

Chapter 7

RIGHT after breakfast the next morning, I went upstairs to the washroom to see about that special job Miss Moore had for me. She was waiting with little Clara Spencer.

Clara was our Indian Shirley Temple; she had great masses of curls all over her head. Her mother had died when Clara was about two, and she had been placed in the school because her father and her grandparents could not look after her. She had been living in the school for about a year and had the

run of the place—the only free soul in the building.

“Janie, do you see how crooked Clara’s feet are?” asked Miss Moore. (Everyone knew how pigeon-toed she was.) “Now you and I are going to teach her to walk properly. Every morning before school, I want you up here to help me teach her how to walk. Get down on your hands and knees in front of her, grab her feet, straighten them out, and place them for her so she can walk this straight line that I have marked on the floor. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I got down on my hands and knees, grabbed Clara’s feet, straightened them out, and placed them on the straight line. I started crawling. There was a loud crack as Clara’s head hit the hard floor and a piercing shriek as she started bawling.

“Janie!” yelled Miss Moore. “You don’t go forward. You crawl backwards so *Clara* can walk forward. Have you ever seen anyone walking backwards?” I had to admit I had not, but I had never seen anyone crawling backwards either.

It was back-breaking work, crawling around backwards on the hard floor while Miss Moore stood around supervising, letting me know when to stop, turn around, and crawl towards the other end of the washroom.

For some reason or other, this became my permanent job. I did not mind when the weather was bad, but on beautiful, warm sunny days, I got slightly impatient with Clara and her pigeon-toed walk. In time Clara learned to walk properly, and when my services were no longer needed, I felt liberated. But I was also proud that I had been instrumental in correcting such a great deformity.

I had never been so happy to hear a bell as when the school gong sounded. I stood up painfully and arched my back to snap everything back into place, wondering how I was ever going to survive another month. I dragged my aching body downstairs to the classroom.

Mrs. Holland had managed to survive the summer. I found it incredible that anyone her age could still work. Her teaching methods had not changed. Even though I was a whole grade smarter, I still found it extremely difficult to picture or grasp what we were being taught; everything was so

abstract. (It is virtually impossible to try and visualize city living when you have never seen a city, or even a small town.) In spite of this, I still found school and learning enjoyable. As much as I liked attending classes, though, the week seemed to drag on as I waited impatiently for Saturday to arrive so I could see my family once again.

Right after breakfast on Saturday, Janie Washababino, Annie Tapiatuk and I went upstairs to the washroom to sterilize everything in it. We found Miss Moore busy filling the laundry tub with steaming hot water and a quart of lysol.

“All right you girls, roll up those sleeves,” she greeted us. “Put all those toothcups, *one by one*, in the tub. Here’s a cloth for each of you. I want those cups scoured clean. When you’ve finished those, start on the basins, then the toilet lids. Leave the toilets until last. Now get busy!”

We squatted down on the floor and tested the water gingerly. “Ow!” we cried simultaneously.

“What’s the matter now?” she snapped.

“Hot!”

“Of course, it’s hot! You need hot water to kill germs. Now get those hands in there and get busy if you want to go home this afternoon!”

At dinnertime, there was not a single child in the dining-room who was not willing to eat every bit of unappetizing, dried-up macaroni in front of him. We were all so eager to see our families and friends.

Before we could leave, however, the school had to be spotless. The girls zipped through their work quickly, but thoroughly. When all the work had been completed, we were called inside to wait in the playroom until some responsible adult came to pick us up. Every single child in the room knew every part of the island, but we were obviously not considered capable of finding our way home.

When my grandfather finally appeared, he stood at the door and looked around. His eyes lit up when he spotted me, and with a beautiful smile on his face, he held out his arms whispering my name in a husky voice.

With my arms outstretched and tears streaming down my

face, I raced towards him. It had only been a week since I had left home, but the joy of seeing him again was so great that it hurt.

“Tut! Tut! Get back until I call your name,” Miss Moore scolded quietly, looking at my grandfather and shrugging helplessly.

I kept hugging my grandfather all the way home to reassure myself that it wasn't just a beautiful dream I was having and that he really was beside me. “jim-yoydanah school?” he asked.

“Nim-wee!” I answered emphatically. School was a hateful place, with too many senseless rules and regulations. He laughed.

My grandmother grabbed me and hugged me tight as soon as we entered the cabin. Tears streamed down her face and as she stroked my cheeks lovingly, she kept whispering, “wasa! wasa!”

Once she had herself under control, she prepared a meal of fresh goose and delicious hot bannock. “meetsu, meetsu,” she urged, poking me in the ribs repeatedly, remarking that I had lost some weight. “jah-gone ashimgoyak?”

“ndowee jah-gone!” I answered because as far as I was concerned the food at the school *was* garbage.

After I had finished my meal and visited awhile, I left to see my mother, who had another meal waiting for me. In spite of the warning we had received about eating at home, I ate everything in sight.

