

Chapter 4

THE night seemed never ending. I tossed and turned, too excited to sleep. As soon as my grandmother arose and began her daily chores by starting the fire to heat the cabin and brew some tea, I hopped eagerly out of bed.

“Shhh!” she whispered. “gooshoom meen.”

But sleep was impossible. It was my first day of school and I was determined not to be late. “If I am,” I thought, “the principal will probably tell me they ran out of desks.”

“wabim mah beesoomgan,” she said, pointing at the clock. I looked at it but the numbers meant nothing. “goodaushj eeshbsh-ipewe,” she explained, but even knowing it was six o’clock still gave me no idea how much longer I had to wait. However, I climbed back into bed reluctantly and watched her as she bustled about, heating a five-gallon bucket of water on the stove for my bath.

As soon as she felt the cabin was sufficiently warm enough, she let me out of bed. She bathed me thoroughly and shampooed my hair, then braided it. I donned the new clothes which I had received the previous Christmas, but which were still several sizes too large. My beautiful paisley cotton dress skimmed the tops of my navy-blue high-top track shoes.

My grandfather took his cracked shaving mirror off the shelf and handed it to me. I grinned back foolishly at the proud and excited girl in the mirror—her eyes twinkling, her face flushed with pride and happiness, and her silly ear-to-ear toothless grin.

“ahgoo mac,” my grandfather said gently, prying the mirror out of my hands. “bitmah meetso.”

I choked down the suddenly dry and tasteless bannock and tea. My excitement had become tinged with a hint of fear and uncertainty.

My grandparents decided that my grandfather would take

me to school, since he could speak English. Before we left, my grandmother checked my face and hands once more and made certain I had not spilled anything on my new dress. She put my sweater and coat on me.

“wasa! washa jishidow,” I protested, but it was not the heat I was thinking of; I just did not want my beautiful dress covered up.

“nimoowee, yighdah jidshk oo-hee,” she said sternly, buttoning me up. But as she bent over to kiss me, her eyes became misty with unshed tears. She tightened the knot in my kerchief once more as we left.

I skipped alongside my grandfather and pumped his arm up and down all the way to school. “wasa, Geniesh, gighspee-ewe mah,” he complained, but I could not. Only unfeeling adults could walk on such an exciting day.

We went directly to Reverend Dawson’s office. The principal was not in so we waited outside on the steps. A few minutes later he came running over from his home a few yards away, his face red, and his bald head shining with perspiration. He shook hands with my grandfather, then took out his handkerchief and started wiping the top of his head. I could sympathize with him because I was feeling extremely uncomfortable myself all bundled up for a blizzard on a hot August day.

“Take Janie around to the school yard and the other children will show her what to do,” Reverend Dawson told my grandfather.

My grandfather took me around to the play yard, warning me to behave myself and to listen to the teacher. He gave me a quick kiss before he left.

My friends and I spent the next few minutes admiring each other. I admired their red plaid dresses, their red berets, their red wool cardigans, and their brown leather high-top shoes. They admired my blue paisley dress, my navy-blue track shoes, my maroon wool cardigan, my forest-green kerchief with big red roses all over it, and my thick army-blanket coat. Their clothes reeked of moth-balls; mine of wood smoke.

They were envious of my long braided hair, and I laughed at the length of their hair, so short that their ears stuck out.

Every single one of them had an extremely short, badly cut Dutch-boy hairstyle. With their berets perched on top of their heads, they looked as if a strong wind could easily snap their necks and blow their heads away.

When a bell rang, everyone started running for the door. “asdim, Geniesh,” they yelled. “jeebee!”

I raced inside with them. I found myself in a huge square room, the walls painted a dark green below the wide moulding which ran around the room, half way between the floor and the ceiling. The walls above this moulding and the ceiling were painted a lighter green. From the middle of the ceiling hung a bare light-bulb. I had never seen such elegance! In one corner sat a small wooden table with a white enamel water-jug, a hand basin, a bar of pink Lifebuoy soap, one comb, and one hairbrush on top and a filthy multi-coloured striped hand-towel hanging on the side. Over the table was a small, soap-scummed mirror.

The girls formed a line behind this table, the youngest in front and the oldest in the rear. One of the girls grabbed me and pulled me into the line. “asdim,” she whispered.

“jahgone ahk?” I asked.

“Be quiet!” bellowed the short, muscular, white woman standing beside the table. I cringed. She looked as if she could squash anyone with a gentle squeeze. She was wearing a double-breasted, gray tweed suit, and on her feet were thick heavy clunkers. Her dark brown hair was cropped short in a mannish cut. With her feet planted slightly apart and her arms crossed, she glowered at each of us in turn as we washed our hands and faces, dried ourselves on the smelly old towel, and combed and brushed our hair. Her name was Miss Moore.

