# GENIESH

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# *An Indian Girlhood*

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*new press*
Toronto
1973

ISBN 0-88770-202-3

Design / Peter Maher

new press
Order Department
553 Richmond Street West
Toronto, Ontario
M5V 1Y6

Manufactured in Canada

*To my mother, whose lack of faith made the story possible, and to my husband, whose faith made the book possible.*

The names of all the white people who worked at the Indian schools mentioned in this book have been changed. The events actually happened. We genuinely regret any inadvertent similarity between these fictitious names and the names of real persons.

# *Chapter 1*

NO white person employed by the Hudson Bay Company shall fraternize with the natives [Indians]." This was a rule of the "Bay"—as the company is more commonly known—which I, the daughter of a Cree Indian and a Scotsman, can attest is more often ignored than obeyed on the small island of "jisah-seebee" (Great River) where I was born.

The island was named "jisah-seebee" by the Cree Indians of northern Quębec because it is situated at the mouth of a great, swift river—the Fort George River. Fort George, as the river and the island were named by unimaginative fur traders, is located on the eastern shores of James Bay in northern Quebec, Canada, about eight hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle.

When I was born in 1940, the island was inhabited by approximately twenty white people, seven hundred Cree Indians—who came from their trapping grounds for two months each summer to trade with the Bay—and forty

"white-status" Indians, descendants of Indian women who had married white men.

In Canada, any Indian woman who marries a non-Indian automatically becomes "white" or an "enfranchised" Indian. Her name is struck from the tribal records, and any offspring from the marriage are considered white. On the other hand, any white woman who marries an Indian automatically becomes "Indian", and her name is added to the tribal records. Any offspring from this marriage are considered Indian.

Our island was five miles long, one mile wide and covered with pine trees. In its centre, five distinct communities clustered together: the Catholic mission, the Coaster village with its huddle of tepees, the Hudson Bay Company compound, the Anglican mission, and the Inlander village. (Coasters are Indians who trap along the coast; Inlanders trap inland.)

Scattered around the fringes of these communities were the tar-paper shacks and one-room log cabins of the permanent residents of the island, those who could no longer trap—the aged and the white-status Indians, who on losing their native status had, consequently, lost their trapping rights—and those who did not need to trap—the few Indians who were lucky enough to get the few menial positions available at the white settlements.

My grandfather was one of the lucky ones. As an employee of the Bay, he did everything from waiting on customers to collecting the garbage. It was through him that my mother acquired the coveted position of the Bay manager's maid, and it was there that she met my father, one of the company clerks. Falling in love had been simple, but getting married was more difficult.

Without the company's permission, it would have been impossible; but since my mother had proved herself to be a clean, trustworthy, hard-working girl, the manager and his wife, acting for the main office, gave their consent. My father's parents, thinking that my mother, whom they had never met, couldn't be a "dirty savage" if their son was

willing to face the consequences of an inter-racial marriage, also gave their consent.

Only after he had gained the vitally important consent of these two parties did my father approach my maternal grandparents, and they, after holding several pow-wows with the whole family—aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, anyone even remotely connected with the family, which meant practically everyone on the island—consented to the union.

It was during these long, touchy, and occasionally stormy negotiations that I made my untimely presence known and all plans came to a grinding halt. My mother, who had been considering the consequences of such a marriage and who had more or less resigned herself to them, suddenly rejected the proposal when her suspicions of me were confirmed.

Why? Because, according to the over-zealous missionaries who had come to the island to save my people from eternal hell and damnation, *all* white men drank, robbed, raped, murdered, beat their wives and children, had countless extra-marital affairs, and eventually ran off with their mistresses, leaving their poor defenceless wives and children to starve. Only those on the island, those "chosen and sent by God," could be trusted. This type of preaching was meant to scare the young, curious Indian maidens and to keep the races pure—mainly the white race, I suspect.

My mother, who went to church every day and twice on Sundays, believed all this propaganda and decided that a few months, or possibly, years of happiness would not be worth the years of misery and deprivation that were to follow. While she had been willing to face the risks by herself, she could not subject an innocent baby to such a depraved society.

Her refusal, of course, created a scandal. Nobody could understand why a girl in her condition would turn down any marriage proposal. Even a white man was better than nothing.

When it became a glaring fact that I was on the way, my father was transferred to another store two thousand miles away to save the company further embarrassment. He left

weeping and begging my obstinate mother to reconsider, but she was adamant. It was not the man that she was rejecting, but his society.

Shortly afterwards, he joined the Air Force and was sent overseas. While he was stationed in Europe, I was born and given the grand old Indian name of Janie Margaret Matthews. Everyone, however, called me Geniesh, which means Little Janie.

Before my first birthday, my father was shot down on a bombing mission over Germany. My mother received a letter from him, written a few days before his death, in which he had written that should he survive the war, the first thing he would do upon being discharged would be to return to the island to see his new daughter and marry her, my mother.

She returned to work and left me in the care of my doting grandparents who had been waiting impatiently for this moment, this second chance at parenthood. The circumstances were not exactly what they had hoped for, but they did not care. Once their own children had reached their teens, they, like most Indian parents, were eager to push them into production so that they could be surrounded by grandchildren in their old age. They were a loving and over-indulgent couple.

My grandmother was a huge moose of a woman who weighed about three hundred pounds. Her face was typically Indian—dark brown, deeply furrowed with wrinkles, with the aquiline nose and high cheek-bones—but her hair was not; it was jet-black all right, but it was also naturally curly. A generous freak of nature had endowed her with this un-Indian and enviable trait, a trait which was inherited by all of her four daughters and quite a number of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but which completely bypassed me.

My grandfather was exactly opposite to my grandmother in size. He was a wizened-up old man, small and thin, probably weighing no more than 130 pounds. His skin was rough and leathery; his hands gnarled and misshapen like the weather-tortured branches of a tree. His brown wrinkled face was topped by a shock of white hair which stood out in all

directions. He also had one non-Indian trait. He had blue eyes! Unlike my grandmother's ancestry—her parents were born before the first white men settled in the area—his was suspect. To me, though, the colour of his eyes was not unusual. I thought all Indian children had blue-eyed grandfathers.

Their backgrounds were also different. She had been raised in the old Indian tradition, learning from an early age all the skills—skinning game, tanning hides, weaving nets, treating various ailments—she needed to become a good wife and mother. She could not speak a word of English because she had never gone to school. She had been too old when the first regular day school was started in 1907. The school was mostly for religious instruction and the learning of Cree syllabics, however. Only the names of the days, months, and numbers were taught in English. Arithmetic—only the basics of addition and multiplication—was added to the curriculum about 1928. Even when the first boarding school opened in 1933—when my mother was thirteen—the half-day sessions were still mostly on religion.

My grandfather, however, spoke English well. He had learned it in his youth, which was spent guiding the skippers of trading schooners and steamers through the unfamiliar and ever-changing waters of James and Hudsons Bays, and acting as interpreter for the traders as they bartered with flour, tea, sugar, blankets, and guns for the furs of the Indians.

In the mixture of English and Cree that he always used when speaking to me, he would spend hours, whittling as he did so, telling me about the things he had seen in his travels—strange instruments which carried your voice for miles, vehicles which did not need dogs to pull them; subjects much too alien to me to be believable.

With these eager, loving grandparents to raise and spoil me unmercifully, my mother was once more urged to settle down to the serious business of finding a husband. An unwed mother was easily forgiven, but a spinster, one who was nearing the age of twenty-one and one whose friends had all married and were raising children, was a disgrace to her family forever. So, all the daring and willing braves of the

tribe were brought forth before my mother; she, being in no rush to get married, rejected them one by one. The gentle urgings of concerned relatives and friends became more and more emphatic until my reluctant mother was made to see the error of her ways, and she was married at the unheard-of age of twenty-one.

She married a white-status Indian boy from another village, one whose parents had been more insistent than most, and in so doing she automatically became white. My status, however, did not change; I was still a native.

In the summer of 1944, when I was three, the newlyweds left the island so that my stepfather could return to his job in Moosonee, Ontario. I stayed behind with my grandparents. Being young, and having lived with them anyway all my life, I adjusted rapidly to this new arrangement. Having a mother in another village was like having Christmas every month as each plane that arrived brought parcels of clothing, toys, and candy for me, much to my great-grandmother's dismay.

My great-grandmother was about eighty, but she still spent her winters trapping in the bush, returning only for the summer months to live with us. I loved listening to her stories in the evenings as we squatted on the aromatic pine-covered tepee floor. Each spring we moved from our one-room cabin to our summer home by the seashore, a huge tepee only a few feet from our cabin. The extra space was needed to accomodate the numerous relatives who had returned from their trapping grounds.

My great-grandmother constantly told me how spoiled I was. When she was young, she said, she never had candies and chocolates. She had been ten when her parents made their first visit to the island, shortly after the first clergyman settled there in 1852. She told me their first gift upon arrival was a bag of flour from the other Indians, but after trying to eat it raw, her parents had decided it wasn't much of a gift. One of the other Indians showed them how to mix it with goose grease and water and then cook it on a stick over the fire. This early version of bannock had been so delicious that she and her parents, in spite of the Indians' warnings, had

eaten it all while it was still hot. That night they suffered terribly from violent cramps, their stomachs distended and hard as rocks. Apparently, it took some time before they could eat it without any ill effects.

She told me also of how the early missionaries, after proving their superiority by making good their threats of strange illnesses—smallpox, TB, etc.—and death if the Indians did not accept the white man's God, had gradually converted everyone to Christianity. (Some of the Indians had been ready for conversion by the time the clergy arrived. The managers of the Hudson Bay posts had acted as missionaries when they had nothing else to do.) Upon conversion, the Indians had been christened with biblical names to ensure their entry into heaven. She blamed all illnesses, especially mine, on lack of faith.

Actually I was a very healthy child. I had to be for self-preservation. When I was ill, my doting grandmother always took the precaution of dosing me with her own home-made remedies after I had been treated by the nurse. It was the dreaded combination of the white man's blunt hypodermics and marble-sized pills and my grandmother's sinus-clearing, eye-irritating, and throat-searing remedies which forced me to keep many of my ailments to myself.

I was not always successful, however. I vividly remember waking up one sunny morning with every part of my body aching and my throat feeling as if I had swallowed a bottle of lye. I bounced out of bed as sprightly as I could, but my observant grandmother felt my burning forehead and gently pushed me back under the goose-down comforter. Then I heard her yell the dreaded words, "ndo-wabin mah ndi-queensquogh," to some child outside.

The nurse wasted no time on preliminaries, but thrust a thermometer in my mouth as soon as she entered. My grandmother was gesticulating wildly, clutching at her throat and pointing at mine. The nurse nodded and smiled at her. She took the thermometer out of my mouth and shook her head sadly. She came at me with a flashlight and a tongue depressor, stuck her tongue out and said, "Aaah."

I shook my head violently and clenched my teeth. My grandmother said sweetly, "wabtee mah. dahbah jig-ahk-heok."

I could not believe that it would not hurt. My grandmother had threatened me with the nurse much too often. I shook my head more violently.

"wabtee! yahgaw jig-oot-dumhoodin!" she said, a little less sweetly, but since she had hit me only twice in my life—once for using her favourite pipe to blow bubbles, and once for squeezing the chicken-pox pustules on a friend of mine—I knew she was bluffing.

Letting out a war whoop, I jumped out of bed and raced past them across the room. I made a dash for the door and darted outside around to the back of the cabin. I glanced back to see the nurse, clutching her flashlight and tongue depressor in one hand and hiking up her tight skirt with the other, breathing down my neck. My grandmother was nowhere in sight. I whizzed around the corner of the cabin hoping to lose them in the dense bushes behind the outhouse.

Suddenly, a fat brown hand grabbed me from the open window and jerked me back against the cabin. My sneaky grandmother, who had often chased me all over the island to force some of her home-remedies down my throat, had anticipated my usual escape route. She yanked me inside, muttering about all the terrible things she was going to do to me as soon as the nurse left, as I kicked and screamed. She threw me on the bed, and before I could jump up, she plunked all three hundred pounds of herself on my stomach.

The air exploded from my bursting lungs, and as I opened my mouth to take a breath, the nurse, who had come racing inside, laughing, rammed her tongue depressor down my throat. Again she shook her head sadly. She pulled out a monstrous hypodermic from her black bag and proceeded to fill it with white liquid right in front of me. My grandmother shifted her weight, rolled me over slightly, and the nurse jabbed the blunt needle into my rigid backside. Only after the nurse had yanked the needle out did my grandmother let me go.

The nurse, still laughing, reached into her bag and pulled out a container of pills which she handed to my beaming grandmother. They walked to the door, laughing and nodding, and shook hands.

By then my lungs were fully inflated once more, and I started shrieking. My grandmother put her arms around me and rocked me gently, telling me what a horrible person the nurse was and how much better I would feel as soon as she heated up some goose-grease and brewed one of her own cures for me.

She rubbed my throat, back, and front with warm goose-grease and forced a few spoonfuls down my throat for good measure. The vile-tasting concoction which she had brewed was also forced down my throat by squeezing my nostrils shut until I had drunk every drop.

I lay in bed for several days, pulling the chinking from between the logs to pass the time, smelling like a half-decayed body while the penicillin and my grandmother's obnoxious brews and salves did their work. Sheer will-power and a deep sense of self-preservation, I believe, cured me more than either the white man's medicine or my grandmother's.

My grandmother had a cure for everything—sips of warm goose-grease for coughs; goose or bear grease, sometimes rancid, rubbed on the chest and back for colds; weak tea or mother's milk for snow blindness; black bear bile for liniment; beaver castors for poultices, the oil from the castors for sores and rashes; liquid from boiled and strained beaver castors to prevent hemorrhaging after childbirth; and brews from certain plants for various aches and pains.

Sometimes I questioned her cures because all they did was substitute one form of pain or discomfort for another. For a headache, she tied a piece of cloth or a bandanna tightly around my head. All that was missing was the feather. On our island, an Indian wearing a headband was not necessarily reverting to the old ways; he could simply be trying to get rid of a headache.

Another of my grandmother's questionable remedies was

wrapping beaver or muskrat fur around a sore or an ache. When the ache started to itch, she considered the cure effective.

Summer was the time for gathering medicinal herbs and my grandfather's clover-like tobacco, which he dried and saved for the times the Bay ran out of regular tobacco. This was done on fishing or berry-picking trips. My grandparents always took me along but invariably rejected my contributions: too many flowers, not enough flowers; leaves too dull, leaves too shiny; plant too big, plant not big enough.

The only thing I ever learned to recognize was a spicy shrub which when brewed with tea was my grandmother's favourite drink. If brewed for a short period, the tea is slightly spicy and not unpleasant, but she always brewed it until it was strong and pungent. Then she would take a sip, smack her lips appreciatively, and say, "ahk mac tea!" I preferred the store-bought variety myself.

This brew was also taken for upset stomachs, headaches, and coughs. My grandmother, who believed strongly in taking every conceivable precaution, insisted I drink her gut-dissolvant tea each time she brewed it. I shuddered whenever I saw her taking out her precious leaves and throwing them into the teapot.

"min-gaw oo," she'd say when the brew had cooled down enough. "nastahbaw jig-weej-heegune."

When I complained that it did not make me strong and healthy, that I suffered violent cramps, a throbbing headache, and violent coughing fits from the bitter tonic, she would urge me to drink more of it. She told me I got this reaction because I did not drink enough of it, and I argued that I would probably die if I drank more than I did. She would insist, invariably adding, "wasa! mingawshj oo. oowhan jahminheesk gahdigh-anah?"

Not wishing to be responsible for her early demise, I would give in to her unreasonable demands, whining and complaining all the while.

"wasa! oowah-eejanhee naspit-what?" she constantly wondered, but I knew the answer. It was my white-tainted blood that made me so stubborn, so curious, so pesky, so

contrary—all the traits a good, obedient, and pliant little Indian was not supposed to have. I had heard people say it often enough. It was never explained to me why full-blooded Indian children behaved exactly as I did.

## *Chapter 2*

IT was dark before the tide was high enough for the captain to negotiate the river's sand-bars, and I, having waited impatiently all afternoon, hopped around excitedly while the supply barge was anchored and secured firmly to the anchor posts along the river bank. Two dark figures, each of them carrying a bundle, emerged from the barge and walked slowly up the dock. Suddenly feeling extremely shy and speechless, I wrapped myself in the voluminous folds of my grandmother's skirt and watched as the strange woman from the barge handed her small white bundle to my grandmother. The stranger knelt down, grabbed me, and smothered me with kisses. I stood rigidly, unresponsive and frightened, while the woman, tears streaming down her cheeks, hugged and kissed me.

"jig-ahwee oo," sniffled my grandmother, but I did not believe that the affectionate woman was my mother. I had never seen her before. "dan-eeteech ah?" my grandmother wondered, unable to understand my sudden reserve.

I was bewildered. Everybody was crying, sniffling, laughing, hugging, and kissing at the same time, reminding me of the big family reunions every spring when the trappers returned from the bush. Even my stoic grandfather was crying.

Then the strange man with my mother came up to me. "ah-wah Geniesh?" he asked no one in particular. "Of course it's me," I thought indignantly. He gave me a quick peck on each cheek and walked away. It was my stepfather.

The adults laughed and cried all the way back to the tepee. As soon as we were inside, my grandmother eagerly unwrapped the bundle and pulled out a squalling, red-faced

baby. "nooj mee-eweshoo," she cooed. Turning to me, she said, "asdim mah. oojam jisheemsh."

I went over hesitantly and kissed my baby sister Lillian dutifully. I could not see what they saw in her. She was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. Her face was all screwed up; there were great wattles of flesh where her neck should have been; and her jet-black hair standing on end reminded me of porcupine quills. Her loud wailing was enough to drive anyone crazy, but the proud, beaming adults seemed to find great joy in listening to her.

"oojam gudick jisheemsh," my grandmother urged, pointing at a scrawny, runny-nosed, wispy-haired toddler who was stuffing her mouth with fresh bannock and bouncing up and down on *my* grandfather's lap.

The sudden news that this intruder was my other sister, Sharon, was too much. I had been told about both of them, of course, but I had chosen to ignore such annoying facts, preferring to think of myself as an only child.

With her face all smeared with butter and strawberry jam, she gave me a wide grin, and I kissed her quickly on top of the head. "meeyoy-im mac," I was told, but I refused. I was willing to kiss her, but nobody was going to get me to put my arms around her and pretend that I loved her.

"jiwab-danah in suitcase, Geniesh?" my mother asked. "nandowabt int jahgone gahbat-hamoodan."

"Now this is more like it," I thought, as I opened up the suitcase in eager anticipation. There lay a beautiful golden-haired doll. As I reached in to pick her up, the lid came crashing down on my knuckles. I let out an indignant howl and rushed over to my grandmother, who was still admiring the obnoxious baby. I sat down beside her where I sulked for the rest of the evening. It was the first time in my life that I had had to share my grandparents' affections with anybody and I did not like it one bit.

My new family stayed with us for several weeks before moving into their own cabin. I moved in with them, but the arrangement did not last very long. Feeling that my mother was not giving me the undivided attention that I deserved, I moved back in with my grandparents. Everybody seemed

contented with this arrangement. I certainly was, because I was the centre of attraction once more.

This arrangement is quite common in my tribe. The grandparents, or other close relatives, will sometimes "adopt" a child during the mother's illness or pregnancy. Depending on the child, this can work into a permanent arrangement. The grandparents are happy at having a child around in their old age; the mother, relieved of some of the work, is also happy. And since the child is free to move back any time, or eat and sleep with his parents, he does not feel neglected or abandoned.

In time, however, I became accustomed to having other children around. I had no choice. My aunts and uncles were settling down and raising families, keeping my grandmother busy delivering babies. We did not have a doctor and the nurse, usually a practical nurse, did not deliver babies, so the old women of the tribe acted as midwives.

Births were always a big mystery to the children. We were never told until the actual delivery that a baby had been expected, and I was six before I unravelled the mystery of where babies come from.

I had invited myself along on a seine-fishing trip to the rapids about twenty miles up the river from the island, and we were on our way by dawn. The group consisted of five young children, two teen-aged boys, Willie and John, my aunt Edna, her sister Marianne, and their mother Agnes, one of my numerous grandmothers. I had practically inherited all of them as relatives when Edna had married one of my uncles.

While playing during a lull in the fishing on the second carefree day at the rapids, we saw the old woman, Agnes, beckoning to us wildly. "jeebeok! jeebeok!" she yelled. "asdimik mah! shash jig-boosnahno."

"jah-gone ahk?" we whined, annoyed at having our trip cut short unexpectedly.

"baj-meok inhee," she ordered, pointing at the pile of packed burlap sacks outside the tepee.

We dashed back and forth between the tepee and the river handing her and the two boys our camping equipment as they

loaded everything into the small canoe. My aunt Edna and Marianne were nowhere in sight.

When everything had been loaded, John and Willie pulled the canvas off the tepee, and there sat my aunt, moaning and groaning quietly, with Marianne bent solicitously over her. The two boys helped her into the canoe and lay her down gently.

"dan-i-tick Eedna? jig-boonibmatsee wah?" we asked nonchalantly.

The old woman was appalled at our casual assumption that Edna was dying. She told us quickly that Edna was merely suffering from an upset stomach, and ordered us into the canoe. She and Marianne climbed in beside my writhing aunt, who was obviously suffering from more than an upset stomach.

We paddled and we paddled. The old woman refused to give us a moment's rest. My arms felt as if they were going to fall off. My grandparents had always let me paddle by myself when we were travelling down the river and I had never had any difficulty in getting us home. What I did not know was that there is an eight-knot current in the river and we would have drifted home anyway without anybody having to paddle. They always let me think that I was solely responsible for getting us safely home. This impatient and excitable woman, however, was not satisfied with our efforts.

"bim-shkash-juk!" she yelled repeatedly. "We are, we are," I thought peevishly, my muscles aching more with each strenuous pull.

My aunt's groans and moans got louder and longer. It was obvious to me that she was going to die any minute. The subject of death had always been treated so casually at home that I was not frightened at all.

"Kokum, nas-tahbaw ndeeyah-eeween," I complained, setting my paddle down.

"bim-shkashj!" Agnes yelled, thwacking me over the head with her hard paddle. Something exploded in my head. Birds chirped, and the most glorious display of Northern Lights I had ever seen shimmered before me. I picked up my paddle and did not complain again.

Suddenly, my aunt reached over and clutched her mother's arm. With perspiration running down her red face, and obviously with great effort, she urgently whispered one word, "shash!"

"Now? How did she know the time had come," I wondered.

"John! nahdah eesbeetah oot!" the old woman ordered, pointing at a sandy beach ahead. The knuckles of her hand were white against her dark brown skin as she strained mightily with each powerful stroke. She patted my aunt on the head. "gahbit! gahbit!" she whispered gently. It was the first time I had heard of anyone trying to hold off death.

By the time we scampered out of the canoe, she had thrown half the equipment up on the sand and was barking orders to us. Turning to my aunt, who was doubled over clutching at her stomach, she begged, "gahbit! gahbit!"

My suffering aunt, whom I admired immensely for being so cheerful at a time like this, managed a weak smile. "gishee-ewe ah, 'gahbit'?" she croaked. I did not know either how the old woman could expect her to wait.

We dashed around, bumping into each other as we tried to be helpful. "asa, nahgah! jimdadow mah meechwap," Marianne suggested in exasperation. The old woman thought it was a brilliant idea and they pitched the tepee before doing anything else.

The old woman handed me a water bucket. "Geniesh! ndowabt nibee!" she ordered. She sent the other children in search of firewood.

My poor aunt, who was trying desperately to hang on amidst all this confusion, kept whimpering between spasms, "shash, nahgah!"

"gahbit! gahbit!" repeated the old woman.

Finally the tepee was pitched, the firewood was collected, the water buckets were filled, and the fire was started. She sent the two boys back to the island to fetch some men, and ordered us to play quietly; she then disappeared into the tepee, from which emanated muffled screams.

For the first time, I began to get scared. I had not realized

that death was so prolonged or so painful. Suddenly, there was a hushed silence, followed a few seconds later by the sound of a loud slap, the squalling of an angry baby, and happy laughter. We looked at each other in total confusion.

A few minutes later, the old woman emerged from the tepee laughing and crying and wiping her face and arms. "meen ndowabt nibee, Geniesh," she said quietly, handing me a bucket. Then she said to no one in particular, "eeshquoshshe-ewe."

A baby girl? Where had she come from? "dant gah-ootin-ahk-nood?" I asked. She did not answer.

I asked Annie, who being seven and the oldest was an expert in these matters. She told us condescendingly that everyone knew where babies came from—they came from bumps in the ground. Bumps in the ground? I had always thought those bumps were rotted tree stumps, but I could not question an expert. I suggested excitedly that we dig around for more babies, but we spent the afternoon in vain.

At twilight we heard the sound of a kicker—a canoe with a small motor on its stern—in the distance. John and Willie were returning with three other men and the minister. They were towing our canoe behind them. The services of the minister were not needed as my aunt had made a miraculous recovery, but he disappeared inside the tent anyway while the others busied themselves tying the two canoes together side by side and loading them. The tepee was taken down and the canvas made into a makeshift stretcher for my relaxed and smiling aunt.

The heavy spray which sloshed over between the two canoes soon soaked us, but we did not care. It was the first time any of us had ever travelled by motor and we were all excited about this new means of travel. It certainly beat paddling.

In no time at all, we were back home, sopping wet, exhausted, but very excited about the baby we had found. My aunt was taken immediately to the nursing station, but my new-born cousin came home with us to be shown off to all the relatives and friends.

My grandmother tied a black knotted thread around the

baby's neck to ward off evil spirits, something that she would wear for the vulnerable first few months of her life. (The thread had to be black because evil spirits emerged only at night. Unable to see the thread in the dark, they became entangled in the knots until the first rays of sunlight could kill them.) Only after she had been safely protected was she allowed to join her mother.

"nooj ndee-dinan oowash gamskoojij," I murmured sleepily when my grandmother tucked me into bed. She agreed that finding a baby in the woods was indeed exciting.

