," she continued in a hoarse voice, "to remain in the school for the next three Saturdays. Not one, but three! You will not be allowed into town. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, respectful child that I was.

Actually I welcomed the chance to stay close to the security of the school, prison-like as it was. My most recent visit to the town had been a terrifying experience.

We had been given special permission to go into town on a Friday evening to watch a professional hockey game at the arena. We had even been granted the rare privilege of staying out past our ten o'clock curfew. The only thing that threatened to ruin the evening was the heavy rain which started after supper.

It was ten-thirty when the exciting game ended, and on the way out of the crowded arena, I became separated from the other girls. One of the Indian boys found me wandering around looking lost and frightened in the lobby, and he offered to walk me to the bus stop. He was the same one who had talked me into carrying his books.

He explained that he, too, had been separated from his friends. He looked into every cafe and pool hall we passed. Half-way across town, he found them in a pool hall, and without a word to me, disappeared through the door.

I waited a few minutes before walking on. It was too cold and rainy to stand around outside wondering if he was coming back out or not. I knew where the bus stop was anyway. The only thing I did not know was which bus to take. I had never been on my own before.

There was a bus waiting when I got to Queen and Pine,

but I let it go. I took the next one that came along. It seemed as good a method as any. I could have asked the driver, of course, but he would have thought, “just another stupid Indian.” Two blocks from Queen and Pine, the bus made a left turn. I knew immediately that I was on the wrong one. The bus I wanted went straight along Queen Street until it turned around at the park just three blocks from the Indian school.

I got off at the first stop and walked back three blocks to Queen Street. When I got there, I decided that since I was soaking wet anyway, I might as well walk all the way. It was only two or three miles.

I crossed over to the south side of Queen Street, where there were no businesses or houses, and where there were also no street lights. I thought my chances of meeting a drunk, rapist or murderer there were less than on the well-lit and heavily populated north side. Since there were also no sidewalks on the south side, only a crazy person would trudge through the mud and tall grass, I reasoned.

After several blocks, a Volkswagon passed me. I saw it turn around a block away and drive slowly past me in the direction of town. A few minutes later, it was heading in the other direction, driving even slower. I was beginning to panic. The next time around, it stopped beside me. I started running. The car pulled up and cruised along beside me. The interior light went on, and the young, handsome, black-haired man inside asked me if I wanted a lift.

“No, thank you,” I croaked. “A ‘D.P.’,” I thought. The girls were always warning me about “D.P.’s”. They cruised the park on Sunday afternoons looking for girls to pick up. I did not know what the initials stood for, but I had noticed that they all had one thing in common—black hair. So, I labelled every black-haired man that I saw a “D.P.”

“Come on, I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “You’re going to get sick walking around in that rain.”

Anyone who worried about my health couldn’t be all that bad, I thought; but the words of the ministers, “*All white men are no good,*” haunted me. I kept on running.

“Come on! Don’t be a fool,” he insisted.

When he saw that I was not going to change my mind, he drove on. He turned around and beeped his horn as he passed me on his way to town. There was no other traffic on the road. After stopping for a few seconds to give my heart a chance to slow down and to wait for the fire in my lungs to burn itself out, I plodded on through muck and mire. I could feel blisters forming on the backs of my heels from my brand new white buck shoes, which, covered with mud, were more brown than white.

A horn beeped behind me, and the car pulled up alongside me. “Are you ready for a ride now?” asked a familiar voice. I turned. It was my persistent D.P.

I limped along at a faster rate. I had come to the section of town where only a few feet of swampy ground separated the street from the river. There was no place to hide, and since I could not swim, I did not dare go into the river.

“For Pete’s sake! What do you think I can do to you in this tiny car?” he yelled.

He had a point there. The school was still more than a mile away. My blistered and bleeding feet were killing me. I cursed myself for not wearing an old pair of shoes, ones that were already broken in.

“You’re killing yourself!” he warned.

I asked myself what difference it would make whether I died of pneumonia or strangulation. I limped on a few more feet, then stopped and shrugged my shoulders. The door swung open and I climbed in, dripping wet and shivering, hoping my mother would understand when they unloaded my battered, decomposed body off the plane.

“Brother! Are you ever a stubborn little girl,” he said. I felt somewhat safer. I had nothing to fear from a man who called me “little girl”.

We drove in silence for a few seconds. “Listen, where do you want me to drop you off?” he asked. I told him. “Why don’t you take off your wet clothes and put them on the heater,” he suggested.

“No! No!” I squeaked, drawing my wool sweater, which

had stretched to twice its normal size from the weight of the water, tighter around me. I should have known! A man wants only one thing from a girl.

“I won’t look, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he said. “I’m all right.”

“Why are you scared of me? I’m not going to do anything. I just don’t want you getting sick. If you take your clothes off and put them on the heater, they’ll be dry by the time we get to the school.”