As we finished washing up, we formed another line at the door leading into the classroom. When the last girl was finished, we marched into the classroom. It was painted the same colour as the playroom, the same single bare bulb hung from the ceiling, the wood floor was also unfinished. The only difference was the neat rows of brown desks and the huge desk in front of the blackboard. We waited in line while the teacher, Mrs. Holland, assigned us to our desks.

She was a frail old woman, her white hair wound tightly in braids around her head, her powder unevenly applied, and

her dark red lipstick slightly smeared. Her gray, watery eyes were set deep in her wrinkled and sagging face. A loose, ill-fitting grey dress covered her thin body. I felt an instant rapport with her. She was one of us.

There were about forty-eight of us, ranging in age from five-and-a-half to sixteen, from grades one to five. In our grade-one class were boys and girls in their teens who were starting school for the first time in their lives.

After Mrs. Holland had assigned us to our desks—two to a desk—she said, “Let us pray.” I did not know much English but I knew what those words meant. We knelt beside our desks and prayed, then sang a hymn, and listened to her as she read from the Bible. I was extremely disappointed. I had not come to school to pray; I had enough of that at home and on Sundays. We spent the first thirty minutes of the morning in prayer and meditation, although they seemed like thirty hours to me. I was eager to start learning all about the white man’s world. When the prayer period was over, however, we sang the National Anthem and pledged allegiance to the Canadian flag. We followed along as best we could, but the higher grades did all the singing and the pledging.

At last, we were ready to get down to business. Mrs. Holland called the roll, starting with the higher grades. I noticed that every time she called a name, the child whose name was being called raised his hand. I waited anxiously for my name because I had figured out the system and I was eager to prove to her how smart I was.

“Janie Esquinimau,” she called. I looked around. I thought I knew every child in school, but it was the first time I had heard that name. It must be some girl from another village, I decided. Again, “Janie Esquinimau”. Everyone looked around to see who the new girl was. Finally that frail old lady came storming over to where I sat. “Janie Esquinimau,” she snapped as she raised my hand for me.

I shook my head. “Janie Matthews,” I mumbled.

She shook her head. “No! Janie Esquinimau,” she said firmly.

I shook my head. “Janie Matthews,” I mumbled, a little less certainly.

She shook her head vehemently. “No! No! Janie Esquini-

mau!" she shouted in my ear.

I nodded my head. "If she wants to call me Janie Esquimau," I thought, "that is her right. After all, she is white." I could not understand, however, why mine was the only name to be changed. I could only wait until my wise old grandfather could tell me the reason.

The rest of the roll-call went smoothly. Everybody was present. It was only after she was satisfied that no one had played hookey that we got down to learning, starting with the *ABC's* printed permanently across the top of the blackboard. We struggled through these until recess.

After recess, our scribblers, rulers, pencils, and erasers were handed out. While Mrs. Holland worked with the other grades on their reading, writing, and arithmetic, we practised writing our letters. I spent the morning trying laboriously to perfect my inch-high scrawl, realizing for the first time just how difficult school was going to be. With my tongue sticking out the side of my mouth, firmly clenched between my teeth—necessary for greater concentration and success—I repeatedly touched the pencil lead to my tongue and willed my fingers, even after they had become cramped and rigid, to write the letters, never realizing that we had a whole year to learn how to write. I thought we had to do it in one day.

What a relief when the dinner bell rang at twelve o'clock! I raced outside to meet my grandfather. "jah-gone gahd-skoot-mahgooyak?" he asked.

"dahbah jah-gone," I answered truthfully. I had not learned anything.

When I asked him why the teacher had insisted my name was "Esquimau", he laughed and told me that was how we were listed in the Indian Affairs' files. It seems that my great-grandfather was an avid but lousy story-teller, always leaving out important details. His friends nicknamed him "Esquimau", which means "He Leaves Out" or "Left-Overs". When the first white men came, they called him Esquimau also, and when the Indian agent made a list of all the Indians on the island, he listed my great-grandfather simply as Esquimau.

When his children were born, they were given Christian

names—Box and William—at the insistence of the church, but the name Esquinimau was tagged on as a surname, and each generation was stuck with the name.

It was not too difficult to see why my family never used the name. Who wants to be called Left-Overs? When I asked my grandfather about “Matthews”, he merely stated that was also our name, without elaborating, leaving me just as confused as ever.

When we got home, I ate slowly and deliberately, not too eager to return to school. My enthusiasm had waned considerably in a few short hours. In its place was the beginning of a nagging doubt about my capabilities. My grandfather, however, assured me things would improve and dragged me back.

