

## *Chapter 8*

**T**HE days settled down into a dull monotonous routine: up at seven, breakfast at seven-thirty, school at eight-thirty, dinner at twelve, school at one, supper at five, and bed at six-thirty. Bells signalled the start and finish of every phase

of our lives. The words "Line up!" rang out at least a dozen times a day. Very little happened to break this monotony.

One day, I and another girl, Hannah Matches, got locked in the outhouse by some prankster. Neither of us was worried until the one o'clock school-bell rang, at which point we became hysterical, not so much from the fear of being locked up, but from the fear of what would happen to us when the supervisor found us. We screamed and pounded on the windowless walls and door.

Fortunately for us my uncle happened by on his way to work at the nursing station. He heard my familiar voice screaming, "wasa dabaw! jeek-heeghin bahdak! jeek-heeghin bahdak!"

Thinking that I was being murdered, he hurdled the four-foot barbed wire fence to rescue me. "Geniesh! ahwah jee?" he yelled.

"jeek-heeghin bahdak! jeek-heeghin bahdak!" I kept shrieking. It did not occur to me that the only way anybody could get an axe into my hands was to open the door first. I only wanted to chop my way out of that stinking, suffocating hot box and reduce it to wood shavings.

The latch on the outside of the door rattled and the door burst open. "dan-i-deen?" my uncle asked, ready to strangle the miserable supervisor who was torturing us, "oowan gigh-dodask?" I told him one of the children had locked us up.

Expecting the worst, Hanah and I shuffled nervously into the classroom, our heads bowed, ready to accept our punishment. "Janie Esquinimau! Hannah Matches! *Where* have you been?" demanded Mrs. Holland.

"In the toilet," we mumbled.

"In the toilet! You must know by now that you are to drop everything when the bell rings. You had plenty of time to use the toilet. Why didn't you come when the bell rang?"

"We couldn't."

"You couldn't! You both look healthy enough to me. You were up to some mischief, weren't you? That's why you didn't come, isn't that right?"

"No. We couldn't," we insisted.

“Don’t tell me that! I’m taking you to Reverend Dawson’s office! You deserve a strapping.”

One of the girls stood up. “Mrs. Holland? They were locked in the toilet,” she muttered.

“Is that right?” Mrs. Holland asked us.

“Yes, ma’am,” we replied, relieved.

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place. Now, I am going to get to the bottom of this! Who locked them in?”

Nobody said a word. Everybody sat staring at their desks.

“No girl is leaving this classroom until I know who locked them in. We will skip recess and we will skip supper if we have to, but nobody is leaving here until I know.”

We sat with our hands folded on our desks. Finally, when the recess bell rang and she excused only the boys, it became obvious that Mrs. Holland meant what she said. One girl stood up and mumbled, “I did it, Mrs. Holland.”

“All right, everyone dismissed. You, Margaret, come with me to Reverend Dawson’s office.”

The other girls and I raced around to the front of the school and flattened ourselves against the wall under Reverend Dawson’s windows. We winced at the sound of fleshy smacks and animal-like whimperings. We sneaked off before one of the staff could catch us and march us into the office for the same treatment. It was not an ordeal that we wished to experience firsthand, although we looked on anyone who had as some sort of heroine.

I felt far from heroic, however, when I had my first and only encounter with the greatest resistance-breaker of all. I had been playing with some old cardboard cartons behind our outhouse when I got a call from Miss Moore. (The school administration pinched pennies when it came to providing the comforts of life—right down to toilet paper, or rather the lack of it. We made do with whatever was available, old cardboard, grass, etc. The garbage dump was behind our outhouses and we made use of it, sifting through it daily, looking for hidden treasures.)

A call from Miss Moore meant only one thing; I had broken some rule, but which one? I shuffled into the playroom, concentrating on all I had done that day, trying to recall all

the countless rules and regulations of the school. Miss Moore was waiting, arms folded. "Where have you been playing?" she demanded.

"Behind the toilets," I mumbled.

"Don't you know you are not supposed to play back there?"