Shortly after my cousin's birth, I was rummaging around as usual in my grandmother's personal belongings when I came across a washbasin with what looked like parchment paper wrapped around its bottom. I pulled out the basin and started peeling off the covering. My grandmother let out a shriek of alarm.

She explained it was a bag (the amniotic sac) which was wrapped around the baby when it was born. The grandmother saved the bag to ensure the new-born a long and happy life. If the bag tore when it was peeled off, the baby would die during infancy or early childhood. If it came off in one piece, however, the baby would have a long life. She peeled it off gently and it came off in one piece. She smiled happily as she folded it carefully and tucked it into her prayer book for safekeeping.

At last I knew the secret of life. I couldn't wait to tell Annie that babies did not come from bumps in the ground; they came wrapped up like cheese!

The gods of Grace and Fortune were not present on the blustery Sunday morning in December when I was born. I started out life with ants in my pants, literally.

My mother and my grandparents had spent the previous summer gathering the heavy, moisture-laden orange moss that was traditionally used as a diaper liner among my tribe. They had gathered enough to last me for six months, hanging it on poles outside the tepee so that it could dry in the sun. All foreign matter was removed before the moss was stored in burlap sacks.

On the day of my birth a bag of the moss was taken out of storage and taken inside the cabin to warm up. A small piece of it was placed on top of the old cast-iron stove briefly to soften, then spread on my diaper. After I had been cleaned up and protected against evil spirits by a black knotted cord around my neck, I was dressed in clothes made from flour sacks. (It was the middle of the war and nothing else had been available at the Bay.) Then I was bundled up in layers and layers of covers and laced tightly into my papoose carrier with my legs straightened and my arms placed rigidly against my sides.

Theoretically I was then supposed to stop crying and go blissfully to sleep, but I did not. I continued crying shrilly and hysterically for hours, despite all the love and attention that was lavished on me. I was swung in my little hammock, rocked, walked, bounced, fed, sung to, whispered to, and cradled; even the willow-and-fish-skin rattle made no impression on my apparently deaf ears. All this was done first with love and concern, then with a growing resentment and frustration as I refused to be pacified.

My family wondered what they had let themselves in for and wondered what kind of monster I would turn out to be. Only my grandfather, I am told, remained calm. Having had twelve children of his own, he suggested calmly that someone check my diapers before thinking too harshly of me.

When my grandmother unlaced me and unpinned my diapers, she found my bottom full of red bumps and crawling with tiny black ants. Apparently a colony of them had made a nest for themselves in the moss. The warmth from my body had awakened them from their hibernation and they had attacked when I threatened to drown them.

My grandmother washed me off and smeared my bottom with warm goose-grease. Another bag of moss was brought in and checked thoroughly before it was used. The other bags also proved to be free of ants.

My family, regretting their unkind words and thoughts, apologized profusely by hugging me and showering me with kisses. I was put in my hammock once more, and I slept blissfully for hours, a joy to one and all.

## *Chapter 3*

CHRISTMAS—or "Feast Day", as we knew it—was not much different from the way the rest of the nation celebrated the holiday. I immersed myself in all the preparations—pasting multi-coloured paper chains together with flour paste; putting harnesses on the dogs and hitching them to the sled so we could scour the island for the perfect tree, one that would reach to the ceiling; decorating the tree with shiny glass balls and tinsel; and stringing bright streamers and paper chains from every conceivable place. With my grandfather taking full advantage of one of his privileges of working for the Bay, that of having first choice of what the white people had left, our cabin was always the most gaudily decorated one on the island.

My seventh Christmas is the one I remember most because it was the last I would ever spend with my family. As usual, I was the first one up. Nailed to the wall above the double bed I shared with my grandparents was a flour sack, the twenty-five pound size, brimming to the top with presents. Some were wrapped in old magazine pages and tied with string or leather strips from animal skins; others were in paper bags or sugar sacks, untied. But the wrappings did not matter, it was the contents that interested me.

I yanked the sack off the wall and tore into it. I cast aside the dresses, socks, stockings, and sweater. I lingered lovingly over the blonde, blue-eyed doll, a bag of marbles, a rubber ball, and stuffed my mouth with the pound or so of candy and gum in the bottom of the sack. After I had played with my doll and made myself slightly nauseated from too much candy, I tried on my clothes.

"wasa! wabt mah oohee. wasa jinaw-ghin," I complained, twirling around to show my grandmother the cotton dresses that hung down to my ankles.

"ahksh gheebaw," she commented, adding that I would

soon grow into them. She took them and stored them away for future use.

"shash nighindowabmow nigahwee," I announced, realizing I was not getting any more presents from my grandparents.

They suggested that my mother might not appreciate such an early visit, but I continued dressing. My mother was always glad to see me. I pulled on my mukluks (sealskin boots) and my rabbitskin suit, a suit consisting of long pants and a hooded jacket, a suit my great-grandmother had made by stripping rabbit skins and weaving and knotting them together in the same way she made nets.

Out I went into the still dark, sub-zero morning, looking like a giant fifty-pound snowshoe rabbit struggling through the fresh snowdrifts. I barged into my mother's cabin. She was stoking the old wood-stove. "shash-ah?" she asked in surprise.

I replied that I had been up for a long, long time, then demanded that she hand over my sack immediately.

"bidmah jigoo-jamdin," she laughed, but I was not interested in hugs and kisses on Christmas Day. All I wanted was my precious sack.

"dan jee?" she asked, pointing to three flour sacks nailed to the wall. One was a huge twenty-five pound sack; the others were smaller.

"mough," I answered confidently, ripping the largest one off the wall. I reached in and pulled out more clothes, which I cast aside without a second glance. Then another doll, more candy, and an orange! I had not tasted one since summer. I did not know where she had found such a rare and priceless gift, and I relished it, segment by segment.

"shash nigmah-jeen," I announced after I had finished my orange. I reached for my rabbitskin suit.

"nim jiweegudskan-ah shtabid-stahwin?" she asked. I shook my head. I knew there was not much sense in trying on my clothes because they would be too big. "mough gudshk," she said, holding up a beautiful red dress trimmed with white lace.

I tried it on. The sleeves had to be folded up and the

bottom covered the top half of my mukluks. A perfect fit! "shash nig-jijshkan," I said, but she told me I could not wear it just yet. It was for the feast that afternoon.

Off I went again, dropping my sack off at my grandparents' cabin before making my rounds. I had many, many people to visit; not just relatives, but childless elderly people who treated me like one of their own. There was old woman Charlotte, a dear friend of my grandmother's; old Sandy Big-Nose and his sister; and old woman Sealhunter at the other end of the island.

During the previous winters, when most of the children were in the boarding school, and those who weren't were in the bush with their parents, I had had no one to play with, so I spent my days visiting the old people of the village. They always moaned loudly when I barged in, but they never failed to inquire about me if I missed a day. It was a rewarding pastime, especially at Christmas.

I spent the morning making my rounds, dropping flour sacks off at our cabin before going on to my next victim. Later I would have to return the sacks, usually with a small bag of flour, tea, sugar, or dried meat from my grandparents.

In the afternoon, I put on the dress my mother had given me, my new maroon sweater from my grandparents, my beautiful beaded moccasins from old woman Charlotte, my new navy-blue bloomers from my aunt Edna, and my new kelly-green scarf from old Sandy and his sister. I was ready for the feast. I felt like a princess. Reluctantly, I put on my rabbitskin suit just before leaving.

The feast, as always, was held at the Big House, so called because it was the only two-storey Indian house on the island, and it actually had six rooms instead of the usual one. The feast, a community effort with each Indian family donating what it could to it, had been prepared by the women.

My grandmother, one of the hostesses, shoved me into a small room with a plate of food: different kinds of cake, all of them hard as cement but delicious when dunked in tea; some boodin, a steamed pudding made in twenty-five to fifty pound batches; some dried goose-meat; and, of course, that nauseating mixture of powdered dried fish or meat and bear-

or goose-grease called pemmican, without which no feast could be complete.

Eating pemmican was like eating sawdust sprinkled liberally with sharp slivers, all held together by axle grease. The older Indians ate it with great gusto, but I had not yet acquired a taste for it, and after choking down a spoonful to please my grandmother, I set it aside.

The table was set and all the Indians with prestige—the chief, the councillors, the old men who worked for the church as catechists—and the oldest of the tribe were called. After the chief had thanked the Great Spirit for the abundance of food and for allowing the people to get together once more, they sat down to eat. It was not the leisurely meal that one might expect. Each person, after taking a few quick bites, whipped out a little bag or scarf, shovelled his left-overs onto it, and left to make room for someone else. The table was cleaned off, clean plates were set, food was heaped onto each plate, and the next shift of people came in. This went on until everyone had been served.

I sat quietly watching people stream in and out; the men in their brand new plaid flannel shirts, their hair oiled and slicked back; the women in their gaily coloured satin, silk, or brocade dresses and their new heavily beaded moccasins. Each woman danced a little jig or twirled around so everyone could get a good look at her new outfit. Everyone was in a good humour, laughing and joking.

As soon as the feast was over and the dishes washed and returned to their rightful owners, we trudged home with our loot: our share of the left-overs, and the gifts of dried meat, leather, dress material, tanned hides, furs, and food that people had left for my grandparents. My grandmother's prized acquisitions were giant sausages of goose grease or bear grease encased in animal intestines. I shuddered when I thought of the number of spoonfuls that were in those casings. I prayed that I would remain relatively healthy throughout the winter.

The dance that evening was also held at the Big House. While the violinist and the drummer were warming up, one

of the old men grabbed me and danced around the room with me. Everyone clapped. It was my big moment.

Before the first round was over, I was sound asleep. It had been a big day. Not even the loud music and the stomping of the dancers could awaken me. My grandparents also had had a big day and we left early. The crisp, clean winter air, so bitterly cold it burned the nostrils, jolted me awake as I staggered sleepily outside. With a great feeling of warmth and happiness, I ploughed happily through the snowdrifts behind my grandparents.

"Jiweebahdan-ah *Wisakedjak*?" asked my grandmother as she tucked me into bed. I nodded happily. Winter nights were the only time I got to hear the old legends because it was considered bad luck to tell them at any other time of the day or year. The gods would have been displeased otherwise.

I listened to her soft, soothing voice. "After the Creator had made all the animals and the first people, he said to Wisakedjak, 'Take good care of my people and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots: the ones that will hurt and kill them. And do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other.'

"But Wisakedjak did not obey the Creator. He let the creatures do whatever they wanted. Soon they were quarrelling, fighting, and killing.

"The Creator, greatly displeased, warned Wisakedjak, 'If you do not keep the ground clean, I will take everything away from you, and you will be miserable.' But Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator and did not obey Him. Becoming more and more careless and disobedient, he tricked the animals and the people and made them angry with each other. They quarrelled and fought so much that the earth became red with blood.

"This time the Creator was very angry. 'I will take everything away from you and wash the earth clean,' He said.

"Still Wisakedjak did not believe Him. He did not believe until the rains came and the streams began to swell. Day after day, night after night, the rains continued. The water in the rivers and the lakes rose higher and higher. At last they

overflowed their banks and washed the ground clean. The sea came up on the land, and everything was drowned except one Otter, one Beaver, and one Muskrat.

"Wisakedjak tried to stop the sea, but it was too strong for him. He sat down on the water and wept. Otter, Beaver, and Muskrat sat beside him and rested their heads on his lap.

"In time the rains stopped. Wisakedjak took courage, but he did not dare speak to the Creator. After long, sad thoughts about his misery, he said to himself, 'If I could get a bit of the old earth beneath the water, I could make a little island for us to live on.'

"He did not have the power to create anything, but he did have the power to expand what had already been created. As he could not dive and he did not know how far it was to the old earth, he did not know what to do. Taking pity on him, the Creator said, 'I will give you the power to remake everything if you will use the old materials buried under the water.'

"Still floating on the flood waters, Wisakedjak said to the three animals beside him, 'We shall starve unless one of you can bring me a bit of old ground beneath the water. If you will get it for me, I will see that you have plenty of fish to eat.'

"So the Otter dived, but he came up again without having reached the ground. A second time and a third time Wisakedjak praised the Otter and persuaded him to go down *once* more. When he returned the third time, he was so weary that he could not dive again.

" 'You are a coward!' taunted Wisakedjak. 'I am surprised by your weak heart. I know Beaver can dive to the bottom of the flood. He will put you to shame.'

"Then he turned to Beaver. 'You are brave and strong and wise. If you will dive into the water and bring up a bit of the old earth, I will make a good house for you on the new island I shall make. There you will be warm in the winter. Dive straight down, as a brave beaver does.'

"Twice Beaver dived and twice he came back without any earth. The second time he was so tired that Wisakedjak had to let him rest for a long time.

" 'Dive one more time,' begged Wisakedjak when Beaver had recovered. 'If you will bring me a bit of earth, I will make you a wife.' To obtain a wife, Beaver went down a third time. He stayed so long that he came back almost lifeless, still with no earth in his paws.

"Wisakedjak was now very sad. If Otter and Beaver could not reach the bottom, surely Muskrat would also fail. But he must try! He was their only chance.

" 'You are brave and strong and quick, Muskrat, even if you are small. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth at the bottom, I will make plenty of roots for you to eat. I will create rushes, so that you can make nice houses with them.

" 'Otter and Beaver are fools,' continued Wisakedjak. 'They got lost. You will find the ground if you dive straight down.'

"So Muskrat jumped head first into the water. Down and down he went, but he brought back nothing. A second time he dived and stayed a long time. When he returned, Wisakedjak looked at his forepaws and sniffed. 'I smell the smell of earth,' he said. 'Go down again. If you bring me even a small piece, I will make a wife for you, Muskrat. She will bear you many children. Have a strong heart now. Go straight down as far as you can go.'

"This time Muskrat stayed so long that Wisakedjak feared he had drowned. At last they saw some bubbles coming up through the water. Wisakedjak reached down with his long arm, seized Muskrat, and pulled him up beside him. The little creature was almost dead, but against his breast, his forepaws clutched a piece of the old earth!

"Joyously, Wisakedjak seized it, and in a short time, he had expanded the bit of earth into an island. There he, Muskrat, Otter, and Beaver rested and rejoiced that they had not drowned in the flood.

"Some people say that Wisakedjak obtained some bits of wood from which he made trees; that he obtained some bones from which he made the second race of animals. Others say that the Creator made all things again. He commanded the rivers to take salt water back to the sea. Then He created mankind, the trees, and the animals of today. He took from

Wisakedjak all power over people and animals, leaving him only the power to flatter and deceive. After all, Wisakedjak had played tricks upon the animals and people and had led them into much trouble.

"That is why the Indians tell many stories about him, to amuse themselves during the long winter evenings."

My grandmother kissed me gently and I snuggled deeper into the warm goose-down comforter. A perfect ending to a perfect day!

It was a wonderful childhood, full of fond memories, but it had to come to an end; partly through my own strong curiosity and stubbornness, but mostly because of the "system".

On our island were two boarding schools; one Catholic and one Anglican. Because the Indians, being trappers, were scattered all over northern Quebec for ten months out of each year, their children had to live at the school to get an education.

All the children at that time entered the Anglican boarding school because, except for one family, we were all Anglicans. Even though the Catholics promised clothes, food, and jobs to families who sent children to their school, they had less than five students from our island. Their students came from other Indian settlements on both sides of the bay. Our parents were too terrified by the constant threats of eternal hell and damnation to send their children to the Catholic school.

By Christmas I had already been attending classes for five months at the Anglican school as a day student—a "privilege" whose significance held no meaning for me at the time. I wanted to live at the school and could not understand my family's reaction whenever the subject was brought up. They cried and carried on as if I were about to move permanently from the island instead of just a few yards away.

The previous summer, when the time had come to register me at the boarding school and hand over my life to the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, my grandparents had dried their tears and had taken me down to the school.

We shuffled uncertainly into Reverend Dawson's office.

Reverend Dawson was also the school principal. He was short and stout with a ruddy complexion. The top of his head was completely bald and a fringe of white hair went around the back of his head from ear to ear.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have any more room," he greeted us. "She'll have to wait until next August."

My grandfather's face broke out in a radiant smile. "gish-she-ewe? gish-she-ewe?" my grandmother asked impatiently. My grandfather told her the terrible news. Her face lit up and she started to cry.

Throwing myself down at their feet, I beat the floor with my fists, kicked my legs in the air, and shrieked that I hated them all. It was all their fault. The temper tantrum I threw was unbefitting a stoical, unemotional, expressionless Indian child.

"Can she still go to school?" my grandfather asked.

"Yes, yes, yes. She can attend classes if she wants," Reverend Dawson replied quickly, possibly to get me out of his office immediately.

I was removed bodily from the office, and as soon as we were out of Reverend Dawson's hearing range, I was dropped unceremoniously on the ground. "gah madooshj! dan jigh-dighmisk eemhowjimow?" they scolded, but I did not care what the minister thought of me. I *had* to live at the school! "beejalkshoo-goomguj jigeedoot-heet-nan!" my grandmother threatened.

I surrendered. The missionaries had done their job well and I was terrified of Catholics. I did not want to live in some dumb old Catholic school; I wanted to live at "The St. Philip's Indian and Eskimo Anglican Residential School of Fort George, Quebec, Canada."

## *Chapter 4*

THE night seemed never ending. I tossed and turned, too excited to sleep. As soon as my grandmother arose and began her daily chores by starting the fire to heat the cabin and brew some tea, I hopped eagerly out of bed.

"Shhh!" she whispered. "gooshoom meen."

But sleep was impossible. It was my first day of school and I was determined not to be late. "If I am," I thought, "the principal will probably tell me they ran out of desks."

"wabim mah beesoomgan," she said, pointing at the clock. I looked at it but the numbers meant nothing. "goodaushj eeshbsh-ipewe," she explained, but even knowing it was six o'clock still gave me no idea how much longer I had to wait. However, I climbed back into bed reluctantly and watched her as she bustled about, heating a five-gallon bucket of water on the stove for my bath.

As soon as she felt the cabin was sufficiently warm enough, she let me out of bed. She bathed me thoroughly and shampooed my hair, then braided it. I donned the new clothes which I had received the previous Christmas, but which were still several sizes too large. My beautiful paisley cotton dress skimmed the tops of my navy-blue high-top track shoes.

My grandfather took his cracked shaving mirror off the shelf and handed it to me. I grinned back foolishly at the proud and excited girl in the mirror—her eyes twinkling, her face flushed with pride and happiness, and her silly ear-to-ear toothless grin.

"ahgoo mac," my grandfather said gently, prying the mirror out of my hands. "bitmah meetso."

I choked down the suddenly dry and tasteless bannock and tea. My excitement had become tinged with a hint of fear and uncertainty.

My grandparents decided that my grandfather would take

me to school, since he could speak English. Before we left, my grandmother checked my face and hands once more and made certain I had not spilled anything on my new dress. She put my sweater and coat on me.

"wasa! washa jishidow," I protested, but it was not the heat I was thinking of; I just did not want my beautiful dress covered up.

"nimoowee, yighdah jidshk oo-hee," she said sternly, buttoning me up. But as she bent over to kiss me, her eyes became misty with unshed tears. She tightened the knot in my kerchief once more as we left.

I skipped alongside my grandfather and pumped his arm up and down all the way to school. "wasa, Geniesh, gighspee-ewe mah," he complained, but I could not. Only unfeeling adults could walk on such an exciting day.

We went directly to Reverend Dawson's office. The principal was not in so we waited outside on the steps. A few minutes later he came running over from his home a few yards away, his face red, and his bald head shining with perspiration. He shook hands with my grandfather, then took out his handkerchief and started wiping the top of his head. I could sympathize with him because I was feeling extremely uncomfortable myself all bundled up for a blizzard on a hot August day.

"Take Janie around to the school yard and the other children will show her what to do," Reverend Dawson told my grandfather.

My grandfather took me around to the play yard, warning me to behave myself and to listen to the teacher. He gave me a quick kiss before he left.

My friends and I spent the next few minutes admiring each other. I admired their red plaid dresses, their red berets, their red wool cardigans, and their brown leather high-top shoes. They admired my blue paisley dress, my navy-blue track shoes, my maroon wool cardigan, my forest-green kerchief with big red roses all over it, and my thick army-blanket coat. Their clothes reeked of moth-balls; mine of wood smoke.

They were envious of my long braided hair, and I laughed at the length of their hair, so short that their ears stuck out.

Every single one of them had an extremely short, badly cut Dutch-boy hairstyle. With their berets perched on top of their heads, they looked as if a strong wind could easily snap their necks and blow their heads away.

When a bell rang, everyone started running for the door. "asdim, Geniesh," they yelled. "jeebee!"

I raced inside with them. I found myself in a huge square room, the walls painted a dark green below the wide moulding which ran around the room, half way between the floor and the ceiling. The walls above this moulding and the ceiling were painted a lighter green. From the middle of the ceiling hung a bare light-bulb. I had never seen such elegance! In one corner sat a small wooden table with a white enamel water-jug, a hand basin, a bar of pink Lifebuoy soap, one comb, and one hairbrush on top and a filthy multi-coloured striped hand-towel hanging on the side. Over the table was a small, soap-scummed mirror.

The girls formed a line behind this table, the youngest in front and the oldest in the rear. One of the girls grabbed me and pulled me into the line. "asdim," she whispered.

"jahgone ahk?" I asked.

"Be quiet!" bellowed the short, muscular, white woman standing beside the table. I cringed. She looked as if she could squash anyone with a gentle squeeze. She was wearing a double-breasted, gray tweed suit, and on her feet were thick heavy clunkers. Her dark brown hair was cropped short in a mannish cut. With her feet planted slightly apart and her arms crossed, she glowered at each of us in turn as we washed our hands and faces, dried ourselves on the smelly old towel, and combed and brushed our hair. Her name was Miss Moore.

As we finished washing up, we formed another line at the door leading into the classroom. When the last girl was finished, we marched into the classroom. It was painted the same colour as the playroom, the same single bare bulb hung from the ceiling, the wood floor was also unfinished. The only difference was the neat rows of brown desks and the huge desk in front of the blackboard. We waited in line while the teacher, Mrs. Holland, assigned us to our desks.

She was a frail old woman, her white hair wound tightly in braids around her head, her powder unevenly applied, and

her dark red lipstick slightly smeared. Her gray, watery eyes were set deep in her wrinkled and sagging face. A loose, ill-fitting grey dress covered her thin body. I felt an instant rapport with her. She was one of us.

There were about forty-eight of us, ranging in age from five-and-a-half to sixteen, from grades one to five. In our grade-one class were boys and girls in their teens who were starting school for the first time in their lives.

After Mrs. Holland had assigned us to our desks—two to a desk—she said, "Let us pray." I did not know much English but I knew what those words meant. We knelt beside our desks and prayed, then sang a hymn, and listened to her as she read from the Bible. I was extremely disappointed. I had not come to school to pray; I had enough of that at home and on Sundays. We spent the first thirty minutes of the morning in prayer and meditation, although they seemed like thirty hours to me. I was eager to start learning all about the white man's world. When the prayer period was over, however, we sang the National Anthem and pledged allegiance to the Canadian flag. We followed along as best we could, but the higher grades did all the singing and the pledging.

At last, we were ready to get down to business. Mrs. Holland called the roll, starting with the higher grades. I noticed that every time she called a name, the child whose name was being called raised his hand. I waited anxiously for my name because I had figured out the system and I was eager to prove to her how smart I was.

"Janie Esquinimau," she called. I looked around. I thought I knew every child in school, but it was the first time I had heard that name. It must be some girl from another village, I decided. Again, "Janie Esquinimau". Everyone looked around to see who the new girl was. Finally that frail old lady came storming over to where I sat. "Janie Esquinimau," she snapped as she raised my hand for me.

I shook my head. "Janie Matthews," I mumbled.

She shook her head. "No! Janie Esquinimau," she said firmly.

I shook my head. "Janie Matthews," I mumbled, a little less certainly.

She shook her head vehemently. "No! No! Janie Esquini-

mau!" she shouted in my ear.

I nodded my head. "If she wants to call me Janie Esquinimau," I thought, "that is her right. After all, she is white." I could not understand, however, why mine was the only name to be changed. I could only wait until my wise old grandfather could tell me the reason.

The rest of the roll-call went smoothly. Everybody was present. It was only after she was satisfied that no one had played hookey that we got down to learning, starting with the *ABC*'s printed permanently across the top of the blackboard. We struggled through these until recess.

After recess, our scribblers, rulers, pencils, and erasers were handed out. While Mrs. Holland worked with the other grades on their reading, writing, and arithmetic, we practised writing our letters. I spent the morning trying laboriously to perfect my inch-high scrawl, realizing for the first time just how difficult school was going to be. With my tongue sticking out the side of my mouth, firmly clenched between my teeth—necessary for greater concentration and success—I repeatedly touched the pencil lead to my tongue and willed my fingers, even after they had become cramped and rigid, to write the letters, never realizing that we had a whole year to learn how to write. I thought we had to do it in one day.

What a relief when the dinner bell rang at twelve o'clock! I raced outside to meet my grandfather. "jah-gone gahd-skoot-mahgooyak?" he asked.

"dahbah jah-gone," I answered truthfully. I had not learned anything.

When I asked him why the teacher had insisted my name was "Esquinimau", he laughed and told me that was how we were listed in the Indian Affairs' files. It seems that my great-grandfather was an avid but lousy story-teller, always leaving out important details. His friends nicknamed him "Esquinimau", which means "He Leaves Out" or "Left-Overs". When the first white men came, they called him Esquinimau also, and when the Indian agent made a list of all the Indians on the island, he listed my great-grandfather simply as Esquinimau.

When his children were born, they were given Christian

names—Box and William—at the insistence of the church, but the name Esquinimau was tagged on as a surname, and each generation was stuck with the name.

It was not too difficult to see why my family never used the name. Who wants to be called Left-Overs? When I asked my grandfather about "Matthews", he merely stated that was also our name, without elaborating, leaving me just as confused as ever.

