

Chapter 5

I was up before the sun and the birds, waking everyone in my eagerness to go and register to live at the boarding school. As I started to dress, my grandmother lifted her sleepy head off the pillow and mumbled, “go-shoom,” but I could not go back to sleep. She closed her eyes and started to doze off.

I shook her. “mama, mama, jeebee,” I urged, reminding her that I had to get to the school before it was all filled up again. I was not going to be fooled into waiting too long a second time.

She pattered about stoking the old wood-stove and mixing bannock—a biscuit-like mixture of flour, lard, salt, baking powder, and water. She did not seem her old patient and happy self this morning, dragging herself around, mumbling under her breath as she did her work. After a while, she started sniffing, wiping angrily at the tears which ran down her cheeks, a habit she seemed to have whenever some important event was about to take place in my life. She kept grabbing me and hugging me tight.

My mother came in and joined my grandmother in crying, insisting on holding me in her lap. “wasa!” she sniffled. “ahshk neeshough jigjeengonedow beesoomgan ahmoyah skoolooween.”

It was impossible! I had been up for what seemed like most of the day and she was telling me I had to wait another two hours! Finally we left, and I dragged my reluctant, tearful grandparents and mother all the way to the school. As we went out the cabin door, some of my relatives wept; others were only too glad to get rid of me.

This time, when we entered the principal’s office, he greeted me with good news. “Well, Janie, you’re here bright

and early. You're the first one in today." He wrote my name down in a big black book, then called the supervisor.

I had a few seconds with my family. They were hugging and kissing me, making it very difficult to breathe. An inexplicable lump had formed in my throat, and for the first time I began to have serious doubts about leaving my family.

Miss Moore, the female-wrestler supervisor, strode into the office and whisked me away from my family. Suddenly, tears streamed down my cheeks. I did not look back at my family; I did not want them to think I had changed my mind.

Miss Moore led me up the stairs and into the junior girls' dormitory. It was a square room with fourteen metal cots lined up against two walls. The walls were painted the same greens as the playroom and classroom. On the north and east walls were small windows, three on each wall. The denim curtains were green, to match the walls and the linoleum. Along the south wall were unfinished wooden shelves divided into compartments, each compartment with a huge number taped to the front of it. Under the compartments, clothes-hooks were screwed into the moulding. Each hook was also numbered. The cots were neatly made up with gray wool Army blankets, a patchwork quilt lay at the foot of each one. There were no pictures and no other furniture. From the middle of the ceiling hung the usual bare bulb.

Miss Moore used sign language to show me which bed was mine. It was degrading because I was very proud of my grasp of the English language after one year of school.

Then she pulled clothes from a mountainous stack on the bed nearest the door and held them up to me, tossing them on my bed to form a smaller stack. I received a red plaid school dress, a blue plaid Sunday dress with matching pants, a gray denim work dress, two white cotton undershirts, two pairs of thick fleeced bloomers, two pairs of thick beige wool stockings, a pair of elastic garters, a red wool cardigan, a pair of blue denim overalls, two flannel nightgowns, a gray denim apron, a blue denim play jacket, a green wool Sunday coat, a red beret for play, a navy-blue one for Sundays, rubber boots, and a pair of brown leather high-top shoes. The clothes reeked of moth-balls, but I did not care. They were mine! All

mine! It was not that I had never had new clothes before; it was just that I had never had so many at one time.

Miss Moore pointed to compartment 64, marked every piece of clothing she had issued to me with that number in black indelible ink, and showed me how to stack everything neatly into the small compartment. She hung my Sunday coat on clothes-hook 64. After setting aside the clothes she wanted me to put on, she led me out to the washroom and showed me which toothbrush, plastic cup, and towel to use. They were all marked 64.

The washroom was a long green room. Three counters with green linoleum tops lined one wall. On two of these counters sat ten white enamel washbasins, all in a neat row. The white enamel water buckets under the counters turned out to be our toilets. There was no running water or plumbing in our washroom and all the water for washing and rinsing had to be carried in a water pitcher from the staff washroom at the other end of the hall.

There were two other dormitories in the girls' wing; one for the intermediates, and one for the seniors. Each dormitory was identical.

Only after Miss Moore showed me where everything was, did she utter her first words to me, "All right, bath time."

"No, I finish," I mumbled to let her know that I had already taken one bath that morning.

"No! You take a bath," she said sternly as she gathered up my clothes and took my towel off its hook. I did not know whether she could not understand me or whether she felt I was not clean enough. She led me back down the stairs to the playroom.

Two bathtubs had been set up on benches in one corner of the playroom. She filled the tub with water from the kitchen while I undressed. As I climbed cautiously into the steaming tub, she gingerly bundled up my clothes as if they were contaminated. My foot hit the water, and every nerve in my body recoiled; this mad woman was trying to boil me alive! "Hot!" I gasped.