"No," I answered truthfully. "We play there all the time." I had not been in school long enough to know when to keep quiet.

"Are you talking back to me? You know you aren't supposed to talk back to the staff!" Obviously, I had caught her on one of her particularly off days.

"Yes, ma'am," I muttered.

"Now you are being sassy! We'd better go see Reverend Dawson about this."

I knew immediately what was coming, and I followed her reluctantly into the principal's imposing office. He looked up. "Hello, Miss Moore," he greeted her cheerfully. "What have we here?"

"Janie has been a very naughty girl. When I scolded her for breaking one of the rules, she talked back to me and started being sassy."

"Is that right, Janie?" he asked with a frown on his face.

"Yes, sir," I whispered. I was too scared to tell him that we played there every day and that no one had ever said anything about it to us before today.

"Pull down your pants," he ordered as he went over to the strap hanging on the wall. "Bend over the desk."

Crying silently, I did as I was told. The feeling that I was about to suffocate any second was overwhelming, and the roar in my ears almost drowned out Reverend Dawson's words. "I don't like doing this, Janie, but you have to be taught a lesson," he said softly. "I'm going to strap you five times, but if you make any noise at all, I will give you five additional strokes."

As the strap slammed down on my tender skin, I let out an involuntary scream. It smarted worse than I had ever imagined! Since I was getting five extra whacks anyway, I decided that I might as well make them work. Screaming and

crying, I leaped out of the way, but Miss Moore grabbed me. By the tenth stroke, there was only one word that could accurately describe my back—rawhide, just like the strap itself.

“Are you ever going to talk back to any of the staff again?” Reverend Dawson asked sternly.

I was learning fast. “No, sir,” I sobbed.

“You get on upstairs and get into bed for the rest of the day,” he said.

With my back full of welts, I found I could lie in one position only, and that was on my stomach. It took about a week before I could sit comfortably. I learned my lesson well; I never tried to defend myself again. I did not wish to go through that torture again. I preferred to go without supper, skip seeing my family for a week, or stand in a corner for several hours any day.

I did a considerable amount of that, too. Most of my life seemed to be spent in punishment. By Labour Day, three weeks after school had started, I was beginning to despair of ever getting off the blacklist, or of ever figuring out what white people wanted and expected of me. Just when I’d think I knew, they would come up with a new set of rules and regulations.

For the holiday, however, Reverend Dawson had an unusually pleasant surprise to announce. “Children, today is Labour Day,” he told us. “Labour means work, so we must all work today. There will be no school. Instead you will all dig and gather potatoes and carrots. When you have finished your usual work, report to your supervisors. They will take you out to the fields. Remember, the faster you work, the more time you will have to play. Now let us pray.”

The older girls and boys dug up the vegetables, and we went along behind them filling up the burlap sacks we had been given. Filling and dragging a fifty-pound sack around was hard work, but we did not mind. We enjoyed ourselves, throwing dirt and vegetables all over the place. It was the one time that the sexes were allowed to mix without constant supervision, and the boys took advantage of this, teasing us unmercifully.

During the afternoon, while the boys were busy storing the vegetables in the root cellar, we harvested the minister's garden. Reverend Dawson grew peas, lettuce, cabbage, and radishes. His garden had thrived in spite of the problems he had had with it the previous spring.

He had decided to use fish as fertilizer and had buried them all over the garden. The huskies, smelling a feast, overran his garden and dug up all the fish. He had tried to stop them but the dogs paid no attention to this crazy white man racing around, yelling in some foreign language, brandishing a stick.

Labour Day was an exciting day, but such days were few and far apart. The next exciting event was in late October, the day we got our winter clothing. Not that it was any more fashionable than our summer clothing, but at least it was different. It was tiresome wearing the same clothing, day after day, month after month. Even in my poorest days at home, I had had several changes of clothing, and I had never worn the same dress for months as I did at the school.