“How do you like school?” my mother asked while I was eating.

“I hate it! Why did you put me in a terrible place like that?”

“Why did *I* put you in a terrible place like that! We *tried* to talk you into living at home.”

“You shouldn't have listened to me! The food is terrible. Sometimes it's rotten!”

“You should have seen the food we had to eat when I was in school. Do you know what we used to have for breakfast? Dried fish boiled with flour. Yech! And we couldn't even

wash the maggots off the meat. They were thrown into the stew pot too. I get sick just thinking about it. It's a wonder we didn't all die."

"Well, at least they wash the maggots off," I admitted.

"Do you know what happened if we didn't eat? We got strapped."

"You know what else they do?" I asked, realizing that she was not going to sympathize with me about the food. "They use kerosene on our hair to get rid of the lice."

"They did that to us too. Your aunt Evie and I had to have it done every week."

"You're kidding! Were you that lousy?"

"No. Evie and I were the only ones with naturally curly hair. The kerosene was supposed to straighten our hair. The staff said curly hair was sinful. . . . We also had to drink kerosene."

I thought she was joking. "Drink it? It would kill you!"

"No, really. Whenever we got sick, we had to drink half a teaspoon of kerosene. They never had medicine, so they always gave us kerosene. Just half a teaspoon though."

I was beginning to see that things were not as bad as I had thought. "You know something? My name was on the blacklist this week," I announced proudly. At least one good thing had happened to me at school.

"Do you know what a blacklist is?" she laughed.

"No. My name was on it though."

"That is a list they put you on for being bad. It's not something you can be proud of."

"Oh."

"Miss Moore told me you were a bad girl already, and that you had to go to bed without any supper. What did you do?"

"Well, the other night, while we were getting ready for bed, I heard voices in the classroom. I opened that thing in the middle of the floor—the thing where the heat comes from—and knelt down to peek. You can see most of the classroom through the crack. Well, Miss Moore saw me and just about choked me. She told me never to do that again; it was against the rules. I had to go to bed right after school

the next day, without any supper. She never told us about that rule.”

“There are a lot of rules they don’t tell you. You just have to be very good so you can stay out of trouble,” she warned as I left.

I visited as many relatives as I could in the time allotted, but the three hours were the shortest I had ever known. Before I knew it, my grandfather was taking me back to school.

Miss Moore checked us off her list as we straggled in. Those who were even five minutes late were sent straight to bed without any supper, a punishment they did not particularly mind since we had all broken the rule about not eating.

“Potato girls, follow me,” Miss Moore said when all the girls had reported in.

Janie Washababino, Annie, and I followed her into the kitchen, where a huge black wood-burning stove in one corner dominated the usual green room. Miss Moore pulled out a bucket from the conglomeration of pots and pans that were stored under a counter and turned on a tap over a sink that was the size of a bathtub.

The tap released a magical stream of water; it hissed and spat, and we jumped back in alarm, clutching each other. “Wasa! What’s that?” we asked each other. It was the first time any of us had been allowed in the kitchen, the only other room besides the staff washroom which had any plumbing. We were greatly impressed with this miraculous invention of the white man. Anyone who could command the water to come to him with the flick of the wrist had to be some kind of god.

Miss Moore was not amused. “Where do you think the water you wash up with comes from—the river?” she said sarcastically. But of course we had never seen the inside of the staff washroom into which she disappeared for our nightly supply. She handed each of us a bowl.

We followed Miss Moore down a flight of rickety wooden stairs into a dark, musty basement. She led us into a tiny room that was barely large enough for the four of us. After she

pulled the string on the bare light-bulb overhead, we could see six steps leading up to a small hatch-cover. She climbed the steps, opened the cover and came back down.

“I want you girls to crawl through that opening, get as many potatoes as you can into those bowls, and pass them back out to me. Throw your bowls in ahead of you before you climb through,” she told us. “And start with the rotten potatoes.”

I went first. I threw my bowl through the hatch and peeked in. “ee-dabaw, nooj kudasnahgoon!” (My goodness, it’s spooky in there!) I whispered to Annie behind me.

“Stop talking and get in there!” ordered Miss Moore.

I squeezed through the tiny opening, imagining that cold, clammy hands would grab me. I fell head first into the cold damp sand. My heart was beating a mile a minute as I stood up to brush myself off. My head hit the ceiling. I hunched over and made my way to where I could see the potatoes in long wooden bins. “Eeeee, eeeee,” I whimpered. The dim light only made my vivid imagination work harder.

“Geniesh! Geniesh! Is it safe?” whimpered Annie as she fell through the opening. Janie tumbled in after her.

“I don’t know,” I answered shakily. “I hear a lot of scratching and small noises. I think there are ghosts. I can’t see too well past these potatoes, but I’m sure there are eyes looking at me from back there.”

“Wasa! Don’t say that!” Annie begged. “I have to go to the toilet.”

“Well, go in the sand here,” I suggested helpfully.

“I can’t! I can’t! I’m too scared.”

