

Chapter 19

WASA! wasa!" I moaned, leaning over the railing of the ferry, watching the river rush by. It was spring, and it had taken me nine months to work up enough courage to face the guards at the border of the United States of America, but it was taking less than five minutes for that courage to desert me completely.

Kitty, who had become my good friend as well as my constant guardian, stood beside me, trying to convince me there was no danger. "It's very easy," she assured me repeatedly.

Less than fifteen minutes after we had left Canada, the ferry docked among the battleships on the American side, and the passengers filed out. "Let's get off last," I whispered to Kitty, pulling her back. When the last passenger had disembarked, we made our way slowly up the ramp to face the guards. "There's nothing to it. Just have your student card out," Kitty whispered.

We stood in front of the smiling guards, neither of whom, I was surprised to see, had a machine gun, nor were there any in sight. My hand shook as I held out my card. Without even a glance at our identification, one guard asked, "Going to the movies?", waving us on when Kitty told him we were.

"I told you there was nothing to it," Kitty said.

We did not go to the movies as we had told the man. We went on a sight-seeing trip around town instead. What a disappointment! There were no cowboys or Indians. Not even one lonely tumbleweed tumbled by. The countryside was identical to the one we had just left. The town, too, was

no different. Even the names of the two towns were identical; both were called Sault Ste. Marie.

I was just as nervous on the trip back to Canada as I had been earlier, but again the border official waved us on after a quick glance at our cards. I did not know then that Indians could come and go as they pleased, that they could even work in either country without permits, visas, or any papers. They are, technically, citizens of both countries.

However, two years later I discovered that crossing the border was not always that easy. I went across by myself to meet a friend on the American side, and waited as usual until the last passenger had gone through.

“What are you doing in this country?” the guard asked.

“I’m going to the movies,” I answered.

“Let me see your I.D.” When I showed him my student card, he waved it aside, saying, “I need more than that.”

“I don’t have anything else.” Even my student card had been unnecessary on most border crossings. A glance at our Indian faces was all the officials had needed.

“I’m sorry. I can’t let you into the country without proper identification.”

“But I’m an Indian,” I wailed.

“Oh yeah? Tell me more.”

“Honest! Honest I am!”

“All right, what’s your Indian agent’s name?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. The agent had visited our settlement so seldom that I did not even know his name, and I did not dare make one up because I could not be certain that they did not have a list of all the Indian agents in Canada.

“You say you’re an Indian, but you don’t even know the name of your agent?” he asked incredulously.

“But I *am* an Indian! I’m from the Fort George band in Quebec, James Bay. My band number is 196.”

“Mine is 251.” He laughed. “How much money do you have?”

“One dollar.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, we’ll have to send you back. We just can’t let people come into this country without identification,” he

said, pulling apart the wallet that he had taken from me. It bulged, not with money or identification, but with pictures of school friends.

“I’m just meeting a friend over here,” I told him. A thought hit me. “If it’s my hair,” I said, “this isn’t my natural colour.” I pointed at the black roots of my fiery orange hair. “See? I’m an Indian!”

A friend of mine who was taking a hairdressing course had been practising on me. Some of her treatments had not worked out too well, but none had turned out as disastrously as the bleach job she had given me. My hair, instead of turning blonde, had taken on the vibrant hues of autumn trees.

“Anyone can see that’s not your natural colour,” the official laughed. “Go into that room there and someone will be with you in a minute.”

I was searched and questioned for over an hour, but finally I was allowed to enter the country, feeling like a master criminal.

I became a card-carrying Indian after that. I flashed my orange card at anyone who doubted that I was an Indian—a card with my name, picture, general description, marital status, band name and number; a card bearing my signature and that of some official in Ottawa. I refused to admit that I was part white.

Yet, I was developing rather ambiguous feelings about my Indianness. I had long believed that I was not as good as white people, and I had learned to accept that fact, but a few months in the city was all it took to make me ashamed of the fact that I was Indian. The younger children—even some of the older high-school boys—would greet us with war whoops, rain dances, and Ugh’s and How’s. Some adults would stare and cringe visibly when they met us in town on Saturdays.