Our winter clothes, made to protect against the cold, were bulky and difficult to put on in the mornings. Our long-johns, being several sizes too large, were baggy, and since we were forbidden to roll them up, we all went around with lumpy-looking legs. Our beige wool stockings had been exchanged for black ones that matched our thick black cardigans; red plaid wool skirts and scratchy red wool pullovers took the place of our cotton dresses. Gray moccasins and duffels—somewhat like a moccasin but made out of army blankets and worn under the moccasins—replaced our high-top leather shoes. We were also issued long woollen scarves for our necks, tuques (wool caps) for our heads, big mittens made out of army blankets to wear over our woollen ones, and of course, parkas. With all this bulky clothing on, we looked like little butterballs, as wide as we were tall.

With each set of winter clothing we were given a pair of skates. I used to stand around in the snow with my skates on until one day two older girls assured me that they would teach me how to skate. They grabbed me, one on each side, and whipped around the rink picking up speed. They let go,

laughing, and down I crashed, knocking my tailbone clear up to my head. I rejected other offers of help, deciding that I would be better off on my own.

I tottered, fell, struggled back up and started all over again, and the day came when I could skate like everyone else. I could not stop or make turns, mind you, but I was on my own two feet. I solved these problems temporarily by skating into huge snow-drifts.

Winter presented a whole new set of problems. One of them was how to sleep when you were freezing. The much-resented custom of opening all the windows wide at night, closing the heat registers and the washroom door (so that the frigid air from our quarters would not cool the warm air in the staff quarters) meant that we lay in bed and listened to our teeth chattering from the sub-zero weather.

We each had a flannel sheet, an army blanket, and one patchwork quilt with no stuffing to cover us. It just wasn't enough. I used to wrap myself up like a mummy in the quilt, which helped some, but not much. We spent many sleepless nights trying to keep warm.

In the morning, Miss Moore would come into the dorm, all bundled up, to open the heat register and close the windows, and expect us to stand around stripped to the waist in the frigid washroom. I perfected a system for dressing in seconds, which was to take off my long-johns, bloomers, stockings, and garters as if they were one piece of clothing at bed-time so I could slip into the whole mess in the morning without having to don each piece of clothing separately.

The other problem was Alice George and her tapeworms. She had been passing them quite regularly in the outhouse, but we did not tell the supervisor because we did not know what to call them. We also did not have the stomach to pry one loose off the ice to show Miss Moore.

The girls who emptied the inside toilets were not always too careful about dumping everything down the holes in the outhouse and usually spilled some on the seats. This spillage immediately froze over, getting higher and higher as the winter progressed. Alice's worms added to this repulsive heap, and it got so that we were afraid to use the outhouse.

Finally, one Friday night she passed one inside. (Friday was the only night we could use the inside toilets before midnight because that was the night we were dosed with laxatives.) Anyway, as soon as Alice started sniffing, we knew what had happened. She was very embarrassed about her puzzling condition and was forever crying. We listened to her pitiful sobbing for a few minutes, then decided that we could not let another week go by without doing something about her.

“Geniesh, you go and tell Miss Moore about Alice,” the girls suggested. I was always chosen to relay messages because I had a better grasp of English than any other girl in the junior dorm.

“No, I’m afraid. I don’t want to get punished again for getting out of bed. Why can’t Hannah go? She’s closest to the door.”

Everyone agreed she should go. “What should I call the thing?” she asked.

“A worm?” someone suggested.

“No. It’s too big for a worm.”

“Maybe it’s a caterpillar.”

“Caterpillars are furry. This thing isn’t furry.”

“How about a snake? It’s long like a snake.”

“Snakes are bigger than that.”

“How do you know? Have you ever seen one?”

“No, I haven’t, but I think snakes are bigger around.”

“If you haven’t seen one, then you don’t know. We’ll call it a snake.”

Hannah went out to face Miss Moore, who was supervising the senior girls as they were preparing for bed. “Miss Moore? Alice has snakes,” she said timidly.

“What are you talking about?” the supervisor asked impatiently. “Speak up!”

“Alice has snakes,” Hannah repeated. Miss Moore looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

“What is all this fuss about?” she demanded, storming into our room. “You are all supposed to be sleeping. Janie, *what* is Hannah talking about?”