"No, it isn't! Now hurry up and get in!" she snapped. "Maybe white people can't feel the difference between hot

and cold,” I thought as I climbed slowly back into the scalding hot water. I did not complain again. From now on I was completely at her mercy, to do with as she pleased.

I dressed and we went back up the stairs. “Take your dress off and lay it on your bed,” said Miss Moore. I heard her bustling about in the washroom. “When you have your dress off, come out here,” she called.

I shuffled nervously into the washroom. “Pick up your feet!” she ordered. She motioned me over to a washbowl full of liquid. I took a sniff and placed the smell immediately. Kerosene! (Indians, having no electricity, used kerosene lamps, so the smell was very familiar to me.) I wondered what this woman was going to do next. I was beginning to wonder if I would survive the day.

“Bend over the basin!” I did as I was told. She took a fine-toothed comb, dunked it in the kerosene, and proceeded to scrape it over my scalp. She did this over and over again until I was convinced that my scalp was peeling off. “Stand still!” she snapped when I started squirming, trying to get away from this new method of scalping. I kept expecting to see drops of blood in the kerosene.

It was assumed by the whites that all Indians entered the school infested with lice and all sorts of revolting creatures. We all received the kerosene treatment. When the supervisor found an unfortunate child who was not infested, she could not believe it and spent more time raking over that poor child’s scalp. This treatment was repeated every few weeks for several months. If we did enter the school with a clean head, it did not take long to get a few lice since we all used one common brush and comb.

Miss Moore seemed disappointed that she had not found anything on me. (My grandmother had checked me carefully to make certain I did not have any little animals in my hair.) I naturally assumed that she would wash all the kerosene out of my hair when she was through, but she left it on to dry.

When I had been deloused and deemed presentable, Miss Moore took me downstairs, and told me I could stand at the bottom of the stairs next to the principal’s office and watch the other children as they entered the school. I waited with

my freshly kerosened hair, my scalp tingling, my skin red and glowing all over, wearing my plaid dress, droopy bloomers, thick wool stockings, and my shiny high-top shoes. Though I reeked of kerosene, Lifebuoy soap, and moth-balls, and probably looked like a refugee, I felt like a model. I made sure my shoes were in plain view so everyone could admire them. The fact that all the girls received identical clothes made no difference to me. I felt that I alone stood out from all the rest.

The other children came in singly, or in groups. Some cried and hung on to their parents; others took it like typical textbook Indians, no emotion showing on their little faces. The crybabies had to be dragged away from their equally distraught parents by force. I noticed that the children who cried and carried on hysterically were the ones who had lived at the school before. I was somewhat puzzled by their odd behaviour but I did not wonder about it too much. I was much too excited.

The dinner bell rang at twelve o'clock, and after washing our hands and brushing our hair, we lined up. Miss Moore brought out a brown plastic tray of spoons and gave one to each of us. "Hang on to your spoons," she said, "you'll need them for dinner." Then she came in with a gallon bottle of cod-liver oil and filled each spoon.

I slurped the strange stuff into my mouth, rolled it around, and looked around frantically for a place to throw up. With all the spoonfuls of goose grease and bear grease my grandmother had forced down my throat, it should have been easy, but cod-liver oil had that gagging, fishy taste I detested. Using my grandmother's method, I pinched my nostrils and swallowed quickly. (Christmas was the only day we were spared from taking this vile stuff.)

We then trooped into the dining-room, a long narrow room with two long, bare wood tables on opposite walls. The room was in the usual green colours with the inevitable bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The girls and boys were seated at separate tables—the older boys and the junior girls at one end of the room, and the junior boys and older girls at the other.

When we were all in place, we said Grace, then sat down to a meal of stewed meat, two slices of white bread, and a cup of milk. I was disappointed with such an unappetizing meal, but I was hungry and the tasteless food filled the void in my stomach. This simple menu was varied by fish or macaroni on Fridays, an occasional serving of beans, or the addition of potatoes on Sundays as a treat. Sometimes the bread was plain; other times it was slathered with fat that had been skimmed off the stew pot. We sat at the table with our arms folded until every child had finished eating before we were excused.

Tired of watching over-emotional parents and children, I spent the afternoon in the play yard. Our play yard was large, but completely devoid of playground equipment such as swings, slides, and see-saws. It was more like an empty sand lot with a few patches of grass here and there. There were three or four tall pine trees around. Our boundaries were the outhouses to the south, the graveyard to the west, the church and rectory to the north, and the school to the east. The school also separated the girls' yard from the boys'.

All the children were Crees from the island so we did not have the added problem of getting acquainted with strangers. The children sat around in small groups, talking quietly, or just staring at the sand. When I found one of my best friends, Annie, I hoped she might be able to help me get over my own feeling of gloom, but she was not too cheerful herself.

"You sure are dumb, you know," she greeted me. "You could be living at home, but you want to live here."

"But maybe I couldn't go to school if I didn't live here," I answered. "The only reason I was allowed to go to school last year was because there was no room in the dormitory. Boy! I'd think you'd be excited about living here."