When a white boy, knowing full well I was an Indian, asked me for a date, I accepted gratefully. I was even more thrilled when on our second date, he presented me with a ring, even though I had to remove it the next day to prevent my finger from getting any greener. However, his behaviour changed on our third date. Instead of walking to the theatre

with me as he had done on other dates, he, glancing furtively about, announced that he had left something in the cafe and suggested that I go ahead and buy my ticket and wait for him inside.

I quickly discovered the reason for his odd behaviour. "Why did you have to wear that jacket?" he asked, scrunching down on the seat beside me. "Why didn't you wear your red one?"

"I wore this because the other one was too dirty," I whispered.

"I don't care. Wear the red one from now on," he ordered.

No explanations were necessary. I understood only too well. The navy-blue jacket with two white stripes down each arm, issued by the school and identical to the ones the other girls wore, advertised the fact that I was an Indian. Without it, I would pass for white, but a quick glance at it let people know immediately where I was from and what I was, thus placing him in an embarrassing situation. I was right back to being a dirty little savage again. My refusal to accept any other dates with him puzzled him, and I could not explain that being with him only made me more aware of my inferiority.

Not even my grade average—87 per cent—or my standing at the end of the school year—sixth in a class of thirty-five white students and two other Indians—could convince me that I was just as good and as smart as white people.

When classes were over, I was eager to return to the island, where I could be myself and where I would not have to worry constantly about people thinking I was a dumb Indian. I waited impatiently for my return ticket from the Indian agent, but three weeks later, when most of the children had returned home, I was still waiting.

There were only five of us left. One of the girls heard of a family that needed a babysitter for the summer and she left to live with them, promising to find other homes for us. When she found a Catholic family for me, I hesitated because I was still somewhat leery of Catholics. A prejudice that had been drummed into me for fifteen years could not be overcome in one short year. But the prospect of spending a

whole summer by myself in the depressing school was too much.

I quickly discovered that even Catholics could be wonderful people and that they were not necessarily interested in converting everyone around them. However, in response to my numerous questions about the faith, a friend of the family offered to take me to church whenever I wanted to go. Her name was Marge and she was sixteen, the same age as I was.

One boring Sunday I decided I was ready to risk my life and attend Catholic services. “Just do what I do and no one will even suspect that you’re not a Catholic. There’s nothing to it,” Marge assured me.

It was the most beautiful church I had ever been in, filled with gold statues in lighted recesses, ornate columns and brilliantly coloured stained-glass windows. While I followed her down the aisle, I gawked at the splendour all around me, at the same time concentrating on keeping her within sight. Suddenly, without any sign or warning, she disappeared. The next thing I knew I was flat on my face on the marble floor. Genuflection was an unknown custom where I came from.

As I lay on the cold floor in total mortification, wishing I could melt and evaporate, I raised my eyes to heaven and said silently, “All right, God. I get the message. I’ll never set foot inside a Catholic church again.” There was no answer.

“I told you to watch me,” Marge hissed while we were dusting ourselves off. The urge to rush outside was unbearable, but I forced myself to follow her to a pew, my eyes downcast, my face burning with shame and humiliation.

The service was surprisingly similar to the Anglican service. I could not help wondering why, if the Catholics had almost the same religion, they were doomed to hell and we weren’t. I did not know that the Anglican Church had been founded when King Henry VIII, unable to get a divorce, broke away from the Catholic Church.

I had had my taste of real freedom that summer—the kind that lets you think and act, not the way others tell you to, but the way you want to—and I was sorry to see it end. All too soon, it was time to return to the school.

I realized immediately that it was going to be a terrible

year, but I still blamed myself for that. All our mail was opened and read by Mr. Stewart, and all money sent to us by our parents was turned over to Miss Brady to dole out as she saw fit.