“Alice has snakes.”

“Will *someone* please tell me what is going on before I go



crazy! What is all this talk about snakes?"

"Alice has caterpillars?" someone suggested.

"Eels?" someone else piped in.

Miss Moore hadn't a clue as to what we were babbling about. "Alice, what have you got in bed with you?" she demanded. Alice only cried harder.

"Look in the toilet, Miss Moore," some bright girl suggested.

Miss Moore yanked the lid off the toilet, dropping it hastily when she saw the long white tapeworm coiled around the pail. "Alice, stay in bed tomorrow," she choked, staggering out the door.

Alice stayed in bed for several weeks until she was pronounced cured. I do not know if she received any medication, but everything she ate was covered with blackstrap molasses. I took up her meal trays every day and I would stand by her bed, my mouth watering, watching as she ate her food. The molasses on her bread was a big change from the grease on ours, and I envied her, worms and all.

Alice was lucky; she made a complete recovery. Another girl did not. Her name was Ellen, and she was thirteen or fourteen. She had been sick for several days, but both Miss Moore and Miss Quinlan, the matron, were convinced that Ellen was putting on an act to get out of working. They refused to let her stay in bed. The matron was the principal's assistant, and despite the fact that she had no medical training, she was the one who decided whether we were sick or healthy.

Ellen got progressively worse, until one day she just refused to go outside. She sat on the playroom floor, rocking back and forth, with her head cradled in her arms. Miss Moore was furious, but Ellen refused to budge. "I can't move," she whimpered. "I hurt all over."

"You're going to hurt a lot more if you don't go outside right now with the others," Miss Moore threatened.

Ellen raised her head. Her face was drained of all colour and she was crying. "I can't move. I really am sick."

Miss Moore grabbed her by the arm, dragged her across the room, and kicked her outside into the freezing cold. Ellen

fell in a heap onto the ice-covered steps where she lay until the school bell rang. We tried to make her comfortable, shielding her from the bitter wind, but she just lay there curled tight like a ball.

She dragged herself around all day. The next morning, she could not even get out of bed. But Miss Moore had had enough of Ellen's "imagined" illness.

"If you don't get out of bed right now, I am going to drag you down to the principal's office."

"I can't! I can't move!" Ellen's voice was barely audible from under the covers.

"You are going to get out of bed right now!" She yanked the covers off Ellen. But one look at the girl, who was literally at death's door, was enough to send Miss Moore dashing through the washroom, muttering, "Oh my God! Oh my God."

Miss Quinlan came rushing in, half-dressed, her hair still in curlers, and bent over to look at Ellen. She picked the covers off the floor and covered the girl gently. She dashed out and returned with an armload of blankets. She piled them on top of the girl, saving one for a makeshift stretcher.

They took Ellen into the isolation room. When the nurse arrived and examined her, there were a lot of angry voices from the room, but they were muffled and we could not hear what was being said. Two Indian men from the maintenance crew carried Ellen to the nursing station, where she died a day or two later. We were never told how or why she died.

We all attended the funeral, and that was the last time her name was ever mentioned by the staff. It was as if she had never existed. We talked about her mysterious illness and her death among ourselves, and we wondered, but we never knew the answer.

There were also happy times. Christmas, of course, was the biggest event of the year. We spent weeks preparing for it, making decorations for the hall and the dining-room during our Friday afternoon art periods. And one morning we marched into the dining-room to find a heavily tinselled tree

that stretched up to touch the ceiling.

Three nights before Christmas, we went carolling. We visited the white people's homes first, all four of them, then the homes of the few Indians who were not away at their trapping grounds. At each house we sang a few carols, then trooped through to shake hands with the people and admire their tree. I felt like a fool going into my relatives' homes and shaking hands with them as if they were total strangers.

My grandmother, however, was not content with a handshake. She grabbed me and showered me with kisses. As she was hugging me with her left arm, her right hand was busy stuffing my pockets with candy. I loved her deeply, but it was embarrassing. Miss Moore was hovering over us with a tight smile on her face, not quite daring to say anything.