When we got home, I ate slowly and deliberately, not too eager to return to school. My enthusiasm had waned considerably in a few short hours. In its place was the beginning of a nagging doubt about my capabilities. My grandfather, however, assured me things would improve and dragged me back.

We went through the same routine in the playroom, washing up and forming a single line before entering the classroom. My grandmother had made me wash my hands and face before I left home, but with Miss Moore towering over me, I washed them again. This time, however, there were only twelve of us. Those who were not yet six were napping; those who were over twelve would work all afternoon, cleaning, sewing, and laundering.

After the half-hour prayer session in the classroom, we spent another half hour on the Bible. Our school, being run by the church, placed more emphasis on the fourth "R"—religion—than on the other three.

After this soul-cleansing period, we received our *Dick and Jane* readers, and if it had not been for the pictures, I would never have known which end of the book was up. The words looked like mouse tracks to me. It seemed incredible that anyone could ever learn how to decipher them. My confidence and my enthusiasm disappeared as the long day wore on. The teacher's patience was also wearing a little thin, which did not help any. As she jabbered away in what might as well have been Latin, I could not help but feel that I had made some terrible mistake. The English I had learned from my grandfather—"eat your food", "get a spoon", "go to bed"—was absolutely useless to me in a classroom. Besides, he gave me time to figure out what he was talking about. The

teacher did not. The more uncertain I became, the more intelligent the teacher seemed to be. By the end of the long, exhausting day, I saw her as a god-like, super-human being.

By the time my grandfather came to pick me up at four o'clock, I really felt like a dumb old Indian. I never wanted to see the school again. It was amazing how much seven hours of school had changed my outlook.

I awoke the next morning not too eager to go back, but with a few gentle threats from my grandfather, I went. Gradually I learned. The more I learned, the more enthusiastic I became. I learned to hop, skip, jump, and laugh with Dick, Jane, Baby, and funny, funny Spot. I learned to make my letters smaller and more uniform until I had no difficulty keeping them between the lines. I learned to add and subtract. I learned all about hell and damnation. I even began to understand Mrs. Holland's rantings and ravings.

It was laborious process. For those of us with no visual difficulties, reading came relatively easily, although we did not at first understand what we were reading and it took some time before we made the connection between the written and oral word. Mrs. Holland's lack of knowledge of Cree was a great handicap for us during those first few months, but it also forced us to pay attention, since we could not depend on her for translation. This we had to do for ourselves, with great difficulty at first, but almost instantaneously after a few years. It was not until we had mastered this process that we could speak with any degree of fluency.

I soon learned that the frail old lady who had greeted us on that first morning was not so frail after all. She had a habit of sneaking up on a daydreaming and unsuspecting student and slamming down her yardstick, her constant companion, on the student's desk, or rapping him smartly across the knuckles with it. After just one of these incidents, we all sat up and paid attention to her for the rest of the day. She took on anyone when she was angry, even the senior boys who were twice her size.

We all loved her anyway, but some of the things she taught us were too difficult to grasp, especially about cities. One time she spent several weeks teaching us how to read traffic

signals. Our small island was criss-crossed by narrow trails; there wasn't a single traffic signal for at least five hundred miles. There wasn't even a single lamp post on the island. We also learned how fast we should drive in a school zone, on the street, and on the highway—all of which were completely alien to us. We did understand what "drive" meant, however, since the summer's supply barge had brought two tractors, one for the Catholic mission and one for the Anglican. Our chances of learning to drive, though, were very remote, since the Indians were not allowed to operate these vehicles.

We must have been very frustrating to her too, and I know the one thing about us that drove her crazy was our pronunciation. We found it extremely difficult to pronounce *r*'s since there was no *r* in our Cree dialect—there are several Cree dialects. We found it easier to substitute *l* for *r*, even though there was no *l* in our dialect either.

But the one sound that none of us could master was *th*. Our "the's" came out "da"; our "them's", "dem"; our "these's", "dese". Not even the highest grades could master the sound. Mrs. Holland spent hours with her tongue between her teeth going, "*th, th, th.*"

A typical day in our school went like this: "All right, Peter, stand up and read page ten."

"Look, Jane. Look. Look. Look. Funny, funny Spot. Oh! Oh! Oh! See *da* dog run."

"No! No! No! *The! The!* Not *da!* Put your tongue between your teeth like this. Now say *th, th.*"

"*th.*"

"Again."

"*th.*"

"All right. Now start over again."

"Look, Jane. Look. Look. Look. Funny, funny Spot. Oh! Oh! Oh! See *da* dog run."

Mrs. Holland would throw her book down on her desk in exasperation. She never gave up, however, ever hopeful of the day when by some miracle one of us would be able to stand up before her and the world to pronounce *th*.

And so we spent the year, learning and making mistakes. My confidence and my enthusiasm returned, stronger than

ever. I looked forward to August, though, when I too would become one of the privileged, living, not just attending classes, at the school.

## *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 puttered 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 sniffling, 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 tne 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.

## *Chapter 6*

RISE 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.

## *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 kusdasnahgoon!" (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.

## *Chapter 8*

THE 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 one, 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 sniffling, 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.

## *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.

## *Chapter 10*

AFTER three years in the junior dormitory, I finally graduated to the intermediate dorm for the ten to twelve year olds. There were two advantages to this move. First, we could stay up until seven, and second, food was more accessible.

Our one cup of food per meal was just not enough for growing children and we were constantly hungry. Being an intermediate, however, meant getting assigned to the staff dining-room, kitchen, or bakery detail, and it was a simple matter of nipping into the pantry and pilfering a few handfuls of dried fruit while the staff were eating.

The most lucrative, in terms of food, was the staff dining-room detail. The staff had all the good foods we could not have—fruit, juice, eggs, all kinds of desserts, real butter, bacon, ham, and anything else they desired. The left-overs were carefully sealed for later snacks, but what was left on the plates was ours.

My favourite meal was breakfast, and filling the juice glasses was my favourite task. As soon as the cook became engrossed in stirring the vat of cereal or shovelling more firewood into the stove, I would turn the juice can upside down and chug-a-lug half the contents. After wiping the top thoroughly so my germs would not be passed on to the vulnerable staff, I would fill the can to the top with water. None of the staff ever complained of their watered-down juice.

Another little trick of mine when slicing the breakfast

oranges was to *accidentally* knock every fifth or sixth slice off the counter onto the floor. Of course once the food hit the floor, the cook insisted on throwing it out, and I, being an obedient child, threw everything into my waiting pockets. My natural clumsiness was a blessing because the staff had learned not to expect too much from me in the way of poise and grace, and I was able to get away with little things like that.

There were times, however, when I was afraid that the staff would banish me from the island and from the world for my clumsiness. My first day on staff dining-room duty was one of those occasions.

Mrs. Wilson, the cook, was our trainer in the art of serving—our probable destiny. She was old, as was everyone on the staff, and thin. How anyone with constant access to food could be so skinny was beyond me. She took time out from her busy schedule to show Helen, the other girl on staff dining-room detail, and me what to do.

She led us into the dining-room, a small square room with green walls, maroon linoleum, and a light fixture instead of the usual bare bulb in the centre of the ceiling. The highly polished walnut dining table was covered with crisp white linen; the silver gleamed and the glasses and china sparkled at each setting. To the right of the setting at the head of the table sat a small silver bell. Eight walnut chairs, one at each end and three on each side, surrounded the elegantly set table.

"Please note carefully how the table is set," she said. "I want it set the same *after* each meal. . . . Miss Quinlan sits at the head of the table. The vegetables are placed in front of her; the tea and teacups are placed on her right. Reverend Dawson sits at the other end. The meat is set in front of him, and the condiments are set in the centre of the table. All this must be done just before the staff get here. Before the meal, you will take the plates off the table and put them in the warming oven. When you put the meat and vegetables on the table, put the warm plates in front of the principal. When Miss Quinlan rings the bell, that is your signal to come in and remove the dirty dishes . . . ." On and on she droned. My mind

reeled with information after her thirty minute lecture. I knew I would never remember everything she had told us. "Janie, you will wait on us at dinner, and Helen, you'll wait on the supper table," Mrs. Wilson concluded.

By dinnertime, I was nervous and jumpy, unable to concentrate on anything, and feeling even clumsier than usual. When the bell rang, I stood by the dining-room door for several agonizing moments, wiping off my sweaty palms and swallowing hard.

"Go on! Go on!" Helen kept hissing at me.

"I can't!" I whimpered. "I've forgotten everything she told us."

"Go on! You're going to get punished if you don't get in there."

"This is worse than any punishment I can think of," I cried. The bell rang again. I put on a weak smile and walked in.

"What took you so long?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

I did not answer. I was too busy trying to remember from which side I was supposed to remove the dirty dishes. "Well, there is only one solution," I thought. I removed Miss Quinlan's plate from the left at the same time I was removing Mrs. Wilson's from her right. One of them had to be correct.

"No! No!" whispered Mrs. Wilson, looking towards the end of the table at Reverend Dawson.

Then I remembered. I was to remove Miss Quinlan's dirty dishes first, then Reverend Dawson's. But I already had two dirty dishes in my hand, so I took them out to the kitchen. I still did not know whether to remove the dirty dishes from the left or from the right.

"Quick! Tell me which side you serve from and which side you take the dirty dishes from," I begged Helen.

"Wasa! Don't ask me!" she said. "I was hoping you'd be able to tell me."

I went back in, deciding to play it safe by removing Reverend Dawson's dishes from the left while taking those of the person on his left from the right. I could not understand why they could not stack their dishes in the centre of the table as we did.

"From the right!" hissed Mrs. Wilson as I walked past her.

"Take the dirty dishes from the right," I informed Helen, who was busy filling the creamer and brewing the tea.

I cleared the table, then placed the china teapot on Miss Quinlan's right, along with the sugar, cream, and teacups.

"The condiments," Mrs. Wilson whispered as I started to leave the room.

As I reached for the condiments in the centre of the table, I caught the creamer with my elbow and upset it, spilling cream all over Miss Moore's skirt and all over the floor. I stood there petrified, waiting for her to knock me senseless with an uppercut.

"For goodness sake, Janie!" she yelled, bolting out of her seat. "Do you have to be so clumsy?" Had we been alone, she probably would have throttled me.

I stood rooted to the floor, blinking back my tears. "Get the mop and clean up the floor!" Miss Quinlan ordered. "And fill up the creamer again."

I raced out, wondering how I could go back in after making such a fool of myself.

"What happened?" Helen asked, noticing my tears.

"I spilled the milk all over Miss Moore."

Miss Moore brushed past me with a withering look. I knew immediately she was not through with me yet. I cleaned up the floor, sniffling to myself, wishing I could vanish into thin air.

I was right. Miss Moore was not through with me. Miss Moore always had a scapegoat, someone to ridicule or embarrass for weeks, sometimes months, whenever she was in a bad mood, which happened quite frequently. I knew it was my turn.

She began by ignoring me completely, refusing to answer my questions or acknowledge my presence. I did not mind because I knew the worst was yet to come. A few days later, a Saturday, she began her attack.

I had awakened early, just as the sun was rising. Climbing onto the metal frame of my bed, I looked out the open window and saw that it was going to be a warm day. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the mighty river was like a mirror reflecting a few puffs of pink clouds in the azure sky.

Across the river, a flock of Canada geese had stopped briefly on their annual spring migration further north to swim around lazily and feed.

I giggled quietly as I thought of what had happened to my sister Sharon, who was spending her first year at the school. A shower of goose droppings had rained down on her bare head and down her back the day before. An incident like that was enough to keep us amused for months. The peaceful snores of the other girls intermingled with the occasional calls of the geese. I thought, "What a great day to be alive!"

Hearing a faint step behind me, I started to turn around. "Janie Matthews! How dare you get up at four o'clock in the morning and disturb the whole school! Get back into bed right now!" It was Miss Moore.

I fell over backwards onto my bed, hitting my head on the wall with a sickening crunch. The rudely awakened girls bolted out of their beds.

"See what you've done!" she screamed. "Now everyone's awake! I shouldn't let you go home to visit your family today, but I'll give you *one* more chance." She stormed out of the dorm.

Since I was on my best behaviour all morning long, Miss Moore was forced to let me visit my family. "Well! I hear you've been a bad girl again," my mother greeted me. "Miss Moore said you woke everyone up at four o'clock this morning."

"I did not! I was just standing there looking out the window when she came charging into our dorm screaming. She was the one who woke everybody up. I wish they'd get rid of her. I hate her!"

"Wasa! Don't talk like that about white people. You'll get into trouble."

"I don't care. I'm always in trouble anyway. I try so hard not to break any rules, but they're always making up more every time they want to. I wish I'd never gone into that school."

"You're the one who insisted on living there," she reminded me.

"You should have stopped me."

"Ah, gahmahmahgee," she said, indicating that the subject was closed.

That night after all the lights had been turned out, I had to sneak into the washroom to use the facilities. The toilet pails were wedged in so tightly under the counter that it was impossible to get one out without making a lot of noise. Just as I sat down in blessed relief, Miss Moore came bursting in.

"You again!" she shouted, livid. The veins on her neck stood out so far that I was afraid they would pop. "Get off there right now and get back into bed!"

She was asking the impossible! It would have taken a cavalry to pry me off the seat at that moment. "I can't," I said.

"*How dare you disobey me!* You know darn well you are not to use those toilets until I bring them in to you. I don't know what I'm going to do with you. You are getting to be so bad! For this, you will go to bed without supper for two weeks, and you will stay home two Saturdays instead of one. Get into bed!"

Some days it did not pay to be alive. Fortunately, I did not have to put up with this treatment too much longer, for the school year was drawing to a close.

My poor friend Annie was also under constant attack, although it was nothing new to her because Miss Moore had picked on her from the very first. Annie had a mysterious skin ailment that cropped up at the start of each school year and got progressively worse as the year wore on. Only when Annie's hair had to be shaved off because of massive sores all over her scalp did the nurse suggest that she might be allergic to Lifebuoy soap. The nurse had her switch to another brand, which Annie had to buy for herself at the Bay.

"Don't think that just because you're using that kind of soap you're any better than anyone else," Miss Moore told her repeatedly.

I felt so sorry for Annie when her scalp sores were cleaned every day. Miss Moore would scrape away as if she were scouring a burned pan, muttering, "You dirty little Indian! If you weren't so dirty, you wouldn't have this problem."

Annie was just as clean as the rest of us; we all washed at least six times a day. She would stand patiently and take her torture stoically.

"Why don't you kick her when she hurts you like that?" I often suggested.

"Some day I will," she promised. "I hope she gets a baby. That'll teach her." Miss Moore was always telling us we would end up with papooses on our backs if we weren't careful. Having a baby was the worst punishment we could think of for her.

She had always tried to keep Annie and me separated, but now she tried even harder. She would not put us on the same work detail; she would not let us sit together at the dinner table or in church; she would not let us sleep in adjacent beds; and she would not let us walk together on our Sunday hikes. The only time she could not control us was when we were out on the playground.

She seemed to feel that the two of us together presented a personal threat to her and that we were constantly plotting against her. More often than not, we were.

"Well, what are you two cooking up now?" she'd greet us as we came in from the playground giggling and whispering. "I have told you two not to play together. I should report you to the principal." She never did because she probably knew she was being unreasonable.

What a relief when the school year ended. On the last day of school, we got back our test papers. We did not get report cards; it was probably considered a waste of good paper. While we were standing around comparing marks, Miss Moore came over to see how we had done. She began praising the other girls for their fantastic achievements, but totally ignored me.

"Why Helen, imagine a seventy-eight in English! That's great! And Mary, seventy-five in math! I don't believe it! Those are great marks, girls!"

"Miss Moore, Miss Moore, look. I got eighty-eight in math. Look, look, Miss Moore," I said, waving my papers around. Even though I knew she disliked me, I was willing to be friends again on this last day of school.

Finally she gave me a look of disdain. "I heard you, Janie," she said. "You should be ashamed of yourself. Such a low mark is nothing to be proud of."

"But eighty-eight was the highest mark in math," I whispered hesitantly, hoping to regain some of the confidence and pride I had felt just seconds earlier.

"That may be so, but for you that is a very low mark. You've done much better than that. And you have the nerve to wave your papers around proudly." She went on mercilessly. "If you keep getting such low marks, pretty soon you'll flunk out of school."

I walked away from the happy crowd, feeling like the low man on the totem pole. I actually believed her.

## *Chapter 11*

FORTUNATELY, at this low point of my eleventh year on earth, I discovered Nature. It happened one Saturday spring morning on my way to the nursing station to deliver a message from the matron to the nurse. As I bent over to retrieve a can that I had been kicking, I noticed a few shoots of green grass pushing their way through the soil. It was the first time I had ever noticed anything *growing*, and I took it as some sort of miracle. I glanced at the shrubbery and discovered to my utter amazement that it too was sprouting green growth. A whole new world opened up for me.

Normally the walk from the school to the nursing station took about two minutes, but that day it took me two hours. I inspected every blade of grass, every shrub, and every tree along the way, marvelling at the perfection and the intricacy of everything. Fortunately I had completed all my chores and so I was not missed.

I noticed, also for the first time, that the whole island bloomed with vibrant-coloured wildflowers, from the delicate blue violets to the tall magenta fireweed. I wondered

where all this colour had suddenly come from. And the smells! I walked around with delicately scented pink twinflowers shoved up my nostrils. I was in paradise!

I spent most of the summer vacation on my stomach, totally absorbed in the wonders of nature. My family began to wonder about my sanity. They had always laughed good-naturedly at my abnormal—for an Indian child—curiosity and my sometimes eccentric behaviour, but they did not know what to do about me crawling around on all fours from sun-up to sundown, day after day, my nose buried in flowers.

"She'll outgrow it," they predicted dubiously, in the same tone that they used to predict I would outgrow my clumsiness.

This miraculous discovery made life more tolerable at the school when I returned in the fall. That, coupled with the fact that Miss Moore had left us to make life miserable for other Indian children in another school. It was a day of rejoicing when we registered in August and found that Miss Moore had been replaced by a short, chubby, white-haired grandmotherly type named Miss Foster.

There were other changes as well. Our school population had grown to about seventy children, and our one classroom was no longer large enough to accomodate us all—not even seated three to a desk. So, for the first time in the island's history there were two teachers and two classrooms.

Mrs. Holland had finally admitted that she was too old to be teaching and had retired, or so we thought until we heard that she had gone out west to teach in another Indian settlement. She was unbelievable! Imagine my surprise when twenty years later I heard that she was still devoting her life to teaching underprivileged children.

In her place were two younger women, both about twenty-one. Miss Livingston taught the lower grades, kindergarten to grade three, and Miss Cooper taught grades four to seven. Not one child from our island had yet made it to grade eight.

The problem of another classroom was solved when the Parish Hall, a meeting place and dance hall for the Indians, was confiscated. The Hall had never been finished inside; not

even rough planking covered the bare studding. The rough wooden floor was quite worn in the centre by the shuffle and stomp of hundreds of square dances. Once the desks and the blackboard were moved in, however, the Hall looked more like a classroom and less like a storage shed.

We entered through a small porch which served as a coat-room and wood shed. It was up to the boys to keep the huge wood-burning stove going at all times during the winter. Many a morning when the fire would not start, we would sit wearing our parkas in sub-zero weather, trying to write with numbed fingers. When the teacher could no longer stand the cold, we all trooped over to the boys' or girls' playroom to hold classes until the classroom had warmed up sufficiently.

The thrill of getting a desk by one of the windows, where I could see everything that went on outside, wore off when winter came. There was no insulation around the windows—there was no insulation anywhere in the Hall—nor were the windows framed in. This meant that polar winds howled through the cracks between the walls and windows whenever we had one of our frequent blizzards. And great snow-drifts piled up against the building, hiding everything from sight. How I wished then that I had a seat near the stove.

However, the children seated near the stove had their own problems. The only fire which could almost heat the whole room was one that turned the stove glowing red, and sweat poured off their faces. These clouds of vapour enveloped those of us seated along the walls, and joined our own warm breath in turning to frost on our eyebrows and bangs. Our pores stood at constant attention.

My annual case of tonsillitis was worse that year, possibly from my being constantly semi-frozen. Normally, as long as I was able to drag myself around, I did not bother reporting sick, but all my noble efforts failed and I was sent to bed for several weeks.

When my throat no longer resembled a raw hamburger, I asked Miss Foster to let me out of bed, but she refused. With nobody to talk to, day after day, I was getting extremely bored, so I decided to take matters into my own hands and

cure myself the first chance I had. The white-man's medicine was taking too long.

One evening, Miss Foster slipped on the icy path to the nursing station and broke her ankle. She had to be flown back to civilization to get the care white people deserved. On the day she left, I stood by the window and watched as the children pulled her along on a toboggan to the waiting plane. This was the chance I had been waiting for. The school was completely empty of spying staff.

Wearing nothing but a nightgown, I opened the window, leaned out, and opened my mouth wide to the cold wind. I stuck my tongue out so there would be no obstruction to my throat. Since we were always being told how good fresh air was for us, I had decided that it was what my throat needed. I stood in the freezing wind for about five minutes to give my tonsils the full benefit of the cure, then I crawled back into bed to defrost.

My treatment seemed to work because Miss Quinlan told me that very evening that I was well enough to get out of bed the next morning. I cursed myself for not thinking of the simple cure before.

I felt a little weak the next morning, but I was able to get up with everyone else. By mid-morning, however, I began feeling faint and nauseated. When I started vomiting at recess, I did not say anything to Miss Quinlan, who was replacing Miss Foster as our supervisor. I felt worse and worse as the long day progressed.

I blacked out just as we finished saying Grace at supper-time, collapsing into my seat during the "Amen". Still I did not say anything to the meal supervisor. I distributed my food around to the other appreciative girls, then, as soon as we had been excused, I went straight to bed without informing any of the staff.

Miss Cooper, our teacher, hearing that I had gone to bed, stopped by after supper to see how I felt.

"I feel better," I lied, not wishing to spend another day in bed.

"Then why are you in bed?" she asked.

"I almost fainted at the table, but I feel much better now."

My teeth were chattering, and my whole body was shivering. Even though I was perspiring profusely, I felt as if I were encased in a block of ice.

"Do you hurt at all?" she asked gently, feeling my forehead.

"Just a little."

"Where?"

"Oh, all over," I cried, breaking down. Trying to pretend I was not sick was too much effort.

"I'll be right back," she said. She returned a few minutes later with Miss Quinlan, who also felt my forehead.

"Don't worry about a thing, Janie," Miss Quinlan said worriedly. "You'll be better in no time." Turning to Miss Cooper, she said, "Send one of the girls to get the nurse. Her forehead is like a furnace and her bed is soaking wet." I huddled under the covers trying to find some warmth.

When the nurse arrived, she took my temperature. Without saying a word, she took out a hypodermic, filled it with white medicine and jabbed it into my rump. I was hurting so much all over that I did not even feel the stab.

"That'll make you feel better," she told me unconvincingly. "I want her moved into the isolation room right away," she told Miss Quinlan.

I knew immediately that I was on the verge of death because the only other girl who had been moved to the isolation room had died, but my impending death did not frighten me at all. In fact, I was rather looking forward to it so I could be one up on the other girls. The fact that I would not be around to brag about it never occurred to me.

After they had me settled in bed, Miss Quinlan and the nurse left the room. I could hear them whispering out in the hallway.

"She's a very sick girl," the nurse whispered. "Frankly, I don't hold much hope for her. Don't let any of the other children near her. I don't know what's wrong with her."

"She's been in bed with a sore throat," Miss Quinlan told her.

"Well, it's more than a sore throat now. Keep an eye on her. If she gets worse, call me. If she doesn't, I'll come by

tomorrow to check her and give her more shots. That's all I can do for her."

I awaited my death like a good little Indian. When death appeared to be taking its time about claiming me, I became very impatient, wishing I would either die quickly or get better. The boredom of lying in bed day after day, staring at the ceiling and the walls, with nobody to talk to was unbearable. The nurse came by twice a day to give me injections, and Miss Quinlan brought my meals, but neither of them stayed around long enough to ease my boredom and my loneliness. I began fighting back. When the girls were allowed to bring me my meals and Miss Cooper started sending each day's lessons to my room, I knew I was on the road to recovery and the land of the living.

Some of the girls believed I owed my life to them. "We were told you might die, and we prayed for you every morning and every evening. Now you're getting better, so it must have been our prayers."

I was skeptical. "Remember how we prayed for my grandfather when he was sick, but he never got better?" I reminded them. "I don't think it was your prayers that made me better."

"Well, there are more of us now than when your grandfather got sick, so our prayers were louder."

"If the minister hadn't told you to pray for me, you'd never have thought of it," I told them.

"Wasa! You're so ungrateful!"

I was grateful for my illness because I thought I would be sent "outside" to the hospital, where I could finally see what the white man's world looked like. Getting tuberculosis and spending a few years in the sanatorium was my big ambition in those days. I had begun to doubt the minister's warnings about the evil nature of the white man. I wanted to see and experience the outside world for myself.

"Someday I'm going to get TB and leave the island," I told my family repeatedly. "Then I can see what goes on out there. Maybe this year the doctor will send me out."

"Wasa! Don't talk like that! Why do you want to get sick?" they would ask, appalled.

"I don't want to get sick. I just want to get TB," I would explain patiently. The children who returned from the sanatorium were always telling us about all the movies they saw, all the juice they drank, and all the good food and fruit they ate. All they did was lie around all day eating good food. And they told us that the white men did not go around attacking women, killing people, and being drunk all the time. They only did that once in a while.

I looked forward to the doctor's arrival that winter. He arrived, as usual, in the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) snowmobile—an event we looked forward to eagerly each winter, because we all got a turn riding in the snowmobile (a large, enclosed vehicle with caterpillar treads, bearing no resemblance to the snowmobile or ski-doo of today.) Since the Indians had not yet discovered liquor, and there was no crime on the island, the Mountie had nothing else to do while he waited for the doctor to examine everyone. Although the area under his jurisdiction was thousands of square miles in size, he found that a yearly visit to each settlement was sufficient.