One Saturday morning, I was in her room for my weekly allowance when she went to her dresser for the correct change, leaving the open ledger on a chair beside me. The figures in her ledger did not tally with the ones in mine. Upon closer examination, I discovered the error; she had deducted money on days I had been confined to the school. Other girls had sometimes complained of shortages, but nobody had dared to face Miss Brady with the facts. Without even considering the consequences, I quietly pointed out the fact that she had deducted two dollars and fifty cents more than she should have.

“Are you accusing me of stealing your money?” she exploded.

“Oh, no!” I answered quickly. “I just said you made a mistake.”

“I did not! You made the mistake, not me! You are accusing me of stealing your money, you filthy Indian!”

The other girls, who had been standing in line waiting for their money, quietly walked back to their beds, pretending to look busy. One of them bravely came to my rescue. “Janie’s right, Miss Brady. You wouldn’t give her the money because she was confined. I remember that.”

Miss Brady turned on her. “Shut up! This is between Janie and me.” She turned back to me. “A girl like you belongs in reform school. I should go downstairs and tell Mr. Stewart about this right now, but, if you’re willing to apologize, I will forget the whole matter. Apologize, Janie, or I will tell Mr. Stewart.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled sullenly.

“That’s better. I won’t say anymore about this incident and I advise you to forget it,” she said quietly, shaking her finger at me. She stormed back to her bedroom.

I could not forget, and neither could she. She nagged me continually with taunts and accusations of imagined vices, anything from lying to prostitution. I tried everything to get

back into her good graces, but nothing worked.

I concentrated on my studies—I had been put in an all-white class of “A” students, sometimes referred to as the brainy class—and on my Saturday afternoon job, wasting no time on such trivialities as dating. The truth was that I would gladly have made time for such trivialities if some boy had asked me out, but no one did. I waited patiently for the one boy I had had a crush on from the first day I arrived in town to ask me out, waited for him to notice that I was extremely available.

However, although he had dated all the other Indian high-school girls, even a few of the older intermediates, he did not seem to know I was alive. As far as he was concerned, I was the low girl on the totem pole. Once in a while, he gave me a big thrill by looking my way and smiling absently.

I might have kept on waiting patiently but I was getting desperate. He was scheduled to graduate in May and he had made no effort whatsoever to acknowledge my existence.

“Tell me what to do,” I begged Kitty. “I’ve got to go out with him at least once before he leaves. What can I do?”

“Ask him for a date,” she suggested.

The idea was too appalling. “What would he think of me?”

“Well, he’d know that you were interested, and he just might take you out.”

“But I’m too shy to ask a boy out.”

“That’s your problem,” Kitty said in a motherly tone. “The boys think you’re a snob. They think you’re only interested in white boys.”

It was a lie! “I’ve only gone out with one white boy,” I cried. “I’ve also gone out with one Indian boy, so how can they say I’m more interested in white boys?”

“I don’t know. But you should try flirting with them once in a while. That would make them notice. If you can’t do that, then try asking for a date. See what happens.”

Unable to bring myself to stooping so low, I depended on my looks and my personality to hook him. They did not. My looks were all right, but I was too serious. Even a blob of jelly had more personality than I did.

On the day that he received a scholarship to college, I

threw caution to the winds and walked up boldly to him during our nightly homework period and congratulated him, hoping he would not think I was after his scholarship money. He thanked me and walked away. I was devastated!

One Sunday, Kitty and I went to the park after supper in an effort to find some peace and tranquillity. We forgot all about the time, but by running all the way, we were able to get back to the school just seconds before bedtime.

The next day, my not-so-secret crush came up to me and handed me a kerchief. "What's this?" I asked, wondering if he could be presenting me with a peace offering.

"Your kerchief," he replied.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, very puzzled.

"As if you didn't know."

"What do you mean? I didn't even know I'd lost it," I said truthfully.

"Come off it! You dropped it yesterday on your way out of the park. You dropped it when you saw us coming down the street behind you."

"I *didn't* see you," I protested. It was true; I was lucky to see anything that was more than three feet from my eyes. Anything beyond that was a big blur. I had been fitted for glasses, but I never wore them. Somehow it didn't seem right for an Indian to wear glasses. Besides, I was too vain to wear them.