The children behind me stood around waiting until the big emotional scene was over. Since four of the homes we visited belonged to my relatives, we went through much the same routine at each house. I could feel the resentment building up in the other children as they waited in the winter night while my large, loving family held up the line to hug and kiss me.

Despite all his warnings about Catholics, Reverend Dawson announced that our last stop would be the priests' quarters. We were astonished. After singing a few carols, we trooped into the living-room, where we were even more surprised to see Christmas decorations. It had never occurred to us that Catholics celebrated Christmas as we did. From the minister's warnings, we had gathered they did not know about Christ or Christmas.

We shook hands with the bearded Father who had been on the island for thirty years. "*Bon jour. Bon jour,*" he greeted each of us. "Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas."

The brothers stood around passing out candy to each child. "Aha!" I thought, "they're trying to buy our souls." I accepted the candy eagerly.

For most of us, it was the first time we had ever been inside the Catholics' buildings, and we had mixed reactions. Most of us were fascinated by all the statues, and we went around

touching them, ignoring Miss Moore's warning looks. A few children were terrified. "Don't look at those statues," they warned. "You'll go to hell if you do."

"Who told you that?"

"The minister."

"He said, 'don't pray to them'. He didn't say anything about looking at them. If you pray to them, then you go to hell, but it doesn't hurt to look."

"You can look if you want, but I'm not taking any chances. I might go blind."

Other children were afraid of accepting the candy. "Don't take the candy. They're just trying to buy you," they said.

"No, they're not. They're just trying to be nice."

"Remember what the minister said, we should never accept anything from the Catholics because they're trying to buy our souls."

"If you don't want their candy, then give it to me. I'm not afraid to eat it."

"You think I'm crazy? You're not getting any of my candy!"

We went home, munching on the hard candy; forbidden, but oh, so good! I reminded myself to pray a little harder that night.

Christmas Eve arrived. We were sent to bed right after supper, but for once we did not mind. Each of us received a stocking, to which was pinned a blank piece of paper. When we had written our names on the paper, we hung up our stockings on the clotheslines which were strung up all over the washroom. It looked like laundry day. We went to bed determined to stay awake until we heard Santa Claus filling the stockings, but none of us heard him.

We awoke the next morning long before the supervisor came in to turn on the lights. As soon as we heard the washroom door open, we thundered over to the stockings. We forgot about the cold as we tore into them. We all received nuts, candies, and an orange—the only time of the year we got to eat oranges. Each of us received a toy: a skipping rope, a colouring book, a ball, or perhaps a story book.

Having filled up on nuts and candies, we were not too hungry, but we gulped down breakfast anyway; a breakfast of the usual hot cereal, but with raisins added as a treat, and two slices of bread, one slice tinted green, the other pink. After the dishwashers had cleared the tables, we waited for Santa Claus to make his appearance.

Soon we heard the sound of bells outside. Those of us who were new in school had never seen Santa Claus before and we looked at each other nervously as the sound came closer. Suddenly, in dashed Santa Claus, laughing "Ho, ho, ho!" as he bounced over to the tree. He was larger and scarier than I had imagined. Some children cried, even refusing to go up to him when their names were called.

I overcame my fear when I saw him hold out a big doll for me. He called my name again and I swallowed hard as I walked up to him slowly. When I grabbed my present out of his hands, I was surprised to note that he looked somewhat like one of the clerks at the Bay.

The moment we had all been waiting for, the moment when we could go home to our families, did not come until after church and lunch. I made my usual rounds to collect my flour sacks. One aunt remarked as I barged through her door, "Well, it must be Christmas again. Geniesh is here. That's the only time she comes to visit us." It was not exactly true because I visited them often enough during the year so they would not forget me at Christmas.

The three hours allotted to us were barely enough to make my rounds. At the end of that time, I lugged the twenty pounds or so of candies, chocolates and gum I had collected back to school, leaving the toys and clothes with my grandmother. The older girls had told us we could bring the candy back. When they demanded we hand most of it over to them, we realized why.