I knew for sure then that he had only one thing in mind. Even I knew that I still would be undressing when we reached the school. “No!” I cried, flattening myself against the door, getting ready to jump as soon as he stopped in front of the school.

He cruised past it. “You’re going past it!” I cried frantically.

“I know it. I just thought you might like to take a little ride up the road and back again,” he said quietly.

“No!” I screamed. Up the road, past the country club, was nothing but a forest of poplar and maple trees. A perfect spot for a murder! “I’m getting out right now,” I threatened, my hand on the door handle.

“You can’t. Not while the car is moving. You’d kill yourself. A little ride won’t kill you,” he said. I knew better.

There was only one way to convince him that I was serious. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and prepared to jump. The car came to an abrupt halt, throwing me against the dashboard. He reached over and slammed the door shut, grabbed me and pulled me against him. I screamed.

“*Listen!* Listen to me for one second!” he shouted. “Do you know what would happen to me if you jumped out of the car and killed yourself? The police would throw me in jail for the rest of my life!”

“I don’t care. I don’t care,” I sobbed.

“If you don’t care what happens to you, think about me,” he pleaded. “I am going to turn the car around right now and drive you back to the school, all right? Please, *please*, just sit still and don’t touch the door. I promise you I will take you straight home. Okay?” I nodded.

He made a U-turn and headed back. He kept glancing at me nervously. When he stopped in front of the long driveway to the school, he reached across me—to open the door, I thought—and held on firmly to the door handle.

“Before you start screaming or getting hysterical,” he said, “I want to apologize. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just thought you might enjoy a little ride. I like you. You’re stubborn, but I can tell you’re a good girl. Can I see you again? Maybe when you get to know me, you’ll realize that I’m not as terrible as you think. How about it? Can I see you again?”

“No!” I yelled.

“Okay, okay. Before I let you go, I want you to promise me one thing. No more walking around by yourself in the middle of the night, eh? You never know what could happen.” I had a pretty good idea. “Take care now,” he said as he opened the door for me.

I leapt out and raced up the gravel driveway to the safety of school. I heard him beep the horn as he gunned the motor and sped off towards town.

I tiptoed up the stairs, past the closed door of Miss Brady’s room, into our dormitory. How relieved I was to discover I was the first one home. I climbed out of my wet clothes, into my warm flannel pyjamas, jumped into bed, and lay there shivering with cold and fear. I was ready to admit that the ministers had been right; the outside world was indeed full of danger. I was ready to return to the north, back to the safe island that I missed so much.

It was eleven-thirty when the other girls came in laughing and joking. “Girls! Girls!” Miss Brady shouted, coming out of her room. “There are children sleeping. Please be quiet!” She disappeared back into her room.

“What happened to you?” the girls asked me. “We’ve been so worried about you.”

“Someone gave me a ride back,” I answered. I did not elaborate.

“You’re lucky,” they said. “We had to walk from the park in all this rain.”

Yes, I was lucky. Lucky to be alive.

It was almost three months later before I could bring myself to accept a date. By then I had learned the real facts of life in health class; I now knew there was a lot more involved in “getting into trouble with boys” than just looking at or being near them. So, one week before my sixteenth birthday, I went out on my first date with the Indian boy who found no end of ways to amuse himself and others with my ignorance of the strange customs and ways in the white man’s world. In spite of the fact that he was always playing tricks on me, I looked forward to our date. It was not going out with him that thrilled me so much as finally going on a date.

He met me at the bus stop in town. He had caught an earlier bus. After greeting me cheerfully, he whispered, “Listen, can you give me your money so I can pay for your ticket?” It seemed like a reasonable request, and I gave my money to him.

The thrill of my first date was not dampened by the two boring westerns I had to sit through, nor by the fact that the only time my date seemed to remember me was when he needed more money for popcorn or coke.

“Do you want to go now?” he finally asked after the fifth boring hour of cowboys and Indians.

“Whatever you want,” I said.

On the way out of the theatre, he asked me if I had a dollar. “I’ll treat you to a soda,” he said. I gave him a dollar.

After we had finished our sodas, and he had pocketed my change, he offered to walk me to the bus stop so I could go home. He wanted to play pool with some of the boys. “I’d like to take you to another movie, but I’ve run out of money,” he said.

It was just as well. I was running out of money too. I had barely enough to get me home.

“Do you want to go to the movies with me again next Saturday afternoon?” he asked.

“I can’t. I have to work.” For five hours every Saturday, I cleaned house for an elderly couple. The two dollars they paid me was my only source of income. Another girl had taken my place for the afternoon so I could be free for my special date, but I could see that if I expected to go out on

more dates, I would have to work to finance them.

“That’s all right,” he said. “I’ll meet you here after you get off work. Then we’ll go to the movie. Okay?”

I nodded happily, beaming all over at my fantastic luck. Dating was fun, but very expensive.