Our yearly check-ups consisted of walking back and forth in front of the doctor twice while we were completely naked, a quick look in each ear and down our throats, and a chest X-ray at the Catholic mission. The doctor examined everyone in one week. Before racing off for the next settlement along the bay, he left a list with the principal of all the children who were to be flown out on the first plane. Sometimes it would be the same week and other times it would not be for several months.

For two or three months each fall when the river was freezing up and two or three months each spring when the river ice was breaking up, the bush planes stopped flying to our island, leaving us completely isolated from the rest of the world. We did not even have telephones then.

After the doctor had left, Reverend Dawson read off the names of the lucky children who would be sent to the sanatorium. Mine was not among them. I was so disappointed! Whatever I had had was obviously cured.

My best friend Annie, however, was on the list. "You're so

lucky," I told her when we were saying good-bye.

"*You're* lucky," she said. "My mother doesn't even know I'm leaving."

When we had entered the boarding school, we had become wards of the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and it was not their custom to inform our parents of any moves they made concerning us. As it often happened, the parents would return to the island after spending ten months in the bush, eager to see their children, only to discover they had been sent out for several years.

We were usually allowed to accompany the children to the plane if we were not in class. Fortunately, Annie's plane arrived during the dinner break and I was able to bid her a tearful farewell before she boarded. She waved from her seat by the window. Then the plane roared off, sending great clouds of whirling snow around us. Even though the plane was invisible, I continued waving, thinking how ecstatic Miss Moore would have been if she had been there. Her fondest dreams of having Annie and me separated by hundreds of miles had finally come true.

## *Chapter 12*

IN the summer of 1952, Reverend Dawson, after five years as our minister, left our island for a larger parish. He urged all of us to be on hand to welcome his replacement. It was an unnecessary request because each and every plane and supply boat that came to the island was greeted by hundreds of Indians milling about on the river bank. There was not much else to do on the island.

In fact, when the supply boats came during the late summer months, bringing a year's supply of food, clothing, lumber, and oil, the women and children started out early in the morning with great sacks of food to watch the Indian men unload. Sometimes the unloading took four or five days, but

the women and children were there every day from dawn to dusk, the women exchanging the latest gossip, and the children sliding down the steep river-banks or tearing off chunks of soil to throw at each other.

So, when the small four-seater plane landed on the river and taxied up to the shore, most of the island's population of seven hundred Indians had turned out. Only the aged and sick had stayed home.

The pilot stepped out onto the pontoons and threw a rope to the men waiting on the beach. They pulled the plane in as close as they could to the shore before securing it to the posts which were firmly anchored into the sand for that purpose. The landing dock, which was disassembled every fall to protect it from the winter ice and the spring break-up, had not yet been rebuilt because the river was still too swollen from the thaw. We waited breathlessly as the pilot went over to the co-pilot's door and opened it. Out stepped a lean, young man wearing a navy-blue trench coat and black fedora.

"Oooh! Aah!" the admiring women gasped. Nudging each other, they whispered, "What a handsome man! He can't be our new minister. He doesn't look like one." And indeed he didn't. Reverend Dawson was old, short, fat, and bald.

The new minister stood tall and proud on the top step and waved majestically to his captive subjects. He descended the steps regally, stepped gracefully onto the pontoon, then eyeing the distance from the plane to the shore, he sprang like a gazelle from the pontoon right into the river.

The spell was broken. The children broke out into hysterical laughter. The adults, their faces red with suppressed laughter, frowned at us. "It's not nice to laugh at a minister," they admonished.

The blushing minister dragged himself out of the river and slipped and slid drippily up the steep, sandy bank. We followed him, giggling, as he dripped and sloshed all the way to the school. We hadn't had such entertainment in a long time.

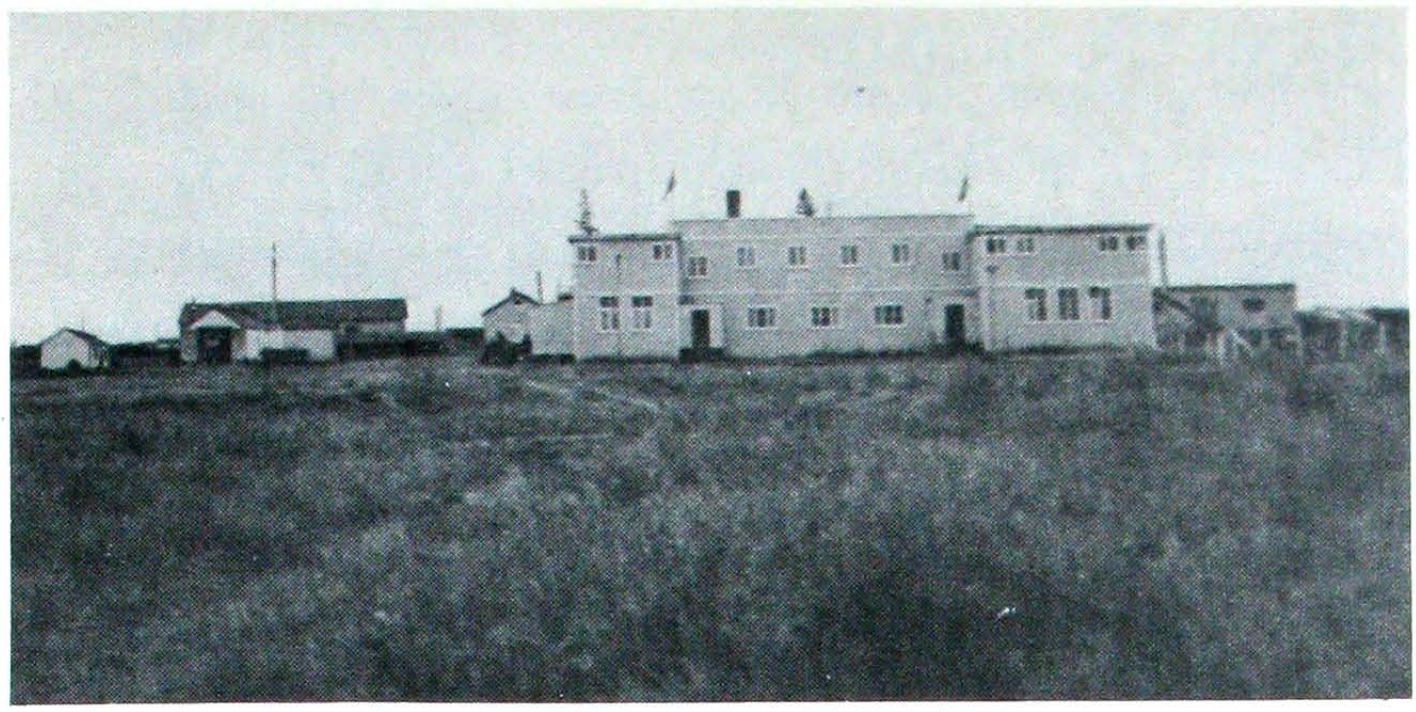
It was soon evident that the new minister's main interest was in our morals rather than our souls. Reverend Montgo-

# About the pictures

I do not have many good candid shots of my earlier days. We were much too poor to buy a camera, and when we were finally able to afford one, we could not waste film on candid shots. Each one had to be posed. Other than the two taken professionally at the school in 1946 (cover photo and below), there are no pictures taken before 1956. However, until the James Bay hydroelectric project started in 1971, the way of life on the island had not changed much since the 40's.

*Jane Willis*

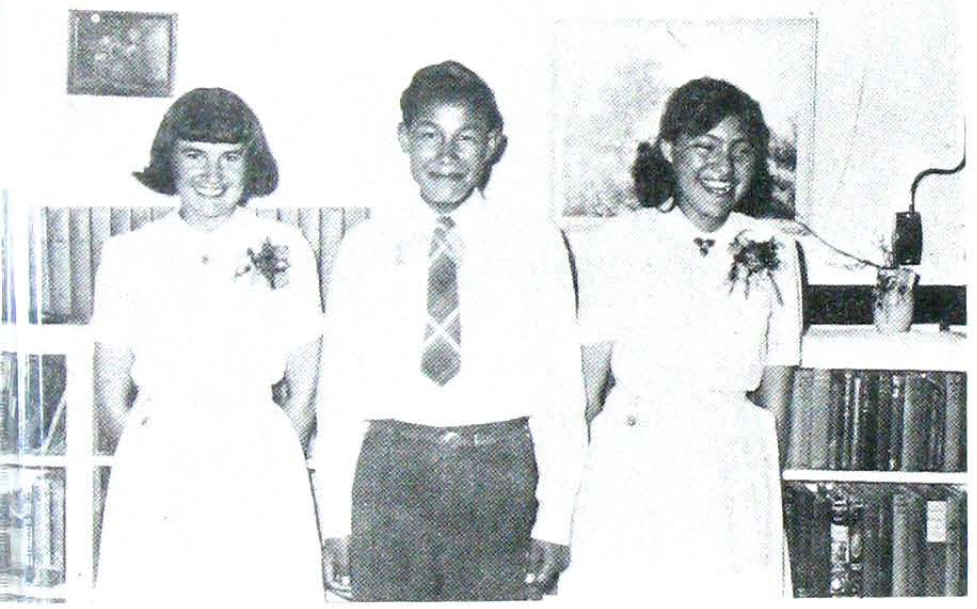
(*Left to right*) Connie Bearskin, Elsie Peepabino, Juliet Head, Annie Tapiatuk and Maria Fleming in 1946, brushing their teeth with Lifebuoy soap.



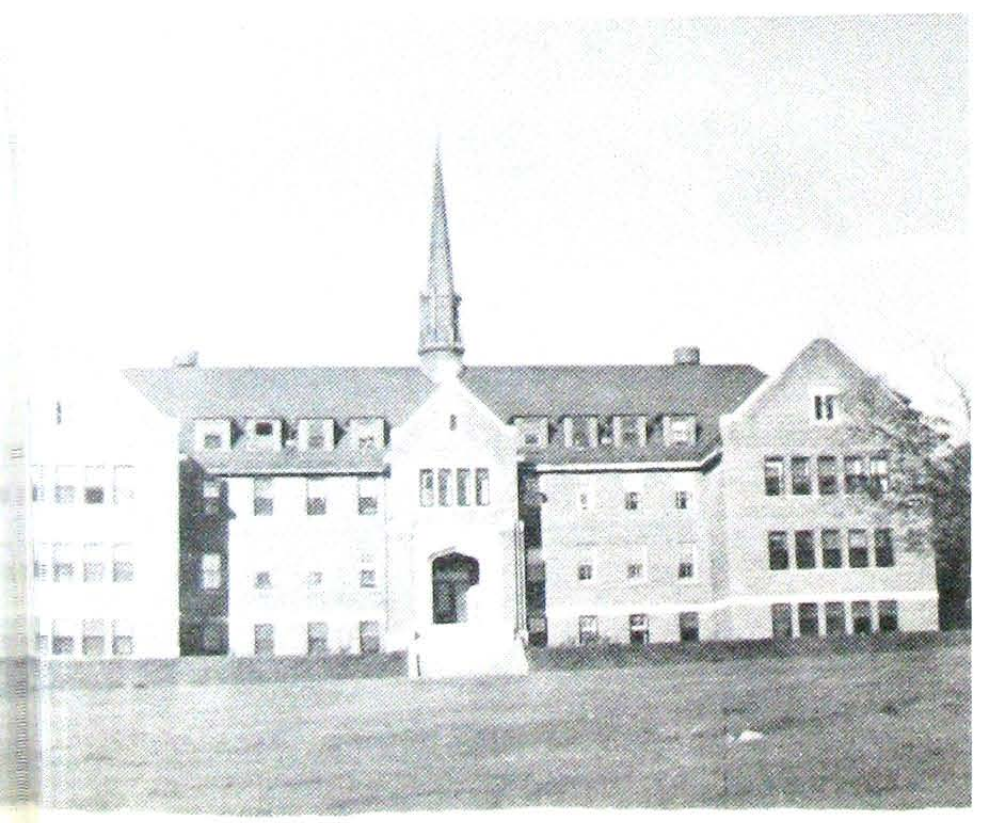
The St. Philip's Indian and Eskimo Anglican Residential School of Fort George, Quebec. I lived there for eight years, eight long, long years.

Two of my classmates cleaning up after the cook. They are wearing the Saturday work dresses that were issued to all of us.

Christmas, or Feast Day as we called it, four years after I was graduated from St. Philips. The children are not raising their cups in greeting to the photographer; this gesture means that they want more milk.



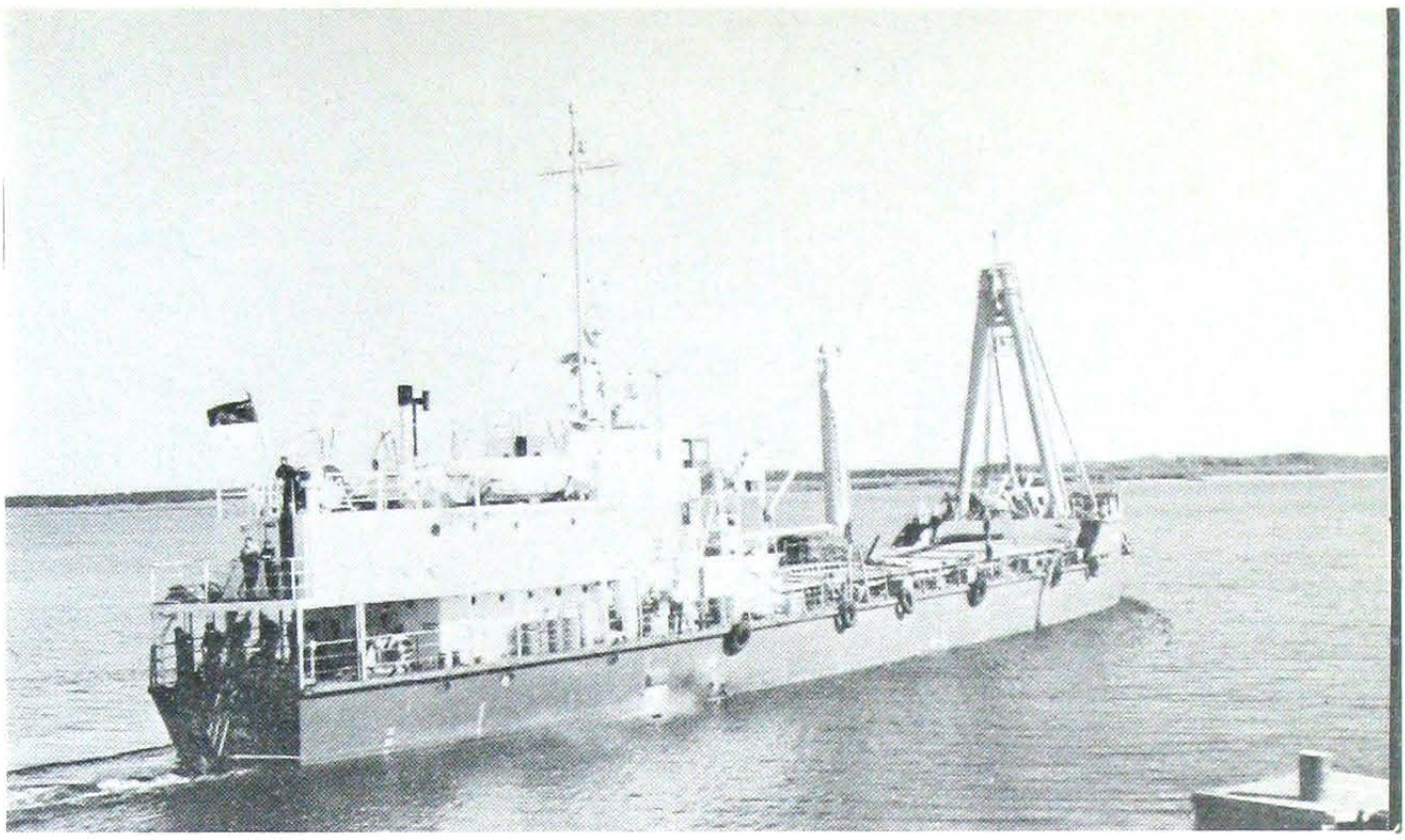
June 1956—Graduation Day. Violet Pachanos (right) and I had completed grade eight. The boy, Samson Sandy, was "graduating" because of his age (sixteen). Samson is now a teacher on the island.



Shingwauk Indian Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, where I lived while I attended high school in the city. I learned immediately that life behind this impressive facade was no better than at St. Philips.

Setting up housekeeping in an old log cabin across the river from the island. The cabin is similar to the one I lived in with my grandparents, but a little more modern.

The old and the new in the modern section of the Coaster village. The tepees are now used for drying and smoking meat and fish. This picture was taken in 1971.



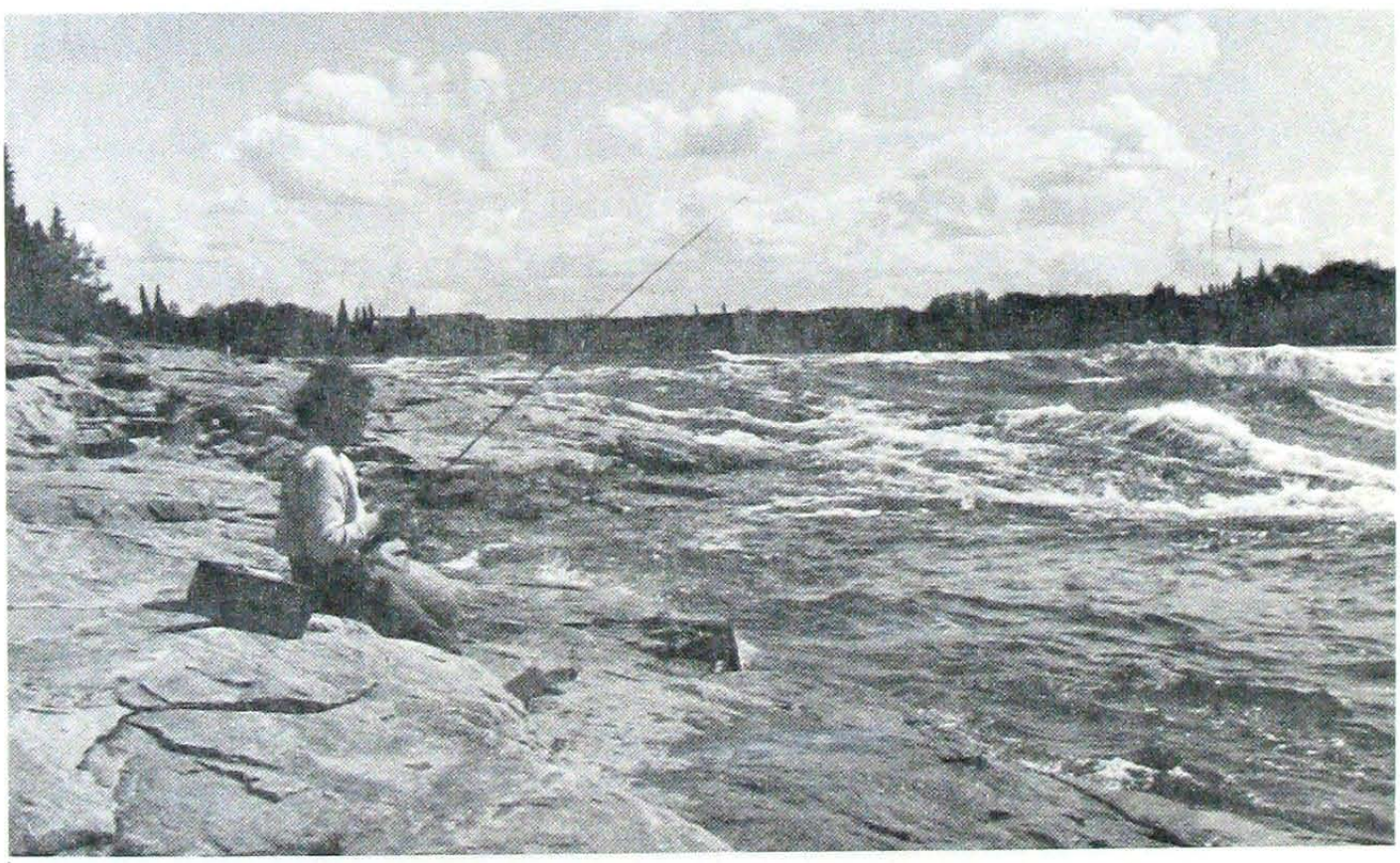
A modern supply boat. It took several of these to bring in a year's supply of food, lumber and other necessities for the Hudson Bay Company and the residential school. The Catholics, of course, had to bring in their own boat.

The first plane flight to Fort George was in 1926; weekly service began in the 50's. This is probably the same plane that I took when I first left the island.

My stepfather and my brother in 1971 with an unfortunate bear that kept pestering us and finally insisted on dropping in for tea one afternoon. After killing the bear, they immediately slit the white spot on his chest to release the spirit. They then broke each joint on the bear's paws to release the game gods which are controlled by the bear. This is the Indian hunter's way of insuring a good and bountiful year.

My brother-in-law, George Visitor (left), and my husband Bud laying in a supply of Canada geese for the winter of '71. George is married to my sister Sharon.

My mother in her cooking tent, drying and smoking fish.



Fishing the rapids about fifteen miles from the island, where more than two hundred fish have just been caught in nets. I fished for more than six hours using modern fishing equipment and never caught a single fish.

Modern squaw with papoose. My daughter Kelly and me in 1971.

mery became more and more of a dictator, trying to govern every phase of our lives, which thrilled our parents no end. They were extremely lax when it came to disciplining us, preferring to leave that part of child-rearing to the minister or the chief.

While they might click their tongues, shake their heads sadly, or occasionally threaten, our parents were never very strict with us. We were completely free from rules and regulations at home and set our own schedules for eating, playing, and sleeping. (This probably is the reason why Indians have such difficulty adjusting to white society, a society whose every phase of life is governed by rules and schedules.)

It was no wonder then that our parents welcomed Reverend Montgomery. They were even pleased when he started spying on the girls who went out at night for a walk. We could do nothing without him interpreting it as evil.

He even went so far as to appoint himself judge and jury of the island. "Next Sunday is going to be very special because I am going to hold court and try two of our people who have been very sinful," he announced in church one day. "You all know that—is going to have a baby and that she claims—, a married man, is the father of her unborn child. I am putting these two evil people on trial to teach all of you a lesson. You *cannot* go around breaking God's Commandments without being punished! This sort of thing must stop! I want everyone on this island to be here at the eleven o'clock service next Sunday to see how we handle these situations in the outside world."

The church was packed more so than usual the following Sunday. Very few people ever dared to miss a service because the minister always used those who did as examples of evil in his sermons. The two on trial sat by themselves in front pews, the man in the right section reserved for men, and the woman in the left.

Reverend Montgomery started the court proceedings by imploring the Good Lord to help him be fair and just in this great task and test that had been set before him, beseeching Him to forgive the two miserable sinners. Raising his hands to heaven, he used Christ's words on the cross, "Forgive

them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Then turning to the woman, he said, "Step up here and stand in front of me. Put your left hand on the Bible; raise your right hand and repeat after me: I swear by the Almighty God,"

"I swear by the Almighty God,"

"that what I am about to say,"

"that what I am about to say,"

"shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

"shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

"Keep your hand on the Bible. Is—over there the father of your unborn child?"

"Yes," whispered the shame-faced woman.

"That is all, you may go back to your seat." Turning to the man, he said, "Your turn."

The man stepped up, put his hand on the Bible, and repeated the oath after the minister.

"Are you the father of—'s unborn child?" the minister asked.

"No." he answered firmly.

Reverend Montgomery's face turned crimson and the veins on his temples popped up. He kept opening and closing his mouth, but no words came out.

"Do you know what you have done!" he shouted in a voice that was suddenly several octaves higher. "Both of you swore on the Bible before the Almighty God and me, but one of you is lying! *May God strike you dead for your unforgivable sins!*"

I waited fearfully for the thunderbolt that would strike me down for my part in this degrading and humiliating spectacle. Both sinners were related to me. Nothing happened.

Reverend Montgomery continued with his verdict. "We have made such sacrifices to bring the word of the Lord to you unappreciative people! We have left our homes, our friends, and our families for you! We have spent years trying to teach you how to live properly, but you are still no better than your heathen ancestors! There is no hope for you! You are all doomed to a life of hell and damnation! You are all

equally guilty in this horrendous crime! I hope God can find it in His heart to forgive you all!

"I am going to exercise one of the powers that God gave me when He reached down from heaven, touched me on the shoulder, and told me I was chosen to spread His word among the sinners of this world." (Most of the white people who came to the island made this same claim, which convinced us even more that they were superior. None of us knew a single Indian who had seen the hand of God reach out and touch him.) "I am going to bar these two sinful people from Communion for as long as they live. They will not share the joy of drinking Christ's blood and eating His flesh. They will not be allowed to step inside this church for one year because we do not want them defiling the house of God." (I could not help thinking of what the ministers were always preaching to us, "Let him among you who has not sinned cast the first stone.")

"When this child of sin is born, I will not allow it inside this church, nor will I baptize it to cleanse it of its parents' sins. You all know that we cannot enter into the Kingdom of God without being baptized."

I scrunched down in my seat, trying to make myself invisible, because I too was a "child of sin", and if an innocent baby had no hope of getting into heaven, then there was no hope for me.

"Maybe this will teach you people the lesson you need to stop your evil ways and listen to the word of the Lord. Now, let us pray."

The baby, a girl, was stillborn, and she was fortunate in never knowing the unforgiving Reverend Montgomery. He told us, "It was God's punishment to this sinful woman that her child be born dead. And the child, without the cleansing of its sins by baptism, is doomed to eternal hell for the sins of its mother. This is a lesson for all of you. Repent now that you may be saved and that you may sit on God's right hand in the life everlasting."

Reverend Montgomery became progressively worse as the Indian adults refused to speak out against him. The white men on the island, particularly the ministers, were treated

like little gods, and the Indians were afraid to criticize their sometimes unrighteous behaviour. Yet it was his god-like attitude which made me begin to doubt and question the white man's saintliness and infallibility.

