

Chapter 9

THE most difficult adjustment I had had to make upon entering the boarding school had been accepting the fact that I was no longer the important person that I had been at home—or liked to believe I was anyway. I was just one of the crowd of little savages who had to be saved and anglicized.

What a tremendous feeling it was to be back home again, away from the rigid regimentation and rules, rules, rules. Back home where love no longer was a rationed luxury restricted to three hours on Saturday afternoons, where I was free once more—free to roam, free to think, free to love, laugh, cry, and be happy.

I informed my grandparents of my decision not to return to school, and they promised to talk to the Indian agent when he came that summer to see what could be done about my staying home while attending classes.

When they heard that the agent had arrived, my grandparents dressed in their best clothes: my grandfather in his shiny, threadbare navy-blue suit and my grandmother in her red-checked blouse and her plaid skirt that hung down to her mocassins.

“Come in, come in,” the agent said when we entered the minister’s office, which he used on his short annual visits.

“William Matthews,” my grandfather introduced himself.

“William Matthews, William Matthews. Oh, yes! William Esquinimau!” said the agent, leafing through the large maroon book in front of him. “What can I do for you?”

“This is my granddaughter, Janie,” said my grandfather pushing me forward. “She doesn’t like the school here and we would like to have her live with us this winter while she goes to school.”

“Where are her parents? Why aren’t they here?” he asked impatiently.

“She lives with us.”

“Oh, I see. I’m afraid your granddaughter *has* to live at the school. You know the rules.”

“Yes, I know. But we live here all winter,” argued my grandfather.

“William, you know that *all* the children have to live at the school. We spend a lot of money building schools for the Indian children so they can live in comfort, and it would be a waste of money if these children didn’t use these schools. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, but she’s only one child. Maybe if she doesn’t live at the school, someone else will have a chance to go to school.”

“I’m sorry,” said the omnipotent agent. “Once the children start school, they have to stay there until they are sixteen—Janie is only eight. If we let your granddaughter live at home, every parent on the island will want to take his child out of school. We are trying to help you people but we cannot do that without your co-operation. Of course, if you insist on taking your granddaughter out of the school, I cannot stop you, but that will be the end of her education. We cannot allow her to attend classes while she is living at home. . . . You can go now. I’m very busy.”

“gishee-ewe? gishee-ewe?” my grandmother asked as soon as we were out of the office. My grandfather translated.

“*Wasa!* noojin-mijigh-dakso!” my grandmother exclaimed, her voice full of hate.

I spent the summer fishing, hunting, and picking berries,

trying to decide if living at the school was worth an education. In the end it was the time I spent at Sandy Big-Nose's cabin that convinced me to return.

I spent more time at Sandy's that summer than I had ever done before because his cabin was so very interesting and informative. Every inch of it was papered with old magazines and newspapers, and I spent more time reading his walls than I did talking to him or listening to his stories. Noticing my preoccupation with his walls, one day he asked, "jinisdo-nan ah?"

"I think so," I answered modestly. After two years of school, I could read anything.

"gawshone jigjee weej-heen," he said, digging into the box which sat at the foot of his handmade bed, and lifting out an old Eaton's mail-order catalogue. I had heard about his little problem.

"wabim mah oo," he said. "me-eweshoo ah?" he asked appreciatively, pointing to a blonde, blue-eyed model in the catalogue. I agreed she was indeed very beautiful.

"ee-yimdah mah oo," he asked, pointing to the description under the model's picture.

I read, translating as I went along: "Delightfully feminine . . . exquisite lace over satin. Please state correct size. Misses' sizes: 10, 12, 14, 16. Also in half-sizes. Red, black or white. \$17.99."

"nimyigh-mawo-heewahwah in eesquosh?" he asked.

"nimwee," I answered, hating to disappoint him. There was no mention of the girl.

"wasa," he said sadly. It seems that he had ordered the girl and Eaton's had sent him an evening dress. He was incensed that Eaton's would send him a dress when they knew full well that he did not wear dresses and that what he really needed was the girl. He wondered why they had put the model's picture in the catalogue if she weren't for sale. "nimoowee meen nigimsinheejan," he announced disgustedly. Eaton's had just lost a potential customer.

By the end of the summer, I had read each wall at least five times, and I had learned all there was to know about the Royal Family and World War II. I suggested to Sandy that

he put up some clean paper; the other was getting yellowed and unreadable. He promised that someday he would.

I decided then that the only way I was going to get any new reading material was to return to school. I announced my change of plans to my grandparents who agreed it was a good idea. My grandfather added that maybe someday I would be smart enough to work for the Indian agent, but I had other plans. I was going to work as a maid at the nursing station.

I had no illusions about the school now, and I found the second year infinitely better than the first. That winter we were hit with an epidemic of influenza.

Mrs. Holland was one of the first people to come down with it, and Reverend Dawson took over her classes, unfortunately for us. He was stricter and more eagle-eyed than she had ever been. One day Reverend Dawson noticed a boy resting his head on his desk, obviously not paying attention. The principal tiptoed around him and whacked him over the head with a yardstick. The boy slipped off his seat onto the floor in a dead faint.

Reverend Dawson's usually ruddy face turned white. He stared at the boy for a few seconds before carrying him out like a sack of flour. He returned to announce that the boy had recovered from his fainting spell, but had the flu.

One by one we came down with it until every child and staff member was in bed. The older girls were dragged out of bed every day to prepare the meals and wash the dishes, then sent back to bed as soon as they had completed their work. Every morning at ten and every afternoon at three, we received some sort of medication that tasted like milk heavily laced with pepper—probably somebody's home-remedy.