"What's to get excited about? In a few days you won't be so excited either, and you'll wish you were back with your parents." Annie had lived at the school the previous year, and she was thoroughly disillusioned with this way of life.

"I'll be able to see my family whenever I want to," I answered, naively thinking that I would be exempt from some of the rules just because my family lived on the island

the year round. "My mother's house is right outside the gate."

"You really are dumb!" she retorted. "I feel sorry for you."

At this point, I had a few doubts, but I could not understand her negative attitude. I had shrugged aside all my friends' warnings and complaints about the school. I was convinced they were trying to discourage me from sharing in this most wonderful of all experiences. Even if there were some truth in what they told me, I thought it would be different for me. After all, I was the sun, the most important figure in the Universe; all life revolved around me. The staff could not help but pamper me the way my grandparents did.

Some parents would wait until the day they left for their trapping grounds before enrolling their children, hoping, no doubt, that the school would be filled up by then, but most of us were in by suppertime at five o'clock.

By then I was ravenous again. My stomach was not used to such a rigid schedule; I usually ate whenever I was hungry. Before we could eat, however, we had to spend several minutes praying. We prayed for the safety of travellers on the water, on the land, and in the air. There was a moment of silence during which we were requested to remember our loved ones who were on their way to their trapping grounds. I sent up a silent prayer to God, begging His forgiveness for not being able to concentrate on spiritual things when my stomach was growling so loudly.

When we finally sat down, I wolfed down my meal of stewed prunes, two slices of white bread, and a cup of milk. The prunes were delicious—it was the first time I had tasted them—but little did I know that we would have them at least twice a week for eight years. For variety, we had stewed figs, apples, bread pudding, or lumpy custard, and as a special treat on Sundays, jello with real honest-to-goodness cake.

I noticed that the older children were holding up their bowls, hands, or cups. When I realized this meant seconds—bowl for food, hand for bread, and cup for milk—I stuffed my mouth with prunes, and raised my bowl.

"Sorry. No more," announced the supervisor. She had filled five or six bowls before running out of food. "There is more milk here though if anybody wants some." There were

no takers; the milk was lukewarm and watery.

I put my bowl down. We all learned that to get seconds of any food we liked, we had to wolf down our food in order to beat the older children.

After supper, we sat around in the yard feeling and looking glum. No one felt like playing. I had never thought it possible that I could be so lonesome with forty girls around. I was glad to hear Miss Moore call us at six o'clock and tell us to use the outhouses before going upstairs to bed. As soon as we were in the dorm, she started barking out orders.

"Everybody get undressed and into your nightgowns! Lower your gowns and tie them around your waist. Get into the washroom and wash yourselves thoroughly. Don't miss the backs of your necks, your ears, inside and out, and your arms up to your elbows. Brush your teeth thoroughly. *And absolutely no noise!*"

We did as we were told, some of us having to wait since there were not enough washbasins. We did not get any toothpaste or tooth-powder for our teeth; instead, each of us had to scrape our toothbrush across a bar of pink Lifebuoy soap and scrub our teeth and gums vigorously while Miss Moore glared at us.

"Get more soap on that brush!" she yelled at some unfortunate girl who was not foaming at the mouth. "Soap is good for your teeth." The Lifebuoy Company must have made a fortune from our school because we did everything with their product except eat it.

She made sure we had brushed each tooth thoroughly before she poured a little rinse water in each cup. I had brushed my teeth too thoroughly because by the time I was through, she had run out of water. She refused to make another trip down the long hall to the staff washroom for more water, and I had to forego the pleasure, and I mean pleasure, of rinsing. Lifebuoy soap does not have the most pleasant flavour in the world, especially when the taste lingers on until breakfast. I never made the same mistake again.

"Get in line," she ordered after we had brushed our teeth. She disappeared around the corner and came back with a tablespoon and a gallon bottle of Milk of Magnesia. Each of

us got two tablespoonfuls of the laxative, from the same spoon. Our insides too had to be sterilized, just like our bodies. This laxative treatment was to be repeated every Friday evening, but the dosage was cut down to one tablespoon.

After the laxative treatment, we knelt down at the foot of our cots and said our evening prayers. As we hopped into bed, Miss Moore opened all the windows wide—a must, even during blizzards and rain storms. “I don’t want any of you closing these windows at night,” she warned. “Fresh air is very good for you. It makes you strong and healthy.” I wondered how I had managed to survive without the white man’s help.

She checked each bed to make certain no one had run away, bid us good-night, and closed the door, leaving us to sleep in broad daylight. It was only six-thirty, in the middle of August. The sun would not set until ten o’clock.

As the door closed, the tears which had been getting closer to the surface as the long, lonely day wore on finally spilled over, and great wracking sobs shook my body. The whimpers, sobs, and sniffles of other girls filled that cold, impersonal room. Boarding school was not all that I had hoped and thought it would be.