His campaign to save the morals of the children toughened as we got older. Even the songs we learned from the children who had returned from the sanatorium were now censored. One song in particular, a song about a back-street affair, was absolutely forbidden. None of us had any idea what a street was, much less a back-street affair, and we sang the song for its melody, not for its words. We did not even know what they meant.

The song got me into more trouble. I hummed and sang constantly, a habit I had developed before I entered the school, a habit that irritated the teachers, staff, and sometimes the other children. Nobody could start a song without me finishing it for her. I was not conscious of this annoying habit—annoying because I sang the same song over and over again, driving everyone around me crazy.

"Janie! What song are you singing?" the supervisor would demand.

Unaware that I had been singing, I would stop and think. "Back-Street Affair?"

"You know you're not supposed to sing that song."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then why did you sing it?"

"I forgot."

"Well, don't you forget again. Stand in the corner until the bell rings. If you're not careful, you are going to have a baby one of these days."

I was beginning to realize just how complicated it was to have a baby. I gathered it had something to do with boys, being disrespectful to the staff, and singing love songs. When I asked my family about babies and life, all they would say was, "ah! gahmah-mahjee!" (Translation: "Ah! Be quiet!")

The supervisor was no help either. When I reached puberty—a dreadful process because I did not have the faintest idea what was taking place—she took me aside to give me the "facts of life".

"You realize that this means your chances of getting into trouble are greater than ever," she whispered. "Each month you will report to me so I can keep a record and give you the things that you need."

What a degrading experience it was! It was difficult to say who was more embarrassed when I slunk away from her in shame. I felt as if I had just become a member of some repulsive organization.

When I discovered that my friends had not yet experienced my "shame", I began to feel like a freak. Because we had no privacy whatsoever, our Friday-night baths became a nightmare. I felt that the other girls were staring at me and making fun of me behind my back, and one Friday evening I absolutely refused to climb out of the tub.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the impatient supervisor asked.

"Could I please have a towel?" I asked timidly.

"A *towel!* Well, lah-dee-dah! Her majesty wants a towel."

"Please?"

"Look at the little baby crying," she taunted. "*Get out of that tub right now!* Who do you think you are anyway? You'll get a towel after you're out of the tub, the same as everyone else—you're nobody special, and don't you forget it!"

As I climbed out of the tub reluctantly, one of the girls threw me a towel. The supervisor gave her a dirty look, but said nothing. When the other girls who were my age caught up with me, I felt slightly better, but the damage had been done. I never got over my self-consciousness; I became an absolute fanatic about privacy, treasuring it even more than my freedom.

Any request to be treated as an individual was met with sarcasm from the staff. Their favourite comment was, "Who do you think you are? Queen Elizabeth?"

With all the respect and awe I had for the Queen, there were times when I wished I had never heard of her, but I quickly put these sacrilegious thoughts out of my head. To me, the Queen and the minister were in the same category with God, the Queen being only slightly more important than the minister. However, my esteem and respect for the minis-

ter was dwindling each year as my eyes were gradually opening to his faults and short-comings.

My belief in the Queen being God's overseer here on earth was so complete, however, that once when our teacher asked us why England had a warmer climate than Canada, I promptly answered, "Because the Queen lives there."

The teacher looked at me blankly for a second before bursting into laughter. Clutching her stomach with one hand, she doubled over and banged on her desk with the other, tears streaming down her cheeks as she laughed and laughed.

I was completely shocked by her reaction to my sensible answer. When she finally caught her breath, she gave us some answer about how "the Gulf Stream warms the air", which only proved to me that white people weren't always right. My answer made more sense than hers. I firmly believed that if the Queen someday decided to retire to our frozen island, the climate would miraculously change to a more temperate one to make her comfortable.

## *Chapter 13*

MY dreams of catching TB as a way of escaping the confining island—not so much to escape our way of life as to satisfy my insatiable curiosity—began to dissipate as the doctor's visits each winter found me in disgustingly good health. My only other apparent hope—a persistent breast abscess—disappeared when the doctor cured the infection by prescribing hot salt-water compresses. Not having reached the mature age of fifteen, I was not considered old enough to wear a bra, and my scratchy wool sweater and the copper rivets on my "union-made" bib overalls rubbed constantly against my breasts, making them raw and infected.

By then, however, I had another plan for getting off the island. I was going to graduate from grade school and go on to high school. Only two students had ever completed grade eight—the half-day sessions made it necessary for some

students to spend two, or even three years in one grade—but their parents had refused to allow them to go on to high school. But at least they had been offered the opportunity, they had even been allowed to attend classes all day instead of working in the afternoons like the rest of the older children. All I had to do was work on my family until they gave their permission for me to leave. It was going to be difficult, but I knew they would give in sooner or later.

Our teacher, Mr. Woods, had a lot to do with my decision. He was the best teacher we ever had. Not only did he make learning enjoyable, he also helped us realize that we were human beings.

After a few years in the boarding school, we had all begun to believe that we were subhuman and not very intelligent. Our standard response to a request was, "I can't." If somebody ordered us to do something, we did it without hesitation; but when someone *asked* us if we could do something, we replied, "I can't."

After putting up with our defeatist attitude for several weeks, Mr. Woods gave us a stern lecture. "Why do you always reply 'I can't' when I ask you something? You children are giving up before you even start. Each one of you is capable of accomplishing anything if you put your mind to it! Some of you are smarter than most white children I have taught. So, from now on when I ask if you can do something, I don't want to hear 'I can't', but 'I'll try'. Just remember, if you make up your mind to do something, you can do it!"

He made a large drawing of a grave with a tombstone inscribed: "Here lies 'I can't', long forgotten." He tacked it up in a place where we could not help but see it whenever we raised our eyes from our desks. It worked; we tried harder for him than we had for any other teacher.

He was a disciplinarian when he had to be, but he always took the time to listen to both sides of any story before determining who was at fault. This was something we were not used to and we appreciated him all the more for it.

Learning was a pleasure with Mr. Woods as our cheerleader and coach. He urged us to ask questions, to take an active part in class instead of sitting back and taking his word

for everything. He taught us to question the How, Why, and What of every statement; in short, he tried to teach us to think. Thinking was an alien process to us after several years in the boarding school. We had given up asking questions after years of hearing, "Because I told you so."

Under Mr. Woods' guidance, we became actors, acting out stories instead of reading them monotonously from dull textbooks. We read *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and I got the part of Long John Silver because I was the only one bold enough to hop around on one leg on top of a table bellowing, "Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!"

On warm Friday afternoons, Mr. Woods would move us all outside for our art classes. "Paint whatever you want, whatever you feel," he told us. "Get some feeling into your paintings."

Lacking artistic ability and imagination, I always painted the straight-angled, I-shaped school with its long, narrow windows, its red Cross of St. George emblazoned across the center-top, just under the eaves, and its wooden fire-escapes which jutted out from the ends like supports.

One Friday afternoon as we sat scattered all over the school yard, Miss Foster opened a narrow window and leaned out to see what we were doing. She shook her head. "Tch, tch! What is that crazy man up to now?" I overheard her say to someone beside her. I disagreed with her. Mr. Woods may have been unconventional, but I only wished we had had more teachers as "crazy" as he was.

Aided by Mr. Woods' constant encouragement and his faith in us, I convinced myself that I was as capable as any white child of going on to high school. The only problem was how to go about it.

One wintry day, the grade eight students—all four of us—were called into Reverend Montgomery's office. We answered the call nervously and reluctantly. A call from the principal did not come unless extreme measures were called for to handle an impossible child.

"Girls, you come on in first," he called pleasantly. Violet and I relaxed, realizing that we hadn't broken any rules after all.

Pulling up two chairs to his desk, he told us to sit down.

"You girls will be graduating from this school in June," he said. "I called you in here to discuss your future. David and Samuel can leave because they're both sixteen, but you two cannot leave for two more years. Legally, you're supposed to stay in school until you're sixteen.

"So, what I had in mind was for both of you to live and work here at the school. Violet, you could work in the kitchen, and, who knows, maybe someday you could work yourself up to assistant cook. Janie, we could put you in the laundry, and maybe someday you'd be in charge. But since you cannot legally quit school for another two years, you'll have to continue with your lessons. I was thinking of ordering some correspondence courses, say, cooking, for instance. That way you can earn money while you're learning. We'll start you off at five dollars a week. How does that sound?"

It sounded fantastic to me. Five dollars a week was a lot of money, more money than I ever saw in one month. It was a tempting offer, but high school was more tempting. I took a deep breath and gulped. "I want to go to high school," I whispered.

"High school?" he asked, surprised. "Well now, I don't know. As you know, we were going to send Gracie and Sammy to school last year, but things did not work out. But anyway . . . I think you two are too young to go outside by yourselves. You know what it's like out there with all that drinking. Indians just cannot stay away from liquor, and I think that you two are much too young to be thinking about things like that. We're very fortunate that there is no drinking on the island, but if we let you out, the next thing we know, the whole island will be as evil and as corrupt as the white people and other Indians outside."

Liquor had been the furthest thing from my mind when I had mentioned high school, but it seemed as if I had corrupted my people before I had even lifted one foot off the island. I could not figure out his reasoning.

"I'll tell you what," he continued. "If you still want to go to high school when you're sixteen, we'll talk about it again."

"I want to go to high school this year," I said a little more defiantly.

"Me too," added Violet.

"Oh dear . . . I won't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do." He sighed. "Don't be too disappointed if nothing happens. These things take a long time to arrange."

"I don't want to work in the laundry all my life," I told Violet as we returned to our classroom. "I'm going to high school even if I have to sneak on the airplane."

"You can't do that. You don't even know where the high school is."

"I'll find one," I answered confidently. "I'm sure there's more than one high school in Canada."

In January it looked as if my dream of going to high school was just that, a dream. My mother's X-ray report had come back positive—there was a hint of a shadow on one of her lungs—and she was leaving on the first plane out.

"It's just not fair," I complained. "Why did you have to get TB and not me?"

"Wasa! Don't say things like that!" she scolded. "Why do you want to get sick?"

"I told you I don't want to get sick. I just want to get TB like you. You're so lucky!"

"gahjeeshp-shahgah!" she muttered.

The plane left while we were in class. As the pilot dipped the big bird's wings and buzzed the school before disappearing into the vast unknown horizon, I prayed that my mother would come back alive. For once, I was not thinking selfishly of myself. Without my mother at my side when I made my plans known to my family, my chances of leaving were very slim, but that was not the reason I wanted her to come home.

Mr. Woods came down with a bone infection, and his departure left us without a teacher. March was too late in the school year to get a substitute teacher, so Reverend Montgomery put Violet and I to work as teachers until the end of June. With Mr. Woods gone and my mother in the sanatorium, my chances for going to high school seemed just about zero.

Each of us took over one half of Miss Lindsey's grade-one class, and we held classes in the playroom; Violet's group in one corner and mine in the opposite.

I was a terrible teacher, taking out my disappointment on six young students, three Eskimos and three Indians. The Eskimo boys were not from our island. They had stepped out of a northbound plane one wintry day and were grounded until June when the planes could fly them to whatever isolated settlement they had come from originally.

The three Eskimo boys and I could not communicate. They could not speak Cree, and the only word I knew in Eskimo was "chewing-gum". Their knowledge of the English language was much more limited than mine had been when I first entered the school. I began to realize how difficult it was for white teachers to try and teach us. It was frustrating.

One of the boys, Simeonie, developed a mad crush on me. He was nine years old and the oldest in the class. It was very disconcerting. I'd be trying desperately to explain something to the class, and he'd be staring at me with his bright black eyes, wearing a big vacuous grin on his face. If I managed to divert his attention to his numbers or letters, he would look up every few minutes, give me a big happy grin, and giggle. I did not know how to handle such open and unrestrained adoration, and I could only wait impatiently and uncomfortably for the school year to end.

Finally, it ended and Miss Lindsey gave Violet and me bouffant crinolines with layers and layers of white tulle. We thought this was an extremely generous payment, especially since the other girls, who had spent four months scouring, sterilizing and polishing every inch of the school, did not receive a thing, not even a thank-you.

With my mother away at the sanatorium during the summer and living conditions being overly crowded at my grandmother's—in addition to taking in my two-year-old brother during my mother's absence, she had *adopted* two more children, one a motherless nephew of hers, and the other a fatherless grandson—I decided to accept Reverend Montgomery's generous and irresistible offer of working at the school and helping his maid in exchange for a bed in one of the dormitories. Food was not included in the arrangement, but with my countless less-than-eager but willing relatives, it was no problem.

The Montgomery's had adopted a beautiful half-breed baby girl in March, and Mrs. Montgomery, finding motherhood too strenuous even with twenty-four-hour maid service, was taking off alone for a relaxing summer vacation in that evil and dangerous outside world in which only white people were safe.

She had asked me to baby-sit before she left, so the baby and I could get acquainted. Not wishing to be fired from my first lucrative job—I had been promised a quarter—I arrived fifteen minutes early.

"Am I glad to see you! Come in! Come in!" she said impatiently, pulling me into the kitchen. "I've had a terrible day! I don't know what possessed me to let Martha have the day off when there was a party at the school tonight! I've had to take care of the baby and do all the work by myself! Listen, Janie, do you mind washing a few dishes for me?"

"No."

"Good! The soap is under the sink." She spun around. "Are my seams straight?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Zip me up, will you? Thanks. Listen, Janie, when you get those dishes finished, would you run the sweeper over the carpets downstairs and dust everything quickly? I just haven't had time to do it today."

"Okay."

"Don't say Okay; say Yes."

"Yes."

"That's better. I certainly appreciate all this. Oh! It's been a terrible day! I don't know if I'm coming or going. Listen, Janie, I've put some cleanser and a rag upstairs in the bathroom. If you have time, could you rinse out the tub and the sink?"

"Yes."

"And run the mop quickly over the kitchen and the bathroom floors?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Do I have any hairs or dust on my dress?"

"No."

"Fine. Oh, by the way, if the baby wakes up, let her cry

until ten o'clock, then change her and give her the bottle that's on the table. That's all you have to do. Don't play with her; I don't want her to get spoiled. Now, I left some cookies and a glass of milk on the table for you. Oh yes! One more thing. If you have to use the toilet, don't use more than three squares of toilet paper. And when you're finished, push down the little lever on the side of the tank to flush it. All right?"

"Yes."

"You can listen to the radio if you want. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes." I wondered how I was going to have the time to sit around listening to the radio when I had so much work to do.

"All right. I hate to rush off like this but my husband is waiting for me at the school. How do I look?"

"Fine."

"Thank you. I don't know what time we'll be home. Just make yourself at home. Bye now."

"Bye." I sighed as the door slammed shut behind her.

Before doing any work, I sat down for a few seconds to gulp my milk and gobble up my cookies, not wasting time to relish each tasty nibble. I cleaned the kitchen thoroughly and put away the mountainous stack of dishes and pots that I had washed. Next I tackled the luxuriously furnished living-room. Then I dusted the gleaming mahogany table and chairs in the dining-room and ran a dust mop over the heavily waxed linoleum floor.

When the downstairs was clean, I trudged up the stairs, running the dust cloth over the banister as I went. I looked in on the baby, who was sleeping peacefully on her stomach, sucking quietly on her thumb. It was past ten o'clock, but she was still sleeping soundly. I covered her gently and left her.

I scoured the bathroom. I pressed the lever on the toilet and the water swooshed down the hole. "Ingenious," I thought. "Only a white man would think of something like that!" I dared not use it, however. I did not want to break it. After I finished cleaning the bathroom, I looked in once more on the baby, who was still sleeping peacefully. I let her sleep. I was ready for it myself.

It was eleven-thirty when I collapsed wearily into one of the armchairs and sank gloriously up to my waist in the cushion. I turned on the radio and listened to the monotone, spine-tingling voice of Jack Webb on *Dragnet* confirm the dire warnings of the ministers, and I wondered why I wanted to leave my island sanctuary and risk my precious life by going out into that raping, murdering, plundering world outside.

The program was just ending when the Montgomerys walked in. "Oh, you were listening to *Dragnet*," Mrs. Montgomery remarked, glancing around to see if I had done any work. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes."

"Now do you see what I keep telling you children about the outside world?" Reverend Montgomery asked.

"Yes."

"And you still want to go to high school?" He smiled.

"Yes."

"Oh, honey! I think it's great that she wants to go to high school," interjected Mrs. Montgomery. "Pay her and let's get to bed. I'm so tired! I've had a hard day!" Turning to me, she said, "I don't know what I would have done without you, Janie. The house looks good. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Did you have any trouble with the baby? I see her bottle is still full. Didn't she wake up?"

"No."

"Well, thank God, one of us had an easy day!" she exclaimed. "I've got to go to bed. I can't keep my eyes open for another second."

Reverend Montgomery walked me to the door. "Good night, Janie, and thank you," he said as he dropped a quarter into my palm.

"Thank you," I said. Twenty-five cents was not bad for five-hours work. It would buy me two chocolate bars at the Bay.

## *Chapter 14*

ONE warm evening, several of my friends and I went down to play on the airplane loading dock—a wooden platform held afloat by two empty oil drums. As we jumped up and down on the dock, the waves produced by the action gave us a nauseating ride. Laughing gleefully, we clung to the oil drums on the dock for support, pretending not to notice the man's head which bobbed up occasionally from behind the drums on the river bank. In the gathering dusk it was difficult to make out who it was.

Slightly seasick and dizzy, we left the dock to stagger home before dark. Because we were extremely nervous about disturbing and waking the dead, we quit laughing and spoke only in soft whispers when we neared the graveyard. Suddenly, a dark and gigantic shapeless figure sprang from the solid hedge of shrubs to the right of us, sending us shrieking and scampering in all directions. Our immediate thought was ghosts.

"Come back here!" a human voice bellowed. It was Reverend Montgomery.

We looked fearfully at the graveyard and slunk back to where he stood, thinking how dumb white men were sometimes. Nobody went around screaming and hollering near a graveyard at night.

"I followed you girls this evening," he yelled. "I saw you down at the river. You girls should be ashamed of yourselves! Running around at night when you should be in bed. Don't you have any morals?"

He had a special lecture for me. "And you, Janie! I thought you had more sense than that. I am ashamed of you! At your age!" I was younger than the other girls by a year at the most,

and if jumping up and down on a loading dock was immoral, then I was guilty. I began to squirm under the barrage of unjust accusations.

"It was a good thing I was there to watch over you," he ranted. "There's no telling what might have happened if I hadn't. I knew you girls were up to no good when I saw you heading down there. I fooled you though. The boys you were expecting didn't dare to show up while I was there, did they?"

It would have been useless to try and convince him that we had no ulterior motives in mind when we went out for the evening. It was the custom in our tribe for all young, unmarried people to stroll around night after night. It was true that this was the only time the older ones could meet their boyfriends or girlfriends without having interfering and spying parents around, but then they had interfering and spying children around to keep them on their toes. No part of the island was safe from inquisitive children and prying ministers. But we did not defend ourselves.

"Get on home, all of you!" Reverend Montgomery ordered. "I don't ever want to see you out at night again! Go home and pray for forgiveness. Shame on you."

"That does it! I am not going to live at the school this fall!" I exclaimed as soon as we were out of his hearing range. I was so tired of Reverend Montgomery's suspicions, his belief that there was only one thing on our minds: sex. Every act, according to him and the staff, was motivated by our lustful desires.

I had been thinking more and more seriously of not returning to school in the fall. I could see no sense in it when my family lived year round on the island. Why I could not live with them and still attend classes was beyond me, especially when the white-status Indians were doing just that. I preferred to spend my last year on the island with my family. I had tired of living by myself at the school, and after three weeks of it, I had moved in with my Aunt Edna.

When school opened in August, I did not show up to register. I failed to show up the next day, or the next. On the fourth day, Reverend Montgomery came storming into our

cabin while I was reading a book. My aunt Edna gave a little shriek. Feigning calmness—I was terrified and my stomach was tied up in knots—I went on reading, bracing myself for the barrage.

"Why aren't you in school?" he demanded. "I have been waiting for you for three days now. What have you been up to?"

I gulped. "I am not going to live at the school."

"*What!* You are going right now even if I have to drag you down there. Do you hear me?"

Everyone along the coast of James Bay must have heard him. "I am not going," I answered belligerently, quivering all over with rage and fright.

"Don't you talk back to me! I know why you don't want to return to school. You want to be free to sleep and fool around with the boys."

"No. I want to live with my family before I go to high school next year," I answered as quietly as I could.

"*You are not going to high school!* You are not going to set foot in any classroom unless you live at the school. I will not have any pregnant girls in my school, and that is exactly what will happen to you if you do not live at the school."

"How come some of the children can live at home?" I muttered.

"Because they're white status. You're an Indian, which means you can't live at home! Now, you can either return to school to complete grade eight, and go on to high school, or you can live at home and forget about it. Which will it be, Janie?"

I did not have to think too long. "I'll go back," I hissed through clenched teeth. I had never despised anyone so much in my life.

"I knew you would see it my way. You can sleep here tonight," he said magnanimously, "and come in and register first thing tomorrow morning. I'll see you then."

Turning to my trembling aunt, he smiled pleasantly. "Bye Edna. Baby all right?" he asked, patting his stomach.

Edna nodded and muttered an uncomplimentary remark under her breath. She could not understand what had been

said, but she did not need to because she had predicted exactly what would happen.

I went alone to the school to register because none of my family felt like facing Reverend Montgomery just yet. "Oooo, Geniesh, is he ever mad at you," the girls greeted me on my way to the office.

"I don't care," I answered nonchalantly.

Reverend Montgomery greeted me pleasantly. "Glad to see you made it. You know what to do," he said, crossing my name off the list.

I went up to the dorm as I had done seven times before. Miss Foster was waiting. "Look what we have," she said proudly, pointing to a steel coffin standing on its end in one corner of the washroom. It had a curtain in front of it. "It's a shower," she announced.

"That's nice," I answered, not having the faintest idea what a shower was.

Pulling aside the curtain, she reached in and water gushed out of the side. Ingenious! "No more baths. You just step inside, lather up, rinse, and you're all clean. Isn't that wonderful?" she said.

It certainly was. No more lugging pails full of scalding hot water up from the kitchen to fill the tubs. No more parboiling for the few unfortunates who happened to be first. No more freezing for those who were forced to bathe in the icy dregs of twenty other girls. But the best thing was that we had a moderate amount of privacy, not as total as I would have liked, but a vast improvement over what we had had—eagle-eyed, shrill-voiced supervisors hovering over us, constantly harping, "You missed your ears. You forgot your neck."

"I'll leave you alone while you have a shower," Miss Foster said brightly. Her forced friendliness was annoying. "I have your clothes laid out for you. Oh! By the way, do you want a haircut?"

"No, I'm going to let my hair grow," I answered, taking advantage of the one privilege granted me as a senior.

When I had finished my shower and put on my school

clothes, I went out to the playground. "What did they say?" the girls asked excitedly, crowding around me. "Did you get punished?"

"Nobody said anything," I answered. "Everybody was trying so hard to be nice."

"You just wait," they warned. "You're not going to get off that easy."

They were right. A few days later, another girl and I baby-sat for Mrs. Montgomery, who had just returned from her vacation. After paying us each a dime, she handed me a brown paper bag. "I almost forgot to give you this. It's just a small token of my appreciation for looking after the baby while I was away."

I reached into the bag and pulled out a gaudy, imitation beaded-leather belt with "Canada" emblazoned across it. It certainly was a small token. "Thank you," I mumbled, disappointed.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "I bought it especially for you."

"Yes," I lied. I had put in over one-hundred hours of work for a cheap tourist souvenir.

While we were preparing for bed that evening, some of the girls asked to see my belt. I held it up for everyone to see.

"What's going on here?" Miss Foster demanded, breaking into the group.

"We were just looking at Janie's belt," someone answered.

"What belt? Let me see that!" she snapped, grabbing it out of my hand. "Where did you get it from?"

"Mrs. Montgomery gave it to me," I answered.

"For what?"

"For baby-sitting this summer."

"And you took it?" she asked incredulously. "Did Mary get one?"

"No." Mary was the girl who had helped me baby-sit that afternoon.

"If Mary didn't get one, you had no right to accept it. It's not fair for you to get one, is it?"

"She paid us money for baby-sitting this afternoon," I explained. "The belt was for the baby-sitting I did this summer."

"I don't care what it was for! You shouldn't have accepted it. I want you to return it."

"I can't!" I cried. It would be too humiliating. Besides, a belt for a summer's work was better than nothing.

Instead of hitting me over the head as I expected, she muttered grudgingly, "All right, but don't ever let me see that belt in this school. Take it home with you on Saturday."

Which is exactly what I did. I gave it to my little brother. Staying out of trouble was more important than a lousy belt if I expected to go to high school.

It was not easy though. When Miss Foster could not find anything else to nag me about, she would criticize the way I walked. "Don't wiggle your hips when you walk!" she'd yell. "I bet you spend hours practising to walk like that just so the boys will notice you."

It was doubtful that the Indian boys on our island ever looked at that part of a girl's anatomy except when making fun of a particularly large one. Beauty was judged on two things, chubbiness and a pretty face. Boys were not interested in a big bosom, a shapely figure, nice legs, or a well-rounded bottom. They did not get a chance to see these things because the women and girls were always bundled from head to foot in layers of clothing.

I tried to walk like a robot without moving my hips. I had never been aware of how I walked, and neither had anyone else, but now the girls told me, "You know, you do wiggle when you walk." I found it impossible to change the way I walked, and eventually everyone forgot about my hips.

The next thing Miss Foster found to nag me about was toothpaste. After eight years of brushing my teeth morning and night with Lifebuoy soap, I had finally switched to toothpaste, paid for with the nickels and dimes I earned babysitting.

"Well, lah-dee-dah," Miss Foster remarked when she saw it. "Aren't we getting fancy." When one of girls asked me jokingly one night why I had bought the family-size tube,

Miss Foster snidely said, "Because she's going to have a family soon if she isn't careful."