After an early supper of strawberry jello, Christmas cake, and hot chocolate, everyone, including the senior girls, went to bed. We lay in bed making ourselves ill on candy.

For New Year's Eve we had a rare treat—a movie. The movies were limited to two types, Hopalong Cassidy and war movies, but we never tired of them, even when they showed

the same film over and over. Hopalong Cassidy was my first love. Instead of dreaming of Prince Charming on a white stallion, I dreamed of Hopalong Cassidy in a bush plane.

We believed everything we saw in the movies, and to us the whole world was filled with cowboys and Indians. When an actor we had seen shot down in one movie reappeared in a later one, we could only assume that the doctor had arrived after the filming to save him. We got some terrible ideas about other Indian tribes, and we always cheered for the cowboys. We believed we were the only peaceful Indian tribe in the world.

The movie over, we formed a huge circle, held hands, and sang "Auld Lang Syne". Then we marched up to bed, lying awake until we heard the sound of church bells—both Catholic and Anglican—and gunfire as the Indians rushed outside to shoot off their guns at midnight. We listened to the joyful stomping of the dancers at the Big House as they ushered in the New Year.

A big group of celebrating Indians came by the next morning to entertain us. One Indian played a violin while the others danced around in the snow. Reverend Dawson stood on the fire-escape landing and threw candies down at them. There was a mad scramble, but we did not join in because we had been warned not to. After everyone left, we sifted through the snow hoping to find some candy, but no such luck. They had found every piece.

With the Christmas and New Year's holidays over, we settled once more into our dull routine until Easter, the day we got our one egg of the year. The day was spent in church and meditation, and our one-week vacation was spent spring-cleaning the school. By now I felt as if I had spent half my life in the school.

Not until the spring thaw did I begin to see the end in sight. We had a lottery to see which child could guess the day and the hour the ice would start moving. The winner was to receive a box of cookies. The Indians on the island had their own lottery, and their winner received cash.

While the ice was still intact, a pole was placed in the

middle of the river, and when the rotten ice showed signs of cracking, everyone's attention was riveted to the pole. It sometimes took days, even weeks, before the ice started moving out to the bay, but the staff said nothing as we spent all our free time at the riverbank, staring at the pole.

A shout went up when the pole finally started moving, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the mouth was forced open by tons of ice hurtling down the mighty river. The ice rumbled and snapped; huge sheets of it were pushed up and over the thirty-foot-high riverbanks. With a feeling of great exhilaration, we listened to the thunder of tons of ice being hurtled about as if they were mere snowflakes and watched as the muddy waters, great chunks of ground, shrubs, and trees raced past. It would not be long before the trappers would return to the island.

What great excitement when we spotted the first Inlander or Coaster canoe coming around the bend of the river! Whenever a canoe was spotted and we were not in school, we all rushed down to meet it. Although we did not have permission to do this, the staff did not try to stop us. It would have been like trying to stop a stampeding herd of buffaloes.

Finally, the last day of June arrived, the end of the school year. We were bathed and shampooed. Even our clothes had been washed for this special day. We assembled in the classroom for our last service.

“When you are home for the summer,” Reverend Dawson told us, “I want you to attend church every day. I want to see each and every one of you at every service. It is very important that you do not forget God and Jesus Christ, and you won't if you attend church.

“Don't forget what you have learned in this school this past year. Try to spend a few hours each day thinking about all the things you have been taught. We have worked hard trying to teach you the right way to live, and we do not want you to forget.

“I hope to see you all back here in August. There are always some who cannot or do not want to stay in school until they are sixteen. That is too bad. I feel sorry for children like

that. But I know most of you will come back.

“I hope you all enjoy your holidays this summer. And now, let us bow our heads and pray.”

When my grandparents arrived, my name was called and I walked into the principal’s office. “All set, Janie?” he asked as he crossed my name off the list.

“Yes, sir.”

“She is a very good student,” he said to my grandfather. He did not say anything about my behaviour outside the classroom.

“Don’t forget, we’ll see you in August,” he said.

“Over my dead body,” I said to myself.