We got to work, pulling out squishy, stinky potatoes, filling our basins, and handing them out to Miss Moore. She dumped them into a bucket of water, handed the basins back to us, and disappeared through the door.

“Keep working!” she yelled. “I’ll be back immediately.”

While we were standing around sorting the rotten potatoes from the good, Janie let out a screech. “Geniesh! Geniesh!” she whispered in a terrified voice, pointing at my feet.

I looked down and there sat a bold, beady-eyed “ghost” right beside me. I screamed, and without thinking, I stomped

on him, squirting blood and mouse all over myself and the others. That was fast footwork for someone as clumsy as I. We all screamed and dashed for the opening, tearing and clawing each other in our desperate attempts to be first to safety.

Miss Moore raced in to investigate the sudden screaming and saw three sets of terrified bulging eyes, three open mouths shrieking hysterically, as three wildly superstitious girls tried to force their way through the small hatch at the same time.

“*What* is the matter?” she shouted, trying to make herself heard over all the shrieking.

“Gee-beej! Gee-beej!” we screeched.

“Speak English!”

“Ghosts! Ghosts!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! There is no such thing as ghosts. All of you get back in there and get busy. Right now!”

“No! No!” we cried.

“Do you want to be sent to the principal’s office for a strapping?” she threatened. “If you do, just keep this up and I’ll march all three of you upstairs right now. You won’t be able to sit down for a week when he gets through with you because he’ll pull down your pants and strap you on your bare behinds.”

It was a difficult choice, but we finally decided in favour of the ghosts and went back to our sorting. We worked frantically so we could get out of the torture chamber.

We went back up to the kitchen, pale and shaken. Miss Moore had been dumping potatoes into a washtub which looked suspiciously like the one we had used for sterilizing that morning. We peeled, cutting off rotten parts and throwing what was left into a huge stewpot for tomorrow’s meal.

That night I woke up at least a dozen times, shaking and in a cold sweat from nightmares about ghosts and rotten potatoes. Fortunately, the next morning being Sunday, we were allowed to sleep in half an hour later than usual. The seniors, however, had to get up at seven so they could attend Communion.

For us non-communicants, the first service started at ten

o'clock, an extremely long and boring Cree service which owed its length to the fact that the minister's obscure sermons had to be interpreted into Cree for those who could not understand English. Sometimes the interpreter got carried away and went off on a preaching tangent of his own, prolonging the already lengthy sermon. Only rarely did he and the minister preach the same sermon. We fidgeted and dozed off, unable to understand what either man was trying to tell us. What a relief it was when the minister said the closing prayer and we filed out, shaking hands with him and all the church elders.

Our relief did not last long because right after dinner, we had an hour of Sunday School, where our indoctrination into the Anglican faith started in earnest. Religion as taught by my grandparents had been beautiful and full of promise, but the religion taught at school was terrifying, also full of promises, but of a different kind, hell and damnation.

My grandparents had always pointed out the good side of religion, and they talked about the life after death in such glowing terms that I had no fear of dying. At school, however, there was little talk of heaven, only fire and brimstone from which there did not seem to be any escape. The devil was a man in a red suit with horns on his head, carrying a trident which he used to poke you back into the flames if you tried to escape. And all the time he was poking you back in, he was laughing fiendishly.

My grandparents had told me that children always went to heaven because they were innocent. At school, I learned otherwise. Babies had to be baptized before they could be accepted into heaven. Even a baby was sent to hell if his soul had not been purified by baptism.

I learned immediately that I had no hope of getting to heaven because I had two strikes against me: first the fact that my ancestors had been heathens, and second, my parents had not been married when I was born. Either one of them would have been enough to bar my way.

Some of the other ways to hell, according to the minister, were associating with Catholics, going to their Sunday evening movies (which just happened to start at the same

time as our evening services), going to their Christmas Eve open house (this also coincided with our midnight service), sending children to their school, and accepting gifts from them. It was all right to use their clinic and hospital, but other than that, we were not supposed to go near the Catholic mission.

Aside from associating with Catholics, the other paths to hell were going out with white boys, drinking, sex, thinking unclean thoughts, breaking the Ten Commandments or any church laws, and, of course, disobeying the staff. There were so many taboos that I often wondered if anyone ever made it to heaven.

The minister was kind enough to give us some hope of reaching the choicer destination. One of the ways we could achieve heaven was by giving up our Indian superstitions and beliefs. We were not to listen to what our parents and grandparents tried to teach us. We were taught to respect our elders, but that teaching seemed to apply only to our *white* elders.

The school's and church's main objective was to educate the *savage* out of us and turn us into little paragons of virtue like the white people on the island. To make their job easier, we had to be willing to forget everything that we had learned at home and start out with a fresh, clean mind, one that was not cluttered with a lot of useless garbage.

Since the easiest way to heaven seemed to be listening to and obeying the staff, I tried harder to get back into the good graces of the staff and God. To me, the two were synonymous.