I could not think of any reason why she would make such a remark, so I glared at her. Except for the time I had been a bridesmaid, I had never been near a boy. The closest I had come to having a boyfriend was when one of my sisters delivered a package to me from an admirer. In the package were five packs of gum and a note which read: "I will give you a package of gum every week if you will be my girlfriend." I had sent my sister back with a message that I did not wish to be his girlfriend, but I wouldn't mind a package of gum every week.

The year had barely begun, but I could see that it was going to be a difficult one. As if having to put up with Miss Foster's unjust treatment was not enough, I was troubled with frequent, gnawing stomach pains, sometimes so intense that I doubled over crying and clutching at my stomach, trying frantically to dislodge what felt like a pack of wolves chomping at my insides. (Years later when I could afford a doctor, I learned I had ulcers, thus giving me the dubious honour of being the first one of my tribe to get this high-pressured white-man's affliction.) When I reported my problem, I was accused of trying to get out of my share of the work load, so I never complained again.

I merely plotted all kinds of revenge—scalping, a quick shove down the fire-escape or stairs, getting out my bow and arrow or slingshot and "accidentally" piercing the heart of any white person I happened to despise at the moment.

Only my mother's long-awaited, unexpected, safe return from the outside world in late September prevented me from doing something drastic that could get me expelled from school, and lose my one chance to leave the island. Surprisingly enough, my stomach pains diminished in both frequency and intensity after her return.

"What's it like out there?" I immediately asked when I finally saw her five days later.

"Oh, terrible!" She shuddered. "I hope I never have to go out there again. There are cars all over the place. And they go so fast! I got to ride in one and I've never been so scared

in all my life. I kept my eyes closed the whole time. I was so sure we would crash.

"And you should see the police. All over the place. With guns on too. I kept waiting for one of them to shoot me. . . ." On and on she talked about the horrors of the outside world while I listened spellbound. I suspected she might be exaggerating slightly to frighten me, and when she presented me with a stack of crime magazines showing gory pictures of unfortunate victims, and romance magazines with such shocking stories as "My Husband Ran Away With My Sister", or "The Night My Best Friend's Husband Attacked Me", I was convinced of her intentions.

The magazines did not change my mind about leaving. My friends and I found them extremely fascinating, although they did tend to verify the minister's warnings. We read them over and over until they were banned from the school. We were told we did not need such filthy garbage to flame our already-lustful desires.

## *Chapter 15*

THE school year of 1955-56 was one of numerous improvements in our dilapidated building. The shower had been installed in our washroom; bunk beds replaced the old cots, which after years of use sagged in the middle like hammocks; a commercial mixer replaced the washtubs we had used to make bread, saving us many hours of hard kneading. In the kitchen, a large gas-stove was added to be used in conjunction with the old wood-stove, which was no longer big enough for our ever-growing school population.

One Sunday morning while the cook was busy preparing lunch, she asked me to light the griddle on the new stove. As with every other mechanical appliance, we were usually not allowed to touch it except to clean it. It was only recently that we had been allowed to turn the light switches on and off by ourselves.

I had watched the cook light the stove several times so I knew how it was done. But instead of turning one knob at a time for the three rows of elements under the griddle as I had seen her do, I tried to save time by turning on all three before lighting. (There were no pilot lights on the stove.)

There was a loud hissing sound as I lit the match. I bent over to see where the jets were, then stuck my arm in to light them. The mild explosion which followed sent me sprawling. Laughing nervously, I picked myself up, and after prying my blistered eyelids open and inspecting myself for damages, I realized that all the hair on my face—my bangs, my eyebrows, my eyelashes—and the hair on my right arm had been singed off. My right arm, my eyelids, and the tip of my nose were blistered. The sight of myself made me laugh even harder, more from fright than from humour.

"Are you stupid, girl? You could have been seriously hurt. This isn't a laughing matter!" barked a voice behind me. I spun around to see a strange man at the door.

After he left, I asked the cook who he was. "Oh, that's the American who's here to fish and hunt," she replied.

"That was an American?" I asked incredulously. It was the first time I had ever seen an American and he certainly did not fit the image I had of Americans. "Is that what they look like?"

She looked at me with a puzzled frown. "Of course. What did you expect?"

D'Artagne. If not him, then at least the swashbuckling Errol Flynn, whose movies had begun to replace Hopalong Cassidy's.

It was a terrible period in my life, a time when while all the other girls seemed to be growing gracefully into their teens, I felt like an octopus, all arms and legs. I did not like making public appearances, and with the loss of my self-confidence, I had lost my long-standing function of giving speeches at the end of all school gatherings. I had been demoted to writing them for my successor.

One day during our Christmas holidays, Miss Foster sent word that she wanted to see me in our washroom. Climbing

the stairs slowly, I tried to think of any rules I might have broken recently, but I could not think of any. When I entered the washroom I was relieved to see a smile on Miss Foster's face. "Sit down, Janie. I have to cut your hair," she announced pleasantly.

"Why?" I protested. "I'm a senior now and I can let it grow."

"I know, but the staff decided you look much better in bangs, so I'm going to cut your hair."

My bangs had grown out just enough so that I could hold them back with a barrette, and my hair was almost down to my chin. "No! You can't!" I cried, my visions of walking into high school in long flowing hair shattered.

"Oh! Don't be such a baby! It's only hair!" she snapped, starting to hack away at it.

Yes, but it was my hair, and it was very precious to me. While she continued cutting, I held back the bitter tears which threatened to come to the surface. "Now that looks much better," she said when she was through.

After supper, as I was furiously scouring pots and pans in the kitchen, the matron came up to me. "Well, I see you got your hair cut," she said. "I think you look so much prettier in bangs, Janie. Don't ever let them grow out again."

I did not answer. I kept on working out my anger on the pots. "Do you want to know something?" she said cheerfully. "Mamie Eisenhower wears bangs, and she's a very important person."

I did not care if Mamie Eisenhower wore bangs! I had never even heard of her, but I was willing to wager that nobody had forced her to wear them.

"What did she say to you?" one of the girls asked after the matron had left.

"She told me to wear bangs all my life, and she told me that Mamie Eisenhower, a very important woman, also wears bangs."

"Who's Mamie Eisenhower?"

"I don't know. I never heard of her," I answered bitterly.

"She probably made up the name to make you feel better," she said. (We did not take modern history, nor did we have

television, newspapers, or listen to the radio.)

I graduated in June, still wearing my detestable bangs. Our teacher had remained healthy throughout the year, unlike Mr. Woods, and Violet and I graduated with honours. Our fears of having to repeat grade eight a third time were over.

It was the first graduation the school had ever had, and while there were only two of us, it was still a big occasion. (We had entered the first grade with about twenty other children, but some had dropped out; others were several grades behind when they returned from the sanatorium.) We were dressed in white confirmation dresses. One of the staff members presented us with white lace handkerchiefs, another gave us each a pendant, while yet a third pinned nosegays of artificial flowers on us. Reverend Montgomery gave us honourable mention in his prayers and officially announced that we were going to high school.

We were permitted to visit the Indian village to show the people what graduates looked like, but everybody was more impressed by our white dresses than they were about the fact that we had achieved the impossible—graduating from grade school and going on to high school.

My grandmother, as usual, cried when she saw me, and, as usual, her unrestrained emotions embarrassed me acutely. Eight years of having to stifle and hide all feelings at the school had made me incapable of coping with the slightest show of emotion. Tears were streaming down her face when I raced out the door.

We even had a movie that evening, a new one entitled *Alexander's Rag-Time Band.* While the children sat on the floor, Violet and I sat on chairs by the projectionist.

The excitement of the day and the thought of spending my last night in the school I had entered with such great expectations, but that had turned out to be a prison, left me too tensed up to sleep. When I walked out of the school forever the next morning, the unhappy memories greatly outnumbered the happy ones, but the thought of leaving all my friends behind, girls with whom I had spent eight years, eight unsuccessful years of having the Indian educated out of us, left me with a great feeling of loss. My future was so uncer-

tain. I did not know if I would ever see them again.

This sense of doom was heightened by the depressing behaviour of my family, who sat around moaning, "wasa, wasa," as if they were mourning my death, which as far as they were concerned, was certain if I could not be talked out of leaving the island. With this constant wake going on at our cabin, I stayed away more and more.

"Why can't you spend a little more time with us?" my mother complained.

"Because you all act like I'm dying. I can't stand it."

"We're just preparing ourselves. Why can't you stay and get a good job at the school? Reverend Montgomery told me he offered you one. Why don't you take it?"

"Because I don't want to work there and make five dollars a week. And I'd have to work nine hours a day, six days a week for that. No thanks!"

"But think of all the people who don't make any money at all. Don't you realize how lucky you are to be offered a job at the school?"

"I don't want to wash smelly old clothes for the rest of my life. I want to finish high school and become a nurse."

"Wasa!" she sighed. "Why can't you remember that you're an Indian and you can't do things like that?"

"I know I'm an Indian, but that doesn't mean I have to stay here, get married, and have a baby every year until I get too old to have them. I'll never be happy unless I go to high school."

"Wasa," she moaned. "I've lived here all my life and I'm completely happy. I have no desire to live anywhere else. Why can't you be like that?"

I could not explain to her that as much as I loved the people and the way of life, I still felt that something was missing from my life. People like her and my grandmother, with very little or no education, were totally content with the simple life. They did not feel the urge to change or to explore other ways. I envied them their naiveté and their happiness. Education had robbed me of this inner peace and contentment.

Sometimes she tried to scare me into staying. "You know how terrible those white men are," she'd say.

"How do you know they're terrible?" I'd argue. "You've only been involved with one, and from what I've heard, he wasn't so terrible. You listen to the minister too much. Look at all the time you spent in the city without getting killed. And look at all the children who've returned from the sanatorium. Nothing ever happened to them. The only ones who died out there were those who were too sick."

"It's different in a hospital . . . you're protected. You won't be though. You'll be living among the white people. I'll worry about you getting run over by a car or starting to drink."

"I'll just have to be careful about where I walk. And I'm not interested in drinking."

"But the minister says that all Indians who leave their reservations drink, and that they end up worse than the white men."

"Oh, he's just trying to scare the people! I don't have to act like that. Besides, I think ministers lie sometimes."

"*Wasa*, Geniesh! Don't say things like that about the ministers!" she said, appalled at my disrespect. "They are sent by God."

I had heard that phrase countless times, and while I had believed it when I was younger, I had begun to doubt it. I wondered how, if God was supposed to be so loving, He could send such people—people who treated us with utter contempt and repulsion. It did not make sense. Of course, not all of them were like that, but there were a few who you just knew were sent from the other side.

My mother and I argued all summer long, but I was deaf to all her arguments and pleas. There were times, of course, when she came very close to convincing me I should stay.

Finally the big day—August 25, 1956—came, the day I had looked forward to for so long. Reverend Montgomery permitted me to use the shower at the school and even issued me some clothes to wear on the plane—a red plaid dress, beige wool stockings, pink bloomers, and oxfords. One of the

staff members presented me with a pair of sheer lace panties, which I accepted with a red face. Not wishing to be caught with such lewd apparel, I rolled them up and hid them in my bloomers until I could be alone to stuff them into my suitcase. Without my heavy fleeced bloomers, I could never feel completely dressed.

Crying and blubbering relatives gathered early at our house, but instead of sitting or mingling with them, I went into another room to choke back my own tears. I kept telling myself I was not going to cry, no matter what.

At the sound of the plane in the distance, I busied myself gathering up all my belongings into one small suitcase and a larger one tied together with string. My mother and grandmother grabbed me, sobbing, while I stood like a statue, afraid to look at either of them. I had nagged them for years to let me leave the island and I was determined not to break down.

We marched down to the river in a funereal procession, everybody but me crying and carrying on. Before I got on the plane, I was grabbed, hugged, and kissed by just about every adult Indian on the island. My relatives shoved money into my pockets, and when I counted it later, I was shocked to discover I had fifty dollars, the most money I had ever seen in my life. My mother and aunts followed me down to the plane, while my grandmother, afraid of capsizing the loading dock with her great weight, remained on the river bank.

Violet had not made it after all, which did not surprise me too much. Her parents refused to let her leave, but she had hoped right up to the last minute to change their minds. I had three travelling companions, however, two girls on their way to the sanatorium and a sixteen-year-old boy, Samson, who refused to give up an education just because he was considered too old. He had just completed the sixth grade, but he had been forced to leave school when he turned sixteen.

"Be careful. Look out for cars. Don't trust any white man." My mother choked out her last warnings. "Behave yourself and write often. We'll think of you always."

I climbed into the plane and the door closed behind me.

From my window seat I could see my family and my friends, and the tears I had held back so valiantly, overflowed and ran down my cheeks.

The pilot started the engine. The noise was deafening and the clouds of exhaust hid from my view the huddle of weeping women, their wool plaid dresses hanging down to their ankles, their bent heads covered with boldly coloured scarves.

We taxied slowly up the river, almost the length of the island, before the pilot turned the plane around and revved the engine up to full throttle. We sped down the river towards the bay at full speed, and the plane sounded as if it were falling apart. Sheets of white water hit the windows as we bounced over the gentle waves. Finally we were airborne and flying over the bay.

I smiled weakly as I swallowed my stomach and clutched at my seat. We had not been in the air more than one minute and already I was feeling quite nauseated.

The pilot turned the plane around and flew over the beaver-shaped island. Looking down, I got my first aerial view of it: the heavily wooded west end with its pines and spruce; the Catholic mission with its residential school, priests' quarters, and tiny blue and white church on the edge of the forest; the little creek that separated the mission from the Coaster village with its conglomeration of tar-paper shacks and white "mahkee" camp tents attached like nursing pups to the huge brown tepees; the red and white buildings of the Hudson Bay Company compound; the dismal little graveyard which separated the compound from the Anglican mission with its gray-shingled buildings; the few 'white-status' Indian shacks on the southern fringe of the Anglican mission; the Inlander village with its three shacks and numerous tepees; and, finally, the tapering east end, its grove of poplar trees and tall shrubbery growing to replace the pine forest that had burned down the year I was born. All of these became indelibly marked on my mind.

The pilot dipped the wings of the plane as we flew over the waving crowd of Indians still down at the river bank. He glided into another turn and finally headed south into a world

that was unknown and suddenly terrifying to me.

I wondered if I had made the right decision. For fifteen and a half years I had never travelled more than twenty miles from the island, and if someone had given me a choice right then between the island and high school, I would have chosen the island without the slightest hesitation. If the plane had developed engine trouble and had been forced to land, I doubt if I would have had the courage to climb back on; at least, not right then.

## *Chapter 16*

THE deafening whine of the engine and the egg-sized lump in my throat made conversation with my fellow passengers quite impossible. Judging by the grimaces on their pasty faces, they were not very interested in being sociable either.

I concentrated on the disappointing scenery below—miles and miles of dark forests dotted with hundreds of tiny lakes, broken by ribbons of swift-flowing rivers and acres and acres of swamp lands. It was easy to see why we were called the Swampy Crees. To the right of us was the never-ending blue expanse of James Bay, 150 miles wide and 280 miles long. The scenery was the same as that which I had seen in my limited travels from the island. From the movies I had seen, I had expected great sand deserts with blowing tumbleweed, rugged snow-peaked mountains, gently rolling farmlands with waving blankets of golden wheat, and at least an ocean now and then.

The puffs of clouds that drifted by the window made me wonder what it would feel like if I could reach out and pull one in. "Probably like goose-down," I thought. I wondered whether Heaven would be visible if we could soar above the blanket of billowy clouds. The light would probably be too blinding for us to get a definite look at anything or anyone, I decided.

The combination of the constant buffeting of the small plane, which seemed to be wired and taped together, my own fear, and the foul contents of the small bag that the girl next to me was holding was too much for my touchy stomach, and I looked around frantically for a container. My neighbour looked at me sympathetically and thrust an open bag under my chin. I gave her a grateful look before spewing out my breakfast. My violent retching started her off again and we sounded like two competing bullfrogs.

Suddenly, the plane took an unexpected nosedive. "Now we've had it," I thought in utter terror.

"Old Factory," the pilot announced cheerfully, motioning below to the ground speeding towards us.

I could see nothing but trees. Clutching at my seat and bracing my legs, I prepared myself for the crash, my airsickness completely forgotten. The plane levelled off and I saw the river below. We circled and came in for a bouncy landing, a solid sheet of water on either side of us. We taxied up to the tiny wooden landing on shore.

A band of waving and smiling Indians waited on the shore, and as soon as the plane had been secured, one of them poked his head through the open door. "oo-wan jee-wow?" he asked.

We told him our names and he called them out to the others. An old woman came over and beckoned to me. "ahwah jee Geniesh, Juliet oodanse?" she asked. I nodded. "wasa, Geniesh!" she cried, throwing her arms around me and clutching me to her ample bosom in a painful bear hug, showering me with wet, sloppy kisses.

It was bewildering. I did not have the vaguest idea who she was. The name she gave meant absolutely nothing to me. To add to my confusion, other toothless, old women, not one of them under two hundred pounds, and bent, sinewy old men hugged and kissed me like a long lost relative, asking about my mother and grandmother, and wishing me a speedy recovery. I did not bother explaining that I was not on my way to the sanatorium but to high school.

At the other plane stops, Eastmain and Rupert's House, I got the same warm reception. People I had never met or even

heard of hugged and kissed me as soon as they heard my mother's name. I had no idea that she was so popular all over the world. She had lived in or visited each settlement during the first few years of her marriage fifteen years ago, and the people still remembered her with great affection.

I was somewhat disappointed in the people. They looked and dressed the same as the Indians on my island. The only difference, a very slight one, was the dialect. I had expected Indians in buckskins and feathers like the ones I had seen in the movies.

From Rupert's House, the site of the first Hudson Bay Company post in the early 1670's, we headed west across the bay on the final leg of our trip to the twin cities of Moose Factory and Moosonee in Ontario. Although they were both Indian villages, the railway ended at Moosonee, and a huge modern sanatorium had been built at Moose Factory, so that put them into the category of cities as far as I was concerned.

My stomach felt as if it had been turned inside out by then, and although I was still retching every few minutes, nothing came out. "World, you'd better be worth it," I thought.

Four hours after we had lifted off from the waters of the mighty "jeesah-seebee", we landed in the muddy brown waters of the mighty Moose River. I could see why my mother had warned me against drinking the water. I staggered off the plane and looked around for a familiar face. Except for two Indians who were unloading the plane, there was only one person waiting, an elderly woman with white hair. "Janie and Samson?" she asked. We nodded. "Come with me."

We followed her past the huge, sprawling, modern sanatorium, past the neat row of two-storey houses for the doctors and nurses, along a wide dirt road to a modern elementary-school building which was every bit as big as the sanatorium. I was very impressed. She took us inside the school to a small office.

The young white man at the desk introduced himself as the principal. "You'll spend two days here," he informed us, "before you leave on the train Friday morning. Miss Hudson will show you to the dorms."

"You wait here while I take Janie to the girls' dorm," Miss Hudson told Samson. She led me up three flights of stairs to a large airy room with forty steel cots. "Take any bed you want and make yourself at home," she told me before disappearing. The school had not opened yet and there was nobody around.

I dumped my suitcases on the cot nearest the door and lay down to unwind. I could not sleep, however. My stomach muscles ached, my neck was stiff, and there was a persistent buzzing in my ears.

After a few minutes, a beautiful, hazel-eyed, auburn-haired little girl, about seven or eight years old, walked in. She looked at me quizzically, then started jabbering away in a soft, lilting, sing-song dialect which I brilliantly deduced to be Moose Cree since I was in Moose Factory.

"Eh?" I asked.

"Parlez-vous Français?" she replied, switching to French.

"Boy, this Moose Cree sure is a funny language," I thought. "Eh?" I repeated.

"You speak French?"

"No," I answered, relieved that we had found a common language, English.

"I'm Micheline. You?"

"Janie."

"Oh. Indian?"

"Yes," I answered, surprised that she even asked when it was surely obvious.

"Yah?" she asked, surprised. "Me too." I was even more surprised. She certainly did not look like an Indian. "I'm from Waswanipi," she added, mentioning an Indian settlement in the central interior of Quebec.

"I'm from Fort George," I said.

"Your father white?" she asked. I nodded in embarrassment. "Mine too," she announced proudly.

I felt an immediate deep affection for her, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for her too. Being part white had not bothered me either when I was her age, but now I resented it. Being a half-breed was shameful and sinful. Although I felt totally Indian, there was always somebody around to remind

me of my mixed parentage. I hoped that she would continue to be proud of hers.

I managed to glean from her limited English that her mother did not want her and she had to live at the school the year round. She did not know where her father was. How I pitied her. I had never known an abandoned child before. She did not seem very upset, however. In fact, she seemed quite proud of her background.

While we were talking, two tall, slim Indian girls walked in. "Janie?" they asked, coming towards me with outstretched arms. I nodded. "I'm Lillian; this is Ruth," said the tallest one. "You remember us?"

"How could she remember us?" Ruth said. "She was only a baby."

I knew who they were, however. They were my stepfather's youngest sisters. It was a good feeling knowing that I had relatives scattered all over the world.

"Come on. We're going to take you home. We want to hear all about the family," they said, and I followed them eagerly.

Their house was large and comfortable. They even had electricity and running water. They offered me cake and ice-cream, a rare treat indeed. I had eaten ice-cream only three times before.

They were extremely kind and friendly, but I was still uncomfortable. Their father was an ordained minister, and although he was a relative and an Indian, sitting and chatting with a man of the church was not my idea of a relaxing evening. When Lillian and Ruth offered to show me around the village, I was very relieved.

The Indians here also looked the same as the ones I had left back home. The only differences were that they were better dressed, the women wore make-up, and they lived in decent homes. Having heard all my life about how the Indians of Moose Factory and Moosonee drank all the time, I stared at everybody we met and tried to determine whether or not he was drunk. I had never seen a drunk before and I did not know how a drunk was supposed to act. Everybody seemed quite friendly and normal.

Later on, the girls took me to a movie, a love story. It was

a little too torrid for my prudish tastes. At the first kiss between the hero and the heroine, I gasped and lowered my gaze. I could feel my face burning. The only kissing I had ever seen before was between a cowboy and his horse. I couldn't help thinking of Reverend Montgomery. I was certain he would feel quite needed in this community, this Sodom of the north.

On the way back to the school, Lillian cleared her throat several times before blurting, "You know, Janie, you shouldn't wear those thick stockings. In the city you'll have to go bare-legged like everyone else if you don't want to appear too different."

Me? Go bare-legged? Why, it was unthinkable! It was sinful and indecent! She might as well have told me to walk around naked. I could not believe that she, a minister's daughter, would tell me to do a thing like that. I told her I would try, but I did not promise.

Once I was back in the dormitory, alone, all the homesickness and loneliness I had managed to fight off all day overcame me, and I cried. Berating myself for crying at my age, I wiped the tears away angrily. I remembered the first time I had entered boarding school eight years before. Surrounded by thirty or more friends, my homesickness and loneliness had been no less than it was now when I had only an unfortunate little girl named Micheline around.

I spent the following morning with her in the playground. She jabbered away in Moose Cree and I marvelled at how anyone her size could master such a difficult language. I caught a familiar word now and then, but most of it was totally alien to me. She paid no attention to my silence. I imagine she was quite happy just to have somebody around. And I was content to have another Indian around, no matter how young she was or how strangely she talked.

That afternoon, an Indian girl, one about my age, came over to where we were. "Janie Matthews?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Daisy Faries. I was sent over by the Indian agent to help you pick out some clothes at the Bay. I'll be going to the same school as you."

I liked her immediately, and I admired her self-assurance.

She seemed so at ease, so sophisticated—a woman of the world—while I quivered and shrank every time somebody spoke to me. I admired her quick smile and friendliness and the way she walked, proudly and naturally. She was everything I wished to be.

I decided to rely on her judgment as to what clothes were appropriate for the outside world. I was shocked at her choice—short-sleeved blouses and a tight black skirt. Like my legs, my arms had never been bare, and I thought that only loose women wore tight skirts. (I eventually became accustomed to wearing short sleeves, even becoming so brazen as to wear sleeveless clothes at times, but I never could bring myself to wear the tight skirt she had picked out and I finally gave it to her.) I did insist on buying one skirt I especially liked, a red plaid, my one symbol of security.

Afterwards, we went to see the Indian Affairs agent who was stationed in Moose Factory. "Now," he said sternly, "you are the first one from your island to go on to high school, so I don't want you getting into any trouble while you are in the city. If you can set an example to the people in Fort George, we may be able to get more children out. We're depending on you. Study hard. Stay away from liquor. Stay out of trouble. And when you've completed your education, go back to help your people. Show them what Indians can accomplish.

"You'll be leaving on the train tomorrow morning. Your tickets will be ready for you. There will be other children on the train who are going to the same school, so you don't have to worry about anything. Someone from my office will pick you up at the school and take you over to Moosonee." Shaking my hand, he dismissed me.

I was awakened at six o'clock the next morning for a quick breakfast of cold cereal and milk. Samson was already there, yawning and rubbing his eyes. When I tiptoed into the dormitory to get my tattered old suitcases, Micheline sat up in bed. She waved. I waved back.

The man from Indian Affairs was waiting for us when we got downstairs to the principal's office. "Samson and Janie, I presume. Off to the bright lights, eh? Follow me," he said.

I did not know what he meant but I grinned and nodded. It was always best to agree with a white man, even if he did not make any sense.

He took us down to the river. We climbed into a power boat and skimmed across the river to Moosonee on the mainland, where we had to trudge about half a mile along a dirt road to get to the railway station. Several dozen Indians were milling about on the platform, and inside the waiting room about a dozen white people sat on long benches. Daisy was already there with her parents. But there was no train in sight.

Seven-thirty, departure time, came and went. Still no train. Finally, at eight o'clock, a long line of rusted cars puffed, screeched, and squealed to a stop in front of the station. Sparks shot out from the metal wheels. "Ontario Northland" was emblazoned across each dilapidated car.

It seemed as if the engineer could not decide where he wanted to go. The train chugged back and forth on the tracks. Finally, he chugged to a stop and the conductor yelled, "All aboard!"

The Indian Affairs man thrust an envelope at each of us. "These are your tickets," he said. "Don't lose them. Good luck."

The conductor stood by the door and showed us where to go: Indians to the right, whites to the left. The dining-car separated us. Our dusty car was almost empty. I took a filthy velvet seat by a grimy window so as not to miss a thing. Daisy sat opposite me. I was glad she was there. My heart was pounding furiously, my ears were ringing, and I felt quite nauseated again.

When the train jerked forward, I grabbed my seat. We rumbled off into the great unknown. I prayed silently that the swaying did not mean anything, that the rattling and creaking did not mean the car was falling apart at this suicidal speed. Having walked and travelled by canoe all my life, I thought this slow-moving train was moving at the speed of lightning. Gradually I relaxed and looked out the window as mile after mile of pine trees whizzed by. I was beginning to think that the whole world was covered with them. The

mountains, oceans, and deserts were just a myth.

It was a clear, warm day. Inside, the car was stifling. Despite the "No Smoking" sign, most of the Indians were smoking. The smoke and the dust only aggravated my nausea, and although I had had a shower that morning, I felt as if I hadn't bathed in months.

The train screeched to a stop. Looking out the window, I saw nothing but trees. I was convinced there was something wrong, but the door opened and a small band of Indians climbed on and went into the dining-car. They came out, laughing and chatting, drinking cokes and eating ice-cream cones. They looked us over and whenever they saw a familiar face, they rushed over to shake hands and sit down for a brief chat. When the train whistle blew, they left, laughing and lapping at their ice-cream cones. This scene was to be repeated over and over again.

I began to resent these unnecessary delays and wish that the Indians would do their visiting and shopping at some other time. The car filled up rapidly, and I was soon wedged in with three other people. My first train ride was rapidly turning out to be a great disappointment.

I could not carry on a conversation with my fellow passengers. I was too self-conscious, and my mind refused to translate my Cree thoughts into English. Everybody must have wondered how I had made it this far in school with my limited English.

Ten exhausting hours after we had boarded the train at Moosonee, we stopped at Cochrane, where we were to spend the night and make our first train change. When Daisy suggested that we eat at the station before finding a hotel room, I followed her example and ordered a hot dog, pie a la mode, and a pop—and suffered terribly from heartburn all night.

After registering at the nearest hotel, I went down the hall to take a long, relaxing bath, but I had not even climbed into the tub when somebody started pounding on the door. I did not answer. "What's the matter in there?" a man's voice demanded. "Are you dead or something?"

Every ten seconds or so, he would pound on the door,

demanding to know if I had died. I took a quick bath and dressed hurriedly. When I opened the door, I found myself face to face with a filthy, unshaven old man with bloodshot eyes, rotten teeth, and foul breath.

"Hi, honey," he said as he staggered by me. Thinking he was mentally deranged, I shrieked and fled to the safety of my room.

Later on, when Daisy and another girl visited some friends, I tagged along. I did not want to go, but after my experience in the bathroom, I did not feel like staying by myself. I was offered an ale, and thinking it was ginger ale, I accepted. When I took a sip, I gagged at the most vile concoction of garbage I had ever tasted, worse than any of my grandmother's home remedies. Months later I learned what I had been drinking that day.

After spending another restless night with my heartburn, I got up at the crack of dawn and made a daring decision. I was going to bare my legs to the waiting world. I did feel out of place with my thick stockings. But without them, I felt even more self-conscious and was sure that everybody was staring at my glaringly white legs.

When we climbed aboard the train, Daisy informed me that we had another day and a half and two more train changes before we reached our destination. I was shocked and dismayed; dismayed because by now I hated trains, and shocked because I had not realized how huge the world was. Looking at the globe in our classroom, I had always believed that I could paddle around the world in a few weeks.

We travelled all day. The ever-present pines and spruces served as constant, painful reminders of the forests I had loved at home and the loved ones I had left behind. It was a depressing day. I had had my fill of the outside world and I was ready to return home.

We arrived in North Bay at midnight, where we not only had to change trains, but rail lines as well. It was pouring rain. We took a taxi across the town and climbed aboard the Canadian Pacific just in time. I was too tired and too emotionally spent to get excited about my first car ride. We stopped in Sudbury at eight o'clock and changed trains again.

I had gone without food and sleep for twenty-four hours. I tried to choke down some coffee but it only aggravated my motion sickness.

Finally, at four in the afternoon, five days and approximately a thousand exhausting miles after I had left Fort George, I staggered off the train at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, my final stop.

We were met by Mr. Stewart, the principal of the Indian school in town. Daisy introduced us. "He's a little deaf," she whispered in my ear.

He was short, about five-feet-two, extremely thin, and elderly. His spine was bent, making him appear smaller than he really was. He was a monochromatic man, wearing a gray suit that matched his gray hair, gray eyes, and gray complexion. Dark gray hairs, stiff and bristly, stuck out from his wide nostrils and large ears. He loaded our bags into a sedan and drove us through town. Once again I was too tired to feel any excitement. I wondered if I would ever feel any emotion again.

I couldn't help but be impressed, however, when I caught my first glimpse of the boarding school. It was an imposing four-storey brick building on a slight hill overlooking the St. Mary's River, surrounded by a forest and several acres of well-kept lawn. The school grounds separated the town from the exclusive country club to the east. As we drove through the gate and up the long gravel driveway, I thought that nothing could ever go wrong in such beautiful surroundings.

## *Chapter 17*

AS I followed Daisy up six flights of stairs to the dormitory for high-school girls on the fourth floor, I had the uneasy feeling that I had walked into a trap. The unpainted cement and steel construction of the building was oppressive. The feeling quickly passed when I saw our dorm, a large

square room which would have housed thirty or more girls at my old school, but which contained only twelve metal cots. There were even separate lockers for each bed. The room itself was dreary, the cement walls and high ceilings were painted a dingy pink and looked like they could use a good scrubbing, but the tiny white porcelain sink with hot and cold running water, and the flush toilet, with real toilet paper, behind a battleship-gray enclosure in one corner made me feel as if I had just checked into the Queen's quarters at Buckingham Palace.

Pictures of Elvis Presley and Sal Mineo were plastered on the walls and inside some of the lockers. I had not heard of either of them, so I assumed they were very popular boys at the school.

There was no supervisor around to tell me what to do, but Daisy, noticing my hesitation, told me I could choose any vacant cot and locker. It was not too difficult to determine which beds were already taken; open suitcases and wrinkled clothes were strewn all over them. "As soon as we've unpacked, I'll show you where the bathroom is so we can both have a bath before supper," she said.

I welcomed the suggestion. The dirt and grime imbedded from forty hours of dusty train travel would take hours to soak off. We went down to the depressing, gray-cement playroom on the bottom floor. There were two small rooms off of it; one a shower room, the other a washroom.

Half of the bottom floor was underground so that the huge, permanently closed windows in the washroom were level with the ground. Along the wall opposite the windows were four tub enclosures, each with a door that could be locked from the inside.

I marvelled at the luxury of it all. Complete privacy at last! I filled the tub to the brim; then I sank luxuriously up to my stiff neck in the hot water, leaning back and closing my eyes, soaking blissfully, letting the heat gradually relax each taut muscle. I was on the verge of dozing off when Daisy knocked on the door.

I climbed out of the tub reluctantly. When I had dressed

in clean clothes, I followed her back up the eight flights of stairs to our dorm. After three days of sitting on trains, my aching legs felt each step.

From the small room which separated the intermediate girls' dormitory from ours emerged a large woman, obviously over sixty years of age, with braided gray hair wound tightly around her head. Daisy introduced her as Miss Brady, our supervisor.

"Welcome, Janie," she greeted me in her booming army-sargeant voice. (I later learned that she had indeed been an officer in the army.) The smile on her face did not extend to her granite-gray and granite-cold eyes. I knew immediately she was one of the crusaders, one of those who had had a call from above to go out and save us poor unfortunate savages.

"She's a real witch," Daisy whispered after Miss Brady had disappeared back into her room for the keys to the storeroom.

After Miss Brady had given us our Sunday outfits, I was glad to learn that we had to supply our own school and play clothing. I knew absolutely nothing about fashion, but I knew instinctively that these gray flannel tunics, baggy cotton blouses, maroon flannel blazers and blue tams were abominably unflattering, making us look dowdy and in our final month of pregnancy.

When the buzzer rang, we went back down the eight flights to the playroom, where we fell into line behind the other high-school girls. There were two other lines: one for the juniors, and one for the intermediates. There were about eighty of us altogether. Whispered welcomes greeted us.

"Quiet!" ordered Miss Brady. "Now march!"

We marched through a dark, narrow corridor into the long gray dining-room. There were ten massive wooden tables, five against the south wall for the boys and five against the north wall for us. The atmosphere of distrust which had pervaded the old school also prevailed here.

I stared at the unappetizing mess in front of me; two golf-sized brown balls, some green paste, and two pieces of white sponge. Most of the girls shoved aside their plates as soon as they sat down, but I managed to eat the hard but greasy meatballs without cracking my jaw, swallow the soggy and

tasteless vegetables by washing them down with the watery milk, and choke down the store-bought bread which I had bit into enthusiastically and expectantly. I did not dare leave anything on my plate. Years of being called back to the table to finish the green and putrid meat we had tried to hide under a pile of bones had trained me to eat everything placed in front of me.

I finally got to meet some of the girls after supper. Most of the intermediates and juniors were Crees from Waswanipi, the Indian settlement in Central Quebec. Their dialect was a cross between the harsh gutteral Cree of the east coast of James Bay and the light sing-song Moose Cree of the west coast. There were also Ojibways, Chippewa, Blackfeet—their feet were the same colour as everybody's—and even a couple of Eskimos from Aklavik in the Northwest Territories.

While we had always ignored the rule about speaking only English at my old school, I found I had no choice here. Aside from Samson, who was in a different and completely separate part of the school, I was the only one who spoke my particular dialect. My English was still limited and I was too embarrassed to practise it on the others who spoke it fluently. I answered in monosyllables when I was questioned, but I did not volunteer any information. All the other girls seemed to know each other and they were busy renewing old acquaintances, which made me feel even more alone.

I was glad when the supervisor called us in at eight-thirty. Having gone without sleep for two days, I fell asleep immediately and slept soundly until the sound of horns woke me up. In the red glow of the night light I peered at my watch—a parting gift from one of my uncles—and was horrified to see it was only five o'clock.

I stumbled out of bed and started to get dressed. The others were still sleeping soundly. The girl next to me stirred. She lifted her head off her pillow and blinked her eyes. "What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"It's time to get up," I whispered. "The horn just blew."

"What horn?"

"There it is again. Did you hear it?"

She laughed. "Those are foghorns on ships out in the

river," she informed me. "That goes on all night. Now go back to bed. You'll know when it's time to get up—Miss Brady won't let you sleep in."

I climbed back into bed and listened to the lonely, mournful moo of the foghorns from passing ships. The sound added to my loneliness and homesickness. All the excitement I felt before leaving my island was gone. There was only an empty, hollow feeling.

Miss Brady marched in at seven o'clock and snapped the lights on. "Come on, everybody up!"

As soon as I had washed and dressed, I went over to one of the small windows to find out more about those foghorns. There were big battleships all over the place. I turned to a girl standing next to me. "Is there a war?" I asked fearfully. I had come looking for excitement and action, but this was not the type I had expected.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"All those boats out there."

"Oh, no! Those are freighters. Didn't you know this is part of the St. Lawrence Seaway? There are ships coming and going all the time. After a while, you won't even notice them."

"What about those over there?" I asked, pointing to some gray ships on the other side of the river. I had seen enough war movies to know they weren't luxury yachts or freighters.

"I think those are battleships; there's a big military base over there. That's the U.S. on the other side."

"The U.S.? What's that?"

"The U.S.A.—America, you know," she replied, frowning at my ignorance.

"*The* United States of America?" I exclaimed, the old excitement returning.

"That's the one," she said.

I could not believe it! The United States of America! Land of the "Long-Knives"! Land of cowboys and Indians! That exciting land full of blowing sand and tumbleweed. I wrote my mother the same day and told her I was practically living in the "Land of the Long-Knives", as she and I knew it, and told her that as soon as I had the courage, I would go across

and take some pictures of cowboys to send to her. I could not think of anything else during breakfast or the morning service in the auditorium.

"Mr. Stewart wants to see you," I was told after the service.

"What did I do?" I automatically asked. I did not think I had been in the school long enough to break any rules, but apparently I had.

"You didn't do anything," she said. "He always talks to the new children."

I was relieved to hear that. His office was on the second floor by the main door. I knocked gently on the half-closed door. Mr. Stewart peered around it. "Oh, Janie. Come in, come in. Sit down right here," he said, pulling up a chair to his desk.

I sat down and cracked my knuckles nervously. He smiled. "Please don't do that," he said softly, shuddering slightly. "Are you happy here?" he asked.

It was difficult to say after less than twenty-four hours. "Yes," I mumbled.

"Speak up a little louder, will you? I can't hear too well." I had forgotten about his hearing. "First of all, what course are you going to take in high school?"

"I'm not going to high school," I answered sadly.

"What do you mean?"

"My teacher told me that I had to take grade eight, or maybe even grade seven, over again." I had been presented with this distressing bit of news just before leaving the island.

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

I shrugged. I tried to explain to him as best I could what the teacher had told me. Because nobody from our island had ever gone to high school, the grade eight they taught there was not good enough to get us into high school. It was incomplete, and was called a termination course. She had told me to expect another year in grade eight and not to be too disappointed if I was put back into grade seven.

"Didn't you finish grade eight?" Mr. Stewart asked, obviously failing to understand my explanation.

"Yes, I did." I did not tell him that I had already spent two

years in the same grade. It would be too difficult to explain and he would probably think I had failed it the first year.

"What's the problem then? Just show me your report card."

"I don't have one."

"Did you leave it at home?"

"No. We never got them. We didn't get report cards in my school."

"What do you mean? All schools give out report cards!"

"Not ours. We never got them." We had received them the first couple of years I had gone to school, but never again. It was probably considered a waste of good paper.

Mr. Stewart shook his head, totally confused, and muttered something under his breath. "You did finish grade eight though?"

"Yes."

"Let's see. You're fifteen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll send you to grade nine and see what happens. All right?" I nodded happily. "Now, what course are you going to take?"

Course? What was that? I did not know anything about courses. I had thought that all I had to do was just start attending classes. "I don't know," I answered.

"Well, are you going to take the commercial or general course?" he asked patiently.

I had never been given a choice on anything before. I went where I was sent and I took what I was told. "I don't know," I replied, ashamed of my ignorance.

"Let me put it another way, Janie. What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked slowly, as if talking to a little child.

"A nurse," I answered immediately.

He coughed. "That's very commendable. That means you'll be taking the general course at Sir James Dunn. However, the school is still being built, so you will have to attend classes at the Tech from one p.m. to six p.m. The regular Tech students will be in school in the morning. It's

a big inconvenience for the teachers and the students, but it'll only be for a year."

"Let's see now," he continued, leafing through some papers on his desk. "Ah, here we are. This is the schedule and list of subjects you will take. There's French, Latin, English literature, English composition, home economics, science, math, history, music, physical education, and health."

The number of subjects I was required to take was staggering. Back home, I had taken arithmetic, history, penmanship, reading, and religion. Half of the subjects he had just read off were unknown to me. I could see that I would really have to slave in high school.

"Now, Janie, you will be going to school with the white children of this community. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yes," I thought, "it means I don't stand a chance." Nobody had warned me about attending an all-white school, and the thought of it was terrifying. I knew immediately that I could never compete with such superior students.

"It means, Janie," he said, breaking into my pessimistic thoughts, "that you must try harder than you would if you were going to an Indian school. We don't want people to continue thinking that Indians are stupid. So, don't let boys or fun interfere with your studies. You came here to learn and that's what we expect you to do.

"School starts on Tuesday. Monday, as you know, is Labour Day, so there is no school. We will supply you with all the texts and notepaper you need, but you will have to get whatever else you need downtown. The other girls will tell you what to get." He got up and smiled. "Good luck," he said, shaking my hand.

Before I could start high school and face the white community, however, the girls decided I needed a couple of improvements. One was to sand off the excess hair on my legs. Never having paid much attention to my legs before, the only difference that I could see was that they had turned from white to red, but the girls assured me it was a vast improvement.

The other procedure was more painful. Two girls, one on either side of me, plucked away at my bushy eyebrows while I lay squirming on my bed. When they were finally through, I could hardly stand the sight of myself in the mirror. Each eyebrow was only about half an inch long and the width of a pencil lead. I almost cried.

"Sorry, Janie," they apologized, "but we just couldn't get them even. Don't worry though. They'll grow out again, then we'll do a better job."

Nobody was going to touch my eyebrows again. I did not care if they did resemble two fuzzy caterpillars. The white community, not even high school, wasn't worth such torture.

My first day in high school was a disaster. Mr. Stewart had obviously neglected to inform the high-school principal that I would be attending classes because when the student and staff meeting was over and the other seven-hundred or so students had been assigned to their classrooms, two other Indian girls and I were still sitting in the empty auditorium. I panicked. I assumed immediately that it meant I was not going to high school after all and that I would be shipped back home.

Only one other person, a gray-haired man with a kind face, was in the room. He had introduced himself at the start of the meeting as Mr. Weir, the vice-principal. "Are you girls in grade nine? You're from the Indian school, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"If you'll just give me your names, I'll tell you where to go." We did. "Janie," he said, "you'll go to Room 103." He wrote my name down on one of the numerous sheets of paper that he carried. "Your home-room teacher is Miss Horten."

When I walked into Room 103, Miss Horten was just starting the roll call. "Take a seat," she said, without taking her eyes off the list. Looking over the sea of pale faces, I saw two familiar brown ones in the far corner, and I joined them. Miss Horten continued calling the roll, but my name was not on it. I waited until the class had been dismissed before drawing the oversight to her attention.

"For heaven's sake! Why didn't you say something before?" she asked impatiently.

"I was scared," I mumbled.

"What's to be scared of? All right, I'll need your name, where you're from, and the name of the school you last attended." When she had all the necessary information, she handed me a sheet of paper. "That's a schedule of your classes," she explained. "You're scheduled for a music lesson right now. Room 110 on this floor at the end of the hall. Next time, don't be afraid to speak up."

When I walked in, the music teacher, Mr. Kelly, demanded to know the reason for my tardiness. I explained that I had stayed behind to speak with Miss Horten. After a brief lecture on the importance of punctuality, he told me to find a seat. Once again, I found a seat at the rear.

Mr. Kelly informed us that we were to be in the school choir, not that we were musically talented, he added. There was only one other music class, and that class and ours would make up the school choir.

"Before we start on any lessons, I'm going to go down each row and I want each of you to give me your name and tell me whether you sing bass, tenor, alto, or soprano," he said.

I had never had a music lesson in my life and I had no idea what he was talking about. All too soon, he was standing beside me. "Your name?" he asked.

"Janie Matthews."

"Alto or soprano?"

I was glad that he had narrowed it down to two choices, but I still did not know what he meant. "I don't know, sir," I whispered, shrugging my shoulders.

"What do you mean 'you don't know'? You do know what music is, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me put it another way, do you sing high or low?"

That was simpler. Boys sang low and girls sang high. "I sing high, sir," I answered, squirming in my seat. The class snickered.

I discovered rather quickly that I was no soprano. My

voice cracked whenever we reached the high notes. I solved this problem by mouthing the words or standing next to the alto section and singing along with them. Fortunately, Mr. Kelly never asked me to sing a solo.

From that day on, it seemed as if Mr. Kelly was picking on me deliberately. How easy it might have been if I had told him the truth, that I had never studied music before, but I did not want him to think that I was just a stupid Indian. I guessed at most of his questions, and fortunately I was right more often than not. I don't know who was more surprised at the end of the year when I got a "B" in music, Mr. Kelly or I.

My next class was home economics. When the teacher informed us that we would take up sewing for the first semester, I did not anticipate any problems as I had been sewing ever since I could remember.

Taking a seat, I stared at the unfamiliar electric machine in front of me. We had never been allowed to use the treadle machines at my old school, but I had often used my mother's, the kind that had to be cranked by hand. There was no treadle or crank on the machine in front of me.

With one hand on top holding the scraps I was supposed to stitch together, I groped around underneath with the other one for something to make the machine run. As I bent down to study the underside, my knee brushed against something accidentally, and suddenly the machine whined and raced at full speed. An agonizing stab of pain knifed through me, and I looked up to see blood spurting from my middle finger which was neatly skewered to the throat plate. I freed it, wiped the blood off the machine, and went quietly about my sewing. My finger was red and swollen for days, and the excrutiating throbbing almost drove me crazy, but the important thing was that I had learned to use the machine without showing my ignorance. My foolish pride was intact.

Other classes were just as bewildering. Latin was completely hopeless as far as I was concerned, but everybody assumed that since I was from Quebec, I should be so proficient in French that I should be able to teach the subject. The truth was that aside from the phrase *Bon jour*, I had

never even heard the language. It was as confusing to me as it was to anyone else. I was having enough difficulty trying to express myself in English.

Science, another new and strange subject, might just as well have been another foreign language with such unfamiliar words as condensation, evaporation, saturation, cumulus, and nimbus.

When the six o'clock bell rang, signifying the end of the day, I raced back to the security of the Indian school. In my eagerness to get away, I tripped on something in the middle of the street and I skidded across the rough pavement. I got up in pain, both physical and mental, pretending not to notice the laughter around me, and looked down sadly at my brand new pair of expensive nylons hanging in shreds from my equally shredded and bleeding knees and legs.

As I limped home the three blocks from the bus stop to the Indian school, one of the Indian boys thrust his books at me. "Here, carry these," he ordered.

"Why?" I asked. My arms were full of my own texts and notebooks.

"It's the custom for the girls to carry boys' books," he answered. The others giggled. "So, from now on, I want you to carry my books for me."

I thought it a strange custom, but being totally ignorant of city ways, I told him I would. I carried his books to and from school for a week before his cousin took pity on me and told me that a boy was supposed to carry *my* books.

My classes went more smoothly after the first day. The only subject I could not master was gymnastics. I loved sports, but not gymnastics. I was too unco-ordinated and clumsy. I considered myself lucky to be alive at the end of the year.

On my first jump over a horse, I froze in mid-air. Since I was extremely afraid of heights, having to jump the four feet down from the top of the horse to the floor was like being asked to jump out of an airplane at 50,000 feet without a parachute. My fingers closed like steel bands around the bars, but my body, carried by the momentum of my leap, continued on over, crashing down on my arms. I flipped over and

landed with a terrible thud on my head. I was stunned temporarily, and for a while it looked as if I might have broken an arm, but I recovered. On my first attempt at the splits I pulled something in my leg and I was unable to walk for two days.

Another of the impossible feats we had to master was leaning over backwards until our hands touched the floor and holding that pose for several seconds. I got the brilliant idea of asking one of the Indian girls to assist me while I practised this exercise in our playroom. I told her to hold on to the front of my apron, thus keeping my back off the floor. I leaned back confidently and slowly lowered my head and arms. Just when I could see the floor below me, one of the apron strings broke, and I crashed down onto the cement floor on my head. The girl collapsed on the floor beside me and rolled around, laughing hysterically, while I staggered up and tottered over to the bench to unscramble my brains.

The only subject I hated worse than gymnastics was oral composition. Having to stand up in class and answer questions was painful, but having to stand in front of the class to make a short speech was sheer torture.

Our first oral assignment was a television-news broadcast. Each row of students was to form a news-reporting team, one student giving the sports news, another the weather report, another the society news, all fictitious, of course. The anchor-man on my team assigned me the local news.

Having never watched television before, I did not know what was expected of me, so I did not prepare any news. I was certain the teacher would understand. On the afternoon our assignment was due, our team gathered before the start of class to discuss our presentation. "What's your news?" the anchor-man asked me.

"I don't have any," I answered.

"You don't have any? Not one?" I shook my head. "Don't worry. I'll make some up for you," he chuckled.

I thought it was extremely kind of him. When my name was called, he slipped me a folded piece of paper. After I had seated myself in the teacher's chair, I unfolded the paper and

read it silently to myself. "That rotten little white boy! I'll kill him!" I thought.

"Come on, Janie," Miss Horten urged.

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. "How! My name is Janie Heap-Big-Feathers," I mumbled.

"Louder please," Miss Horten said.

"How! My name is Janie Heap-Big-Feathers. I am coming to you live from my tepee on the shores of Kitchigoomee. Marilyn Monroe paid an unexpected visit to this little settlement yesterday. Her boat sank unexpectedly and she had to swim ashore. When she staggered out of the water, it was noticed that all her beauty spots had been washed off. I turn you now to the weather report. How!"

Miss Horten did not say a word. She just stood in the back of the classroom with an embarrassed look on her face. I slunk back to my desk. There were a few half-hearted attempts at laughter from the class, but the boy responsible for my shame and disgrace was laughing hysterically in his seat. He held up his right hand, palm out. "How!" he howled. I would gladly have scalped him. I decided never to trust a white kid again.

A few weeks after school started, all the new students were required to take an IQ test. I was shocked when one of the white students kept asking me for help. It wasn't the fact that he was asking me to help him cheat that shocked me, but the fact that here was a white boy asking me, *an Indian*, for help. Apparently, one of the Indian boys had been bragging about my brains and the white boy was taking this opportunity to test me and show how broadminded he was about Indians. His repeated questions were very distracting.

I could not have helped him even if I had wanted to. I was having difficulty myself trying to figure out what the test was all about. I did not know what an IQ test was. All I knew was that most of the questions dealt with subjects I had never encountered before on my isolated little island. Working in strange surroundings, trying to change from one way of life to another, switching from one language to another—all these worked against me. I knew I would fail miserably and be sent

back to grade eight, or worse, back to the island.

A few weeks after the test I was summoned to Mr. Weir's office for something concerning the test. I thought I was about to be expelled for having failed it.

"I want to congratulate you on the mark you got on your IQ test. We never tell the students how they scored, but I'm happy to say that your test showed you have an above-average intelligence," he said. What a relief! I had not failed after all.

"You're the one we need to help us change a few prejudiced ideas people have about Indians. You can show the people of this town that Indians, if given the chance, are just as smart as other children." He was placing a big responsibility on my shoulders. I preferred to be inconspicuous, not in the limelight.

"If you ever have any problems and feel the need to talk to somebody, I'm always here. I want you to look upon me as your friend," he said, putting his arm on my shoulder as he led me out the door.

I did not believe a word he was saying, of course, but, during the years I spent there, he proved that he was sincerely interested in helping me. He encouraged me whenever I felt like quitting. Nobody at the Indian school had taken such an active interest in me and I came to look upon him as my second grandfather. He resembled him in a way. Unfortunately, offering encouragement was all he could do because only the Indian school and Indian Affairs had any say over me.

## *Chapter 18*

SATURDAY was our day, the day we could go into town without any chaperones, the day we could do anything we wanted from one o'clock in the afternoon until curfew at ten. The intermediates, who could also go out if they had the money, had to be back at the school by four. The juniors, heavily chaperoned, ventured forth about twice a year.

For fifteen years I had roamed where I pleased, with no thought to traffic or signal lights, and I gave no thought to them now as I repeatedly stepped out into the path of oncoming cars. Strange words—I only knew they were not compliments—were hurled at me by irate, fist-shaking, horn-blowing drivers. It took me only minutes to recall Mrs. Holland's long-forgotten lessons of when to cross and when not to, but it took me several hours to learn to stop, look, and listen. It was difficult trying to break a fifteen-year-old habit of crossing whenever and wherever I pleased. I broke it though when I saw that to continue it would cost me my life.

Fortunately, one of the girls had offered to act as my mentor and guide. I kept her busy shouting out warnings and pulling me to safety for several hours before she suggested that we see a movie. My tour of the town could wait. She needed to find a place where she could relax and calm her shattered nerves. She suggested seeing a horror movie at the Bay.

We waited in line in front of a girl in a little cage. On the window in front of her were three admission prices: fifty cents for adults, thirty-five cents for students, and fifteen cents for children under twelve years of age. I stood behind Kitty and watched her so I would know what to do.

"One, please," she said, shoving a dollar under the cage. The girl gave her a ticket and some change.

"One, please," I said as I shoved a dollar at the girl. The girl looked at me, then gave me a ticket and change.

Counting my change as we walked into the lobby, I discovered that the girl had given me too much. "Kitty, the girl gave me the wrong change," I whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"She gave me eighty-five cents instead of sixty-five. I'll have to give her twenty cents back."

"Wait, wait. Let me see your ticket," Kitty suggested. I gave it to her. She laughed. "She gave you a children's ticket. She thinks you're under twelve. It must be your hairstyle."

I put up a not-very-convincing fight to return the money to the girl. "Look, you didn't ask her for a children's ticket, so it's her mistake," Kitty rationalized.

I agreed. Reverend Montgomery's predictions had been

correct. I had not been in the white man's world for more than a week and already I was acting like one of them—lying and thieving. Drinking and murdering, no doubt, would be next.

"Hey, let's go see another movie," Kitty suggested on our way out of the theatre. "This time I'll buy the tickets. Just give me your money. I want you to stand beside me when I buy them, but don't say anything."

We went to the theatre across the street. It was playing *High Society*. "Two tickets, please," Kitty said, giving the girl a dollar. The girl looked at us. She punched out two tickets and some change.

"Look at that," Kitty laughed, waving one student ticket and one children's. "It has to be your hair. Don't ever cut it. Just think of all the money you can save."

"But that's cheating," I said, sanctimoniously.

"No, it isn't. I keep telling you it's *their* mistake."

At a time when I wanted to be looked upon as a mature woman, being mistaken for an eleven-year-old was a terrible blow to my already-fractured ego. However, by the end of the third movie that day, I was getting used to it. My materialistic instincts took over. A savings of sixty cents a week would give me more than thirty dollars at the end of the year. "It might be worth keeping this Dutch-boy cut after all," I thought. And I might have if the other children had not teased me about it by calling me Prince Valiant. So, I had it cut very short in a pixie cut.

Less than a month after my arrival, I lost my privilege of going into town on Saturdays. It was my punishment for "indecent exposure".

It happened one evening. I was standing on the inside sill of one of our dormitory windows, yelling out the open top half at some girls below. The bottom half was permanently closed to prevent us from sneaking down the fire-escape at night. Miss Brady came in to investigate.

"You're deliberately making all that noise so the boys can come out and look at you while you're naked, aren't you?" she said accusingly. I looked down at the over-sized, shapeless, thick flannel pyjamas which covered me from neck to

toe. "Let me tell you something, young lady. Boys don't respect girls who go around flaunting their bodies like you. If they do take you out, it will be for one thing only."

She went on and on about my low morals, my evil mind, and my nudity. A brazen hussy like me ought to be locked away so as not to influence the innocent children who surrounded me, she warned.

"Your punishment will be," she continued in a hoarse voice, "to remain in the school for the next three Saturdays. Not one, but three! You will not be allowed into town. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, respectful child that I was.

Actually I welcomed the chance to stay close to the security of the school, prison-like as it was. My most recent visit to the town had been a terrifying experience.

We had been given special permission to go into town on a Friday evening to watch a professional hockey game at the arena. We had even been granted the rare privilege of staying out past our ten o'clock curfew. The only thing that threatened to ruin the evening was the heavy rain which started after supper.

It was ten-thirty when the exciting game ended, and on the way out of the crowded arena, I became separated from the other girls. One of the Indian boys found me wandering around looking lost and frightened in the lobby, and he offered to walk me to the bus stop. He was the same one who had talked me into carrying his books.

He explained that he, too, had been separated from his friends. He looked into every cafe and pool hall we passed. Half-way across town, he found them in a pool hall, and without a word to me, disappeared through the door.

I waited a few minutes before walking on. It was too cold and rainy to stand around outside wondering if he was coming back out or not. I knew where the bus stop was anyway. The only thing I did not know was which bus to take. I had never been on my own before.

There was a bus waiting when I got to Queen and Pine,

but I let it go. I took the next one that came along. It seemed as good a method as any. I could have asked the driver, of course, but he would have thought, "just another stupid Indian." Two blocks from Queen and Pine, the bus made a left turn. I knew immediately that I was on the wrong one. The bus I wanted went straight along Queen Street until it turned around at the park just three blocks from the Indian school.

I got off at the first stop and walked back three blocks to Queen Street. When I got there, I decided that since I was soaking wet anyway, I might as well walk all the way. It was only two or three miles.

I crossed over to the south side of Queen Street, where there were no businesses or houses, and where there were also no street lights. I thought my chances of meeting a drunk, rapist or murderer there were less than on the well-lit and heavily populated north side. Since there were also no sidewalks on the south side, only a crazy person would trudge through the mud and tall grass, I reasoned.

After several blocks, a Volkswagon passed me. I saw it turn around a block away and drive slowly past me in the direction of town. A few minutes later, it was heading in the other direction, driving even slower. I was beginning to panic. The next time around, it stopped beside me. I started running. The car pulled up and cruised along beside me. The interior light went on, and the young, handsome, black-haired man inside asked me if I wanted a lift.

"No, thank you," I croaked. "A 'D.P.'," I thought. The girls were always warning me about "D.P.'s". They cruised the park on Sunday afternoons looking for girls to pick up. I did not know what the initials stood for, but I had noticed that they all had one thing in common—black hair. So, I labelled every black-haired man that I saw a "D.P."

"Come on, I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "You're going to get sick walking around in that rain."

Anyone who worried about my health couldn't be all that bad, I thought; but the words of the ministers, "*All* white men are no good," haunted me. I kept on running.

"Come on! Don't be a fool," he insisted.

When he saw that I was not going to change my mind, he drove on. He turned around and beeped his horn as he passed me on his way to town. There was no other traffic on the road. After stopping for a few seconds to give my heart a chance to slow down and to wait for the fire in my lungs to burn itself out, I plodded on through muck and mire. I could feel blisters forming on the backs of my heels from my brand new white buck shoes, which, covered with mud, were more brown than white.

A horn beeped behind me, and the car pulled up alongside me. "Are you ready for a ride now?" asked a familiar voice. I turned. It was my persistent D.P.

I limped along at a faster rate. I had come to the section of town where only a few feet of swampy ground separated the street from the river. There was no place to hide, and since I could not swim, I did not dare go into the river.

"For Pete's sake! What do you think I can do to you in this tiny car?" he yelled.

He had a point there. The school was still more than a mile away. My blistered and bleeding feet were killing me. I cursed myself for not wearing an old pair of shoes, ones that were already broken in.

"You're killing yourself!" he warned.

I asked myself what difference it would make whether I died of pneumonia or strangulation. I limped on a few more feet, then stopped and shrugged my shoulders. The door swung open and I climbed in, dripping wet and shivering, hoping my mother would understand when they unloaded my battered, decomposed body off the plane.

"Brother! Are you ever a stubborn little girl," he said. I felt somewhat safer. I had nothing to fear from a man who called me "little girl".

We drove in silence for a few seconds. "Listen, where do you want me to drop you off?" he asked. I told him. "Why don't you take off your wet clothes and put them on the heater," he suggested.

"No! No!" I squeaked, drawing my wool sweater, which

had stretched to twice its normal size from the weight of the water, tighter around me. I should have known! A man wants only one thing from a girl.

"I won't look, if that's what you're worried about," he said.

"I'm all right."

"Why are you scared of me? I'm not going to do anything. I just don't want you getting sick. If you take your clothes off and put them on the heater, they'll be dry by the time we get to the school."

I knew for sure then that he had only one thing in mind. Even I knew that I still would be undressing when we reached the school. "No!" I cried, flattening myself against the door, getting ready to jump as soon as he stopped in front of the school.

He cruised past it. "You're going past it!" I cried frantically.

"I know it. I just thought you might like to take a little ride up the road and back again," he said quietly.

"*No!*" I screamed. Up the road, past the country club, was nothing but a forest of poplar and maple trees. A perfect spot for a murder! "I'm getting out right now," I threatened, my hand on the door handle.

"You can't. Not while the car is moving. You'd kill yourself. A little ride won't kill you," he said. I knew better.

There was only one way to convince him that I was serious. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and prepared to jump. The car came to an abrupt halt, throwing me against the dashboard. He reached over and slammed the door shut, grabbed me and pulled me against him. I screamed.

"*Listen!* Listen to me for one second!" he shouted. "Do you know what would happen to me if you jumped out of the car and killed yourself? The police would throw me in jail for the rest of my life!"

"I don't care. I don't care," I sobbed.

"If you don't care what happens to you, think about me," he pleaded. "I am going to turn the car around right now and drive you back to the school, all right? Please, *please*, just sit still and don't touch the door. I promise you I will take you straight home. Okay?" I nodded.

He made a U-turn and headed back. He kept glancing at me nervously. When he stopped in front of the long driveway to the school, he reached across me—to open the door, I thought—and held on firmly to the door handle.

"Before you start screaming or getting hysterical," he said, "I want to apologize. I didn't mean to scare you. I just thought you might enjoy a little ride. I like you. You're stubborn, but I can tell you're a good girl. Can I see you again? Maybe when you get to know me, you'll realize that I'm not as terrible as you think. How about it? Can I see you again?"

"*No!*" I yelled.

"Okay, okay. Before I let you go, I want you to promise me one thing. No more walking around by yourself in the middle of the night, eh? You never know what could happen." I had a pretty good idea. "Take care now," he said as he opened the door for me.

I leapt out and raced up the gravel driveway to the safety of school. I heard him beep the horn as he gunned the motor and sped off towards town.

I tiptoed up the stairs, past the closed door of Miss Brady's room, into our dormitory. How relieved I was to discover I was the first one home. I climbed out of my wet clothes, into my warm flannel pyjamas, jumped into bed, and lay there shivering with cold and fear. I was ready to admit that the ministers had been right; the outside world was indeed full of danger. I was ready to return to the north, back to the safe island that I missed so much.

It was eleven-thirty when the other girls came in laughing and joking. "Girls! Girls!" Miss Brady shouted, coming out of her room. "There are children sleeping. Please be quiet!" She disappeared back into her room.

"What happened to you?" the girls asked me. "We've been so worried about you."

"Someone gave me a ride back," I answered. I did not elaborate.

"You're lucky," they said. "We had to walk from the park in all this rain."

Yes, I was lucky. Lucky to be alive.

It was almost three months later before I could bring myself to accept a date. By then I had learned the real facts of life in health class; I now knew there was a lot more involved in "getting into trouble with boys" than just looking at or being near them. So, one week before my sixteenth birthday, I went out on my first date with the Indian boy who found no end of ways to amuse himself and others with my ignorance of the strange customs and ways in the white man's world. In spite of the fact that he was always playing tricks on me, I looked forward to our date. It was not going out with him that thrilled me so much as finally going on a date.

He met me at the bus stop in town. He had caught an earlier bus. After greeting me cheerfully, he whispered, "Listen, can you give me your money so I can pay for your ticket?" It seemed like a reasonable request, and I gave my money to him.

The thrill of my first date was not dampened by the two boring westerns I had to sit through, nor by the fact that the only time my date seemed to remember me was when he needed more money for popcorn or coke.

"Do you want to go now?" he finally asked after the fifth boring hour of cowboys and Indians.

"Whatever you want," I said.

On the way out of the theatre, he asked me if I had a dollar. "I'll treat you to a soda," he said. I gave him a dollar.

After we had finished our sodas, and he had pocketed my change, he offered to walk me to the bus stop so I could go home. He wanted to play pool with some of the boys. "I'd like to take you to another movie, but I've run out of money," he said.

It was just as well. I was running out of money too. I had barely enough to get me home.

"Do you want to go to the movies with me again next Saturday afternoon?" he asked.

"I can't. I have to work." For five hours every Saturday, I cleaned house for an elderly couple. The two dollars they paid me was my only source of income. Another girl had taken my place for the afternoon so I could be free for my special date, but I could see that if I expected to go out on

more dates, I would have to work to finance them.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll meet you here after you get off work. Then we'll go to the movie. Okay?"

I nodded happily, beaming all over at my fantastic luck. Dating was fun, but very expensive.

## *Chapter 19*

WASA! wasa!" I moaned, leaning over the railing of the ferry, watching the river rush by. It was spring, and it had taken me nine months to work up enough courage to face the guards at the border of the United States of America, but it was taking less than five minutes for that courage to desert me completely.

Kitty, who had become my good friend as well as my constant guardian, stood beside me, trying to convince me there was no danger. "It's very easy," she assured me repeatedly.

Less than fifteen minutes after we had left Canada, the ferry docked among the battleships on the American side, and the passengers filed out. "Let's get off last," I whispered to Kitty, pulling her back. When the last passenger had disembarked, we made our way slowly up the ramp to face the guards. "There's nothing to it. Just have your student card out," Kitty whispered.

We stood in front of the smiling guards, neither of whom, I was surprised to see, had a machine gun, nor were there any in sight. My hand shook as I held out my card. Without even a glance at our identification, one guard asked, "Going to the movies?", waving us on when Kitty told him we were.

"I told you there was nothing to it," Kitty said.

We did not go to the movies as we had told the man. We went on a sight-seeing trip around town instead. What a disappointment! There were no cowboys or Indians. Not even one lonely tumbleweed tumbled by. The countryside was identical to the one we had just left. The town, too, was

no different. Even the names of the two towns were identical; both were called Sault Ste. Marie.

I was just as nervous on the trip back to Canada as I had been earlier, but again the border official waved us on after a quick glance at our cards. I did not know then that Indians could come and go as they pleased, that they could even work in either country without permits, visas, or any papers. They are, technically, citizens of both countries.

However, two years later I discovered that crossing the border was not always that easy. I went across by myself to meet a friend on the American side, and waited as usual until the last passenger had gone through.

"What are you doing in this country?" the guard asked.

"I'm going to the movies," I answered.

"Let me see your I.D." When I showed him my student card, he waved it aside, saying, "I need more than that."

"I don't have anything else." Even my student card had been unnecessary on most border crossings. A glance at our Indian faces was all the officials had needed.

"I'm sorry. I can't let you into the country without proper identification."

"But I'm an Indian," I wailed.

"Oh yeah? Tell me more."

"Honest! Honest I am!"

"All right, what's your Indian agent's name?"

"I don't know," I mumbled. The agent had visited our settlement so seldom that I did not even know his name, and I did not dare make one up because I could not be certain that they did not have a list of all the Indian agents in Canada.

"You say you're an Indian, but you don't even know the name of your agent?" he asked incredulously.

"But I *am* an Indian! I'm from the Fort George band in Quebec, James Bay. My band number is 196."

"Mine is 251." He laughed. "How much money do you have?"

"One dollar."

"I'm sorry, Miss, we'll have to send you back. We just can't let people come into this country without identification," he

said, pulling apart the wallet that he had taken from me. It bulged, not with money or identification, but with pictures of school friends.

"I'm just meeting a friend over here," I told him. A thought hit me. "If it's my hair," I said, "this isn't my natural colour." I pointed at the black roots of my fiery orange hair. "See? I'm an Indian!"

A friend of mine who was taking a hairdressing course had been practising on me. Some of her treatments had not worked out too well, but none had turned out as disastrously as the bleach job she had given me. My hair, instead of turning blonde, had taken on the vibrant hues of autumn trees.

"Anyone can see that's not your natural colour," the official laughed. "Go into that room there and someone will be with you in a minute."

I was searched and questioned for over an hour, but finally I was allowed to enter the country, feeling like a master criminal.

I became a card-carrying Indian after that. I flashed my orange card at anyone who doubted that I was an Indian—a card with my name, picture, general description, marital status, band name and number; a card bearing my signature and that of some official in Ottawa. I refused to admit that I was part white.

Yet, I was developing rather ambiguous feelings about my Indianness. I had long believed that I was not as good as white people, and I had learned to accept that fact, but a few months in the city was all it took to make me ashamed of the fact that I was Indian. The younger children—even some of the older high-school boys—would greet us with war whoops, rain dances, and Ugh's and How's. Some adults would stare and cringe visibly when they met us in town on Saturdays.

When a white boy, knowing full well I was an Indian, asked me for a date, I accepted gratefully. I was even more thrilled when on our second date, he presented me with a ring, even though I had to remove it the next day to prevent my finger from getting any greener. However, his behaviour changed on our third date. Instead of walking to the theatre

with me as he had done on other dates, he, glancing furtively about, announced that he had left something in the cafe and suggested that I go ahead and buy my ticket and wait for him inside.

I quickly discovered the reason for his odd behaviour. "Why did you have to wear that jacket?" he asked, scrunching down on the seat beside me. "Why didn't you wear your red one?"

"I wore this because the other one was too dirty," I whispered.

"I don't care. Wear the red one from now on," he ordered.

No explanations were necessary. I understood only too well. The navy-blue jacket with two white stripes down each arm, issued by the school and identical to the ones the other girls wore, advertised the fact that I was an Indian. Without it, I would pass for white, but a quick glance at it let people know immediately where I was from and what I was, thus placing him in an embarrassing situation. I was right back to being a dirty little savage again. My refusal to accept any other dates with him puzzled him, and I could not explain that being with him only made me more aware of my inferiority.

Not even my grade average—87 per cent—or my standing at the end of the school year—sixth in a class of thirty-five white students and two other Indians—could convince me that I was just as good and as smart as white people.

When classes were over, I was eager to return to the island, where I could be myself and where I would not have to worry constantly about people thinking I was a dumb Indian. I waited impatiently for my return ticket from the Indian agent, but three weeks later, when most of the children had returned home, I was still waiting.

There were only five of us left. One of the girls heard of a family that needed a babysitter for the summer and she left to live with them, promising to find other homes for us. When she found a Catholic family for me, I hesitated because I was still somewhat leery of Catholics. A prejudice that had been drummed into me for fifteen years could not be overcome in one short year. But the prospect of spending a

whole summer by myself in the depressing school was too much.

I quickly discovered that even Catholics could be wonderful people and that they were not necessarily interested in converting everyone around them. However, in response to my numerous questions about the faith, a friend of the family offered to take me to church whenever I wanted to go. Her name was Marge and she was sixteen, the same age as I was.

One boring Sunday I decided I was ready to risk my life and attend Catholic services. "Just do what I do and no one will even suspect that you're not a Catholic. There's nothing to it," Marge assured me.

It was the most beautiful church I had ever been in, filled with gold statues in lighted recesses, ornate columns and brilliantly coloured stained-glass windows. While I followed her down the aisle, I gawked at the splendour all around me, at the same time concentrating on keeping her within sight. Suddenly, without any sign or warning, she disappeared. The next thing I knew I was flat on my face on the marble floor. Genuflection was an unknown custom where I came from.

As I lay on the cold floor in total mortification, wishing I could melt and evaporate, I raised my eyes to heaven and said silently, "All right, God. I get the message. I'll never set foot inside a Catholic church again." There was no answer.

"I told you to watch me," Marge hissed while we were dusting ourselves off. The urge to rush outside was unbearable, but I forced myself to follow her to a pew, my eyes downcast, my face burning with shame and humiliation.

The service was surprisingly similar to the Anglican service. I could not help wondering why, if the Catholics had almost the same religion, they were doomed to hell and we weren't. I did not know that the Anglican Church had been founded when King Henry VIII, unable to get a divorce, broke away from the Catholic Church.

I had had my taste of real freedom that summer—the kind that lets you think and act, not the way others tell you to, but the way you want to—and I was sorry to see it end. All too soon, it was time to return to the school.

I realized immediately that it was going to be a terrible

year, but I still blamed myself for that. All our mail was opened and read by Mr. Stewart, and all money sent to us by our parents was turned over to Miss Brady to dole out as she saw fit.

One Saturday morning, I was in her room for my weekly allowance when she went to her dresser for the correct change, leaving the open ledger on a chair beside me. The figures in her ledger did not tally with the ones in mine. Upon closer examination, I discovered the error; she had deducted money on days I had been confined to the school. Other girls had sometimes complained of shortages, but nobody had dared to face Miss Brady with the facts. Without even considering the consequences, I quietly pointed out the fact that she had deducted two dollars and fifty cents more than she should have.

"*Are you accusing me of stealing your money?*" she exploded.

"Oh, no!" I answered quickly. "I just said you made a mistake."

"I did not! You made the mistake, not me! You are accusing me of stealing your money, you filthy Indian!"

The other girls, who had been standing in line waiting for their money, quietly walked back to their beds, pretending to look busy. One of them bravely came to my rescue. "Janie's right, Miss Brady. You wouldn't give her the money because she was confined. I remember that."

Miss Brady turned on her. "Shut up! This is between Janie and me." She turned back to me. "A girl like you belongs in reform school. I should go downstairs and tell Mr. Stewart about this right now, but, if you're willing to apologize, I will forget the whole matter. Apologize, Janie, or I will tell Mr. Stewart."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled sullenly.

"That's better. I won't say anymore about this incident and I advise you to forget it," she said quietly, shaking her finger at me. She stormed back to her bedroom.

I could not forget, and neither could she. She nagged me continually with taunts and accusations of imagined vices, anything from lying to prostitution. I tried everything to get

back into her good graces, but nothing worked.

I concentrated on my studies—I had been put in an all-white class of "A" students, sometimes referred to as the brainy class—and on my Saturday afternoon job, wasting no time on such trivialities as dating. The truth was that I would gladly have made time for such trivialities if some boy had asked me out, but no one did. I waited patiently for the one boy I had had a crush on from the first day I arrived in town to ask me out, waited for him to notice that I was extremely available.

However, although he had dated all the other Indian high-school girls, even a few of the older intermediates, he did not seem to know I was alive. As far as he was concerned, I was the low girl on the totem pole. Once in a while, he gave me a big thrill by looking my way and smiling absently.

I might have kept on waiting patiently but I was getting desperate. He was scheduled to graduate in May and he had made no effort whatsoever to acknowledge my existence.

"Tell me what to do," I begged Kitty. "I've got to go out with him at least once before he leaves. What can I do?"

"Ask him for a date," she suggested.

The idea was too appalling. "What would he think of me?"

"Well, he'd know that you were interested, and he just might take you out."

"But I'm too shy to ask a boy out."

"That's your problem," Kitty said in a motherly tone. "The boys think you're a snob. They think you're only interested in white boys."

It was a lie! "I've only gone out with one white boy," I cried. "I've also gone out with one Indian boy, so how can they say I'm more interested in white boys?"

"I don't know. But you should try flirting with them once in a while. That would make them notice. If you can't do that, then try asking for a date. See what happens."

Unable to bring myself to stooping so low, I depended on my looks and my personality to hook him. They did not. My looks were all right, but I was too serious. Even a blob of jelly had more personality than I did.

On the day that he received a scholarship to college, I

threw caution to the winds and walked up boldly to him during our nightly homework period and congratulated him, hoping he would not think I was after his scholarship money. He thanked me and walked away. I was devastated!

One Sunday, Kitty and I went to the park after supper in an effort to find some peace and tranquillity. We forgot all about the time, but by running all the way, we were able to get back to the school just seconds before bedtime.

The next day, my not-so-secret crush came up to me and handed me a kerchief. "What's this?" I asked, wondering if he could be presenting me with a peace offering.

"Your kerchief," he replied.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, very puzzled.

"As if you didn't know."

"What do you mean? I didn't even know I'd lost it," I said truthfully.

"Come off it! You dropped it yesterday on your way out of the park. You dropped it when you saw us coming down the street behind you."

"I *didn't* see you," I protested. It was true; I was lucky to see anything that was more than three feet from my eyes. Anything beyond that was a big blur. I had been fitted for glasses, but I never wore them. Somehow it didn't seem right for an Indian to wear glasses. Besides, I was too vain to wear them.

"All right, knock it off!" he said impatiently. "Your plan worked. I'll take you to the carnival after you get off work on Saturday." Without even waiting