"All right, knock it off!" he said impatiently. "Your plan worked. I'll take you to the carnival after you get off work on Saturday." Without even waiting for me to catch my breath to accept or refuse, he turned and walked away.

I had never met anyone so conceited! I thought briefly—for one micro-second—of running after him and telling him I would not go out with him on Saturday or any other time, but after waiting two years for this unbelievably thrilling moment, I could only stand and gaze after him. I floated off to tell Kitty the wondrous news.

After work on Saturday, I met her downtown and we returned to the school so I could prepare for my date. Kitty, who was almost as excited as I was, said she would tag along, discreetly of course, to watch the romantic fireworks.

What a disappointing night for all of us! For two years I had dreamt of the big night, a memorable night when I would blossom forth, enchanting my date with my wit and my irresistible charm. Instead, I walked around in a daze, unable to think, speak, or even look my date in the eye. It was truly one of the most unbearably painful nights I had ever known. Instead of loosening up as the evening progressed, I retreated further and further into my shell.

When it was over, we walked home in silence, my mind reeling with all the witty remarks I should have made that evening. I was convinced he must be overjoyed to be taking me back—he was used to more exciting dates. Knowing that I would never date him again, I wanted to burst into tears.

As I reached out to open the door, he grabbed my hand, pulled me towards him, and gave me a quick, brotherly kiss. My knees buckled and I staggered against the rough cement wall, blinded by the radiance of a million galaxies crashing together in joyful celebration of my first love; my heart and my breathing stopped as I soared above the universe to join the choirs of rejoicing angels.

“Do you want to go out with me again next Saturday?” he whispered.

Would I? I’d crawl through hell for him! “Oh, yes!” I whispered breathlessly, uttering my first complete sentence of the evening.

He laughed softly. “I’ll meet you here then after you get off work. Night now,” he whispered, softly stroking my cheek once before disappearing down the long hall to the boys’ quarters.

The choir of angels escorted me as I floated up the stairs on a blanket of soft clouds. I fluttered into our dormitory, my stunned mind still trying to understand the unexpected turn of events.

“We don’t need a night light with you around,” Kitty noted disgustedly. “What happened?”

“He wants to see me again next Saturday,” I sighed.

“*What!* I was so sure he wouldn’t ask you out again. Oh, Janie, you were so pathetic! I was embarrassed for you. What happened after I left?”

“Nothing. We walked home, he kissed me, then asked me for another date.” I tingled all over with the memory of the too-short kiss.

“I don’t understand it. I just don’t understand it,” Kitty muttered, shaking her head. Neither did I. “I must have missed something,” she said.

The next day, while I was floating around mopping the main hall, lovingly and gently rubbing the spot where my true love had stood, Mr. Stewart poked his gray head out of his office and motioned me inside. For once I did not mind, or wonder what I had done.

He was all smiles as he ushered me in. “Congratulations, Janie,” he said gaily, pumping my hand. “I heard you went out with Johnny last night.”

“Yes, I did,” I answered, completely confused. Mr. Stewart was against dating. He thought it was something that could wait until after graduation.

“I’m so glad,” he said, still pumping my hand. “I wish you both all the best. Listen, did he bring you to the door or did he leave you before you got to the door?”

I looked at him and frowned. He knew that all doors except the one in the main entrance were locked at night and that the only way we could get to our respective dorms was through that door. “He brought me to the door,” I answered.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” he said, releasing my hand and rubbing his hands in glee. He reminded me of a leprechaun. “That’s really wonderful! I’m so glad for both of you.” He dismissed me then.

I walked out of his office in total confusion. I had difficulty concentrating on anything that day, but his actions and words were totally incomprehensible. Maybe he thought we were going to get married and raise our own little tribe of super-intelligent papooses.

My following dates with Johnny weren’t much better than our first. I could not understand why he kept asking me out, and I dared not ask him for fear he might start wondering himself. We dated until he left at the start of June for his summer job in another town. Before leaving, he presented me with his ring, which I wore proudly and constantly on a chain around my neck.