We went through the same routine in the playroom, washing up and forming a single line before entering the classroom. My grandmother had made me wash my hands and face before I left home, but with Miss Moore towering over me, I washed them again. This time, however, there were only twelve of us. Those who were not yet six were napping; those who were over twelve would work all afternoon, cleaning, sewing, and laundering.

After the half-hour prayer session in the classroom, we spent another half hour on the Bible. Our school, being run by the church, placed more emphasis on the fourth “R”—religion—than on the other three.

After this soul-cleansing period, we received our *Dick and Jane* readers, and if it had not been for the pictures, I would never have known which end of the book was up. The words looked like mouse tracks to me. It seemed incredible that anyone could ever learn how to decipher them. My confidence and my enthusiasm disappeared as the long day wore on. The teacher’s patience was also wearing a little thin, which did not help any. As she jabbered away in what might as well have been Latin, I could not help but feel that I had made some terrible mistake. The English I had learned from my grandfather—“eat your food”, “get a spoon”, “go to bed”—was absolutely useless to me in a classroom. Besides, he gave me time to figure out what he was talking about. The

teacher did not. The more uncertain I became, the more intelligent the teacher seemed to be. By the end of the long, exhausting day, I saw her as a god-like, super-human being.

By the time my grandfather came to pick me up at four o'clock, I really felt like a dumb old Indian. I never wanted to see the school again. It was amazing how much seven hours of school had changed my outlook.

I awoke the next morning not too eager to go back, but with a few gentle threats from my grandfather, I went. Gradually I learned. The more I learned, the more enthusiastic I became. I learned to hop, skip, jump, and laugh with Dick, Jane, Baby, and funny, funny Spot. I learned to make my letters smaller and more uniform until I had no difficulty keeping them between the lines. I learned to add and subtract. I learned all about hell and damnation. I even began to understand Mrs. Holland's rantings and ravings.

It was laborious process. For those of us with no visual difficulties, reading came relatively easily, although we did not at first understand what we were reading and it took some time before we made the connection between the written and oral word. Mrs. Holland's lack of knowledge of Cree was a great handicap for us during those first few months, but it also forced us to pay attention, since we could not depend on her for translation. This we had to do for ourselves, with great difficulty at first, but almost instantaneously after a few years. It was not until we had mastered this process that we could speak with any degree of fluency.

I soon learned that the frail old lady who had greeted us on that first morning was not so frail after all. She had a habit of sneaking up on a daydreaming and unsuspecting student and slamming down her yardstick, her constant companion, on the student's desk, or rapping him smartly across the knuckles with it. After just one of these incidents, we all sat up and paid attention to her for the rest of the day. She took on anyone when she was angry, even the senior boys who were twice her size.

We all loved her anyway, but some of the things she taught us were too difficult to grasp, especially about cities. One time she spent several weeks teaching us how to read traffic

signals. Our small island was criss-crossed by narrow trails; there wasn't a single traffic signal for at least five hundred miles. There wasn't even a single lamp post on the island. We also learned how fast we should drive in a school zone, on the street, and on the highway—all of which were completely alien to us. We did understand what "drive" meant, however, since the summer's supply barge had brought two tractors, one for the Catholic mission and one for the Anglican. Our chances of learning to drive, though, were very remote, since the Indians were not allowed to operate these vehicles.

We must have been very frustrating to her too, and I know the one thing about us that drove her crazy was our pronunciation. We found it extremely difficult to pronounce *r*'s since there was no *r* in our Cree dialect—there are several Cree dialects. We found it easier to substitute *l* for *r*, even though there was no *l* in our dialect either.

But the one sound that none of us could master was *th*. Our "the's" came out "da"; our "them's", "dem"; our "these's", "dese". Not even the highest grades could master the sound. Mrs. Holland spent hours with her tongue between her teeth going, "*th, th, th.*"

A typical day in our school went like this: "All right, Peter, stand up and read page ten."

"Look, Jane. Look. Look. Look. Funny, funny Spot. Oh! Oh! Oh! See *da* dog run."

"No! No! No! *The! The!* Not *da!* Put your tongue between your teeth like this. Now say *th, th.*"

"*th.*"

"Again."

"*th.*"

"All right. Now start over again."

"Look, Jane. Look. Look. Look. Funny, funny Spot. Oh! Oh! Oh! See *da* dog run."

Mrs. Holland would throw her book down on her desk in exasperation. She never gave up, however, ever hopeful of the day when by some miracle one of us would be able to stand up before her and the world to pronounce *th*.

And so we spent the year, learning and making mistakes. My confidence and my enthusiasm returned, stronger than

ever. I looked forward to August, though, when I too would become one of the privileged, living, not just attending classes, at the school.