As sick as we were, we were ordered out of bed three or four times a day to brush our teeth or wash. One morning while we were standing around, naked, as usual, from the waist up, Reverend Dawson came through the washroom. (It was not unusual for him or the male members of the staff to walk unannounced through our washroom or through the dining-room at bath time.) Having nothing to hide, we juniors

stood around unconcerned, but the older girls scattered in all directions, shrieking and trying to cover themselves.

One of the intermediate girls, who was washing her face, suddenly keeled over, dropping her nightgown in the process, right in front of the principal. He looked bewildered for a second, then, his face crimson, he fixed the girl's nightgown and scooped her up in his arms. When he demanded to know which bed was hers, all he got in return was giggling, which embarrassed him all the more.

We were not allowed to visit with our families for several weeks, even after we had all recovered from the flu. I received word that my grandfather was gravely ill and was asking for me.

"I cannot let you go to see your grandfather," Reverend Dawson told me in his office. "It would not be fair to the other children. Your grandfather is very sick, but I'm sure he'll be all right. You can see him when this is all over. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I know you wouldn't like it if we let one of the other children go home when you couldn't. It isn't fair to give special privileges to one child. Besides, we wouldn't want you bringing more germs back to the school, would we?"

"No, sir."

"I'm glad you're being such a good girl about this, Janie. Don't worry about your grandfather. He'll get better. We're all praying for him."

I did not worry about him because I too believed that he would get better. He would never go off and leave me. Death was something that happened to other children's relatives, not mine. I was still too young to grasp the full meaning and the finality of death.

Several nights later, as I lay in bed, I heard Miss Quinlan tell Miss Moore that my grandfather had just died.

"Hey, my grandfather just died," I told the girl next to me.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I had a vision," I fibbed. "An angel told me." We had often been told that if we were very good on earth, we might sometimes feel the gentle touch or hear the whisper of the

angels' wings as they hovered around guarding us. Every child in the school had at one time or another claimed to have been so honoured, but not I. I did not seem to be in the mainstream of the guardian angels, and I had always felt extremely guilty about this. This was my chance to redeem myself.

"You're crazy! Go back to sleep," she replied disgustedly.

"I am not crazy! I know he's dead. Wait until tomorrow. Miss Quinlan will stop me after breakfast and tell me. Wait and see."

Sure enough, as we were all filing out after breakfast, Miss Quinlan stopped me in front of everyone. "I have some bad news for you, Janie," she said quietly. "Your grandfather died last night."

"See? I told you so," I told the girls smugly. My grandfather's death was still unreal to me. It was all a big adventure. Any day now I was going to see him, and he would smile that wonderful smile and tell me that everything was all right.

"Wasa! She really did see an angel last night," they said. "What did the angel look like?"

"You know what they look like. They have yellow hair and blue eyes. Well, this angel had yellow hair and blue eyes."

"Are you ever lucky," they told me enviously.

It was not until my grandmother came to see me that I began to comprehend what I had lost. "He wanted to see you so much before he died," she sobbed. "Do you know he cried when they told him you could not come? He kept saying, 'If only I could hold her and kiss her one more time.' He wanted me to tell you that he loved you very much. . . . Come and translate for me. I want to see Reverend Dawson about something." Now I was sobbing too, but I agreed.

As we walked into his office, he jumped up and grabbed my arm. "Don't you know you are not supposed to go near the Indians?" he whispered. "There's still a lot of sickness going around and we certainly don't want any more of it around here."

"She wants me to interpret for her," I said.

He sighed. "Well, I suppose it doesn't make any difference now. What does she want?"

“jahgone natwhydimin isdook?” I asked my grandmother.

“jigjee-idt-danah eemhanooj-ah?” she asked.

“She wants to know if I can go to the funeral.”

“No! No! Absolutely not!” was his answer.

“nimwee ewe.”

“jahgaw-ewe ahk?” she asked, puzzled.

“She wants to know why not?”

“Now, Janie, you *know* why. We cannot give one child special privileges because it wouldn’t be fair to the others. If you went, then everyone in the school would have to go.”

I translated. “jahgaw-ewe mak wahjahgah eetodahj oowashitch?” she asked.

“She wants to know why the other children can’t go.”

“Tell her we do not want the children near the Indians right now. The Indians are sick and we do not want the children coming down with the flu again.”

I told her what he had said. She insisted on knowing why he was refusing to grant a dying man’s wishes.

“I’m sorry, Janie,” Reverend Dawson answered, shaking his head in exasperation. “It just wouldn’t be fair to the other children. Tell her you can watch the funeral from the school yard.”

I repeated what he had said. My grandmother exploded. “*Wasa! nooj mijigh-dak-sisjoo!*”

“What did she say?” he asked.

“I dunno,” I shrugged.

He sensibly decided not to pursue the matter. He could probably tell by the tone of her voice that whatever she had said was not complimentary. “That’s a good girl. Tell your grandmother that you’re a very good girl. I’m certain she’ll like to hear that,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“gishee-ewe?” she asked.

I told her I was a good girl.

“nooj mijigh-dak-sisjoo!” she repeated vehemently.

The funeral was a dismal affair, attended by only the few relatives who were not too sick to drag themselves out of bed. The day was cold and blustery, and I watched, from the school yard, as the black figures huddled together against the

white backdrop of snow and sky. It was not until I saw the pine coffin lowered slowly into the ground that my loss really hit me. The blinding tears flowed freely as I mourned the loss of my beloved grandfather and realized yet another loss, something I could not yet put into words, something intangible—the freedom to be a human being.