

## *Chapter 6*

**R**ISE and shine! Come on now, get a move on! We've got a lot to do today. Everybody up! Right now!" Miss Moore came striding into the dorm, flinging blankets left and right as she stripped them off the beds. Some of us vaulted out of bed, uncertain as to what was happening; others rolled up into little balls, cowering in fear.

"Get those nightgowns down and get into that washroom right now! Don't forget the backs of your necks and your ears!" She stormed around slamming windows shut and jerking curtains open.

At the sound of the proper bell, we trooped into the

dining-room where we waited quietly until Reverend Dawson entered. "Welcome, boys and girls," he greeted us. "Before I start the service, I have a few words to say to you. First of all, you children are here to learn, and we are here to help you learn. You are here to learn English; so, from now on, you will speak only English in or around the school. You will not speak Cree, and anyone caught speaking it will be severely punished." (A rather tall order for those of us who had to struggle through *Dick and Jane*.) "I don't want you to think there is anything wrong with the Cree language. For your grandparents and parents who have not been fortunate enough to go to school, there is no other choice, but for you children, there is a choice. So, you will learn the English language and speak it.

"You are here to be educated. You have been taken out of your homes because it is very difficult to learn under such unfortunate circumstances. It is not your fault, of course, and your families do not know any better, so they must be forgiven for their old ways. However, you must forget your old ways, for then and only then, will you be able to concentrate your whole mind on the process of learning. As you learn, a whole new world will open up for you.

"But the most important reason why you are here is to learn all about God and His son, Jesus Christ. Since your ancestors were heathens, you must try harder than other people to get into the Kingdom of God, for as it says in the Bible, 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons.' That means you must pay for the sins of your forefathers. (Already I could see that my chances of getting into Heaven were rather slim.)

"Now," he concluded, "you children are going to be very happy here. After you've eaten, your supervisors will read you a list of the rules and regulations of this school. Now let us pray."

The next thing on the agenda that morning was haircuts for everyone. Miss Moore chose two senior girls to assist her in the cutting. The senior girls were allowed to wear any style they chose as long as it was not below the shoulders, but for the rest of us, Dutch-boy haircuts were it. Any length below

the ear lobe was considered too long; half-way between the top and the bottom of the ear was just right, but only for a lucky few. The cutters never seemed to take into consideration the angle of the head as they hacked away trying to even up first one side, then the other. Only when they saw the tops of the ears did they stop. With such short hair, each of us had to have the back of our head shaved.

I was almost in tears. Shorn of my long, flowing hair, I felt completely naked. But there was no time for self-pity—Miss Moore was yelling again. “Everybody sit down on the floor! Junior girls up front, and seniors in the back. Come on now. There is no need for talking. *Be quiet!* Now listen carefully, these are the rules.

“Rule number one. This rule has already been mentioned by Reverend Dawson. There will be no Cree spoken in this school. Anyone caught speaking it will be severely punished.” (This was a rule we absolutely refused to follow. By refusing to speak either Cree or English when any of the staff were around, we were able to escape punishment.)

“Rule number two. Any child who has no business inside the school building must stay outdoors. No excuses will be accepted.

“Rule three. Each child is expected to do some work around the school. Remember that you are being fed, dressed, and housed by this school, and you are expected to keep it clean in return. Each child will be assigned a different chore each month and will be required to complete each one willingly and to the best of her ability.

“Rule four. No child shall talk back to the staff, nor shall she question any statements or requests. Anyone who does so will be severely punished. You will address the male members of the staff as ‘Sir’ and the female members as ‘Ma’am’.

“Rule five. No yelling, crying, or loud talking is permitted in the playroom.

“Rule six. No noise or talking is allowed after the lights are turned off at night.

“Rule seven. Each child shall eat everything that is placed in front of her whether she likes it or not. If anyone does not eat what is placed in front of her, everyone in the dining-

room will be punished by having to wait until that person has finished. There will be no talking or giggling in the dining-room.

“Rule eight. Each child must do as she’s told without any hesitation.

“Rule nine. All clothing issued will have to last the full year, so each child is expected to take good care of her shoes and each piece of clothing.” (Most of us were careful with our clothes, but our growth during the year presented problems. A girl could start out the year with a midi and end the year wearing what would be called a micro-mini today. I have nothing against mini-skirts, but they do look ridiculous with droopy bloomers and thick wool stockings. Our shoes were changed only if the holes in the soles got too big, not if they were too tight.)

“Rule ten. No one is allowed to use the inside toilets until the supervisor takes them into your dormitories after midnight. Anyone caught sneaking into the washroom to use the facilities will be severely punished.” (We were willing, but our young, healthy kidneys could not always be willed into closing down for the night. After spending one extremely uncomfortable night trying to sleep, I always risked punishment by sneaking into the washroom to use the facilities. Others who were not as daring as I always waited until the supervisor finally brought the buckets in; then they also had to gather up their soaking sheets and wring them out. I still do not know what this rule was supposed to accomplish; to teach us self-discipline, or to develop strong kidneys. All it did was create a lot of discomfort. Maybe that was the idea.)

“Rule eleven. No girl will look at, talk to, or fool around with the boys. You all know that boys are after one thing only, and you know how much trouble you can get into by fooling around with them.” (Since I was all of seven-and-a-half-years old, I had no idea what it was that boys were after. To me they were nothing but big pests, and they certainly were not going to get *mine*, whatever that might be.)

“Rule twelve. You will be allowed to visit your families or friends on Saturday from one o’clock to four o’clock, *providing* you have been good all week, and you have satisfactorily

completed your Saturday morning's work." There went my belief that I could see my family whenever I felt like it.

We soon found out there were other rules, made up on the spur of the moment, usually when the supervisor was in a particularly foul mood.

I began to get the feeling that my friends had not been exaggerating when they warned me about the problems, about all the rules and regulations. I began to think that maybe living in school was not as glamorous as I had imagined it to be, that it was not comparable to living at Buckingham Palace. However, still being an optimist—an extremely materialistic one—I felt that my lavish surroundings would more than make up for a few inconsequential rules.

Miss Moore droned on with the work list for seniors and intermediates. Then she turned to the junior girls. "Sterilizing—Janie Esquinimau, Janie Washababino, Annie Tapiatuk; potatoes—Janie Esquinimau, Janie Washababino, Annie Tapiatuk; changing junior girls' beds—Janie Esquinimau, Janie Washababino, Annie Tapiatuk (she was beginning to sound like a stuck record); sorting laundry . . . blackboard erasers. . . . Janie Esquinimau, I have a special job for you. Meet me in the girls' washroom tomorrow after breakfast."

As if I did not have enough to do already. Sterilizing, potato peeling and bed changing. When was I going to have time for play?

"That's all for now. You senior girls make sure the junior girls understand everything I've said today. Everybody run outside and play now, and *stay* out until you hear the dinner bell. I'm sure you all know what to do by now."

We sat around outside discussing our favourite subject, white people. Having had little or no contact with them before we entered the school, we naturally found them a fascinating race. What we did not know about them, we made up as we went along.

"Did you know that white people don't have germs like us?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because they're always yelling at us about *our* germs.

They're so afraid of catching them. When we sneeze or cough, they always scream at us to cover our mouths so we won't spread our filthy germs around. If they had germs, they wouldn't be afraid of ours, would they?"

We all had to agree it made sense. They were always yelling at us about our dirty germs. This was one theory we could never disprove. If a white person got sick, we always felt that we were to blame.

Of course, we all believed that the white race was a super-intelligent one. One of the facts that confirmed this belief was that they could speak English.

"They are very, very smart because they speak English."

"Well, we're starting to speak English."

"Yes, but look how much trouble we have. They don't have any trouble at all."

It never occurred to us that we had never met a white man who could carry on a conversation in Cree, or that we knew Indians who could converse quite well in English.

We also believed that white people, at least the ones on the island, were superior beings. We had been brought up to look upon them as gods, and the older Indians treated them as such. But the strongest support for this belief was the Bible.

"The white people are better than we are because Jesus was born into a white family."

"He was born into a Jewish family."

"That's the same thing."

To us, there were only two races, white and Indian, and two religions, Catholic and Anglican.

"I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had been born into an Indian family."

"Then we would be better than white people."

Our belief in the superiority of the white race grew stronger as we grew older. One of our theories, however, was soon disproved.

"White men don't go to the toilet."

"Of course they do! They have to! Everybody does. It's only natural."

"White people aren't natural. They're supernatural. Have you ever seen Geniesh perspire? That's because she's white."

“I am not white!” I would answer. “You just said that white people don’t go to the toilet, but I do. So, I’m not white!”

“Well, you go because you’re an Indian.” (I never could win in such arguments.)

Old Charlie, an Eskimo, soon showed us that white people did have the same body functions as Indians. One of his jobs as part of the maintenance crew was to empty the staff toilet every morning. Charlie, who believed in taking the shortest route with a load like that, would come down the stairs from the staff washroom, through our kitchen, and out the door to the outhouses to empty his bucket.

The cook naturally was extremely upset about Charlie traipsing through her kitchen every morning. She would try to get him to use one of the other eight exits. Charlie would wait—grinning, laughing occasionally, slapping the cook on the back as if she were telling him some hilarious joke—the bucket with its foul contents beside him, while the poor cook tried desperately to make him understand with a few words and many gestures.

Charlie’s knowledge of the English language was limited to two words: No and Okay. And although he spoke Cree like a native, he pretended that he had never heard the language when we were called upon to translate—the only time we were allowed to speak Cree. No power on earth was going to make him take more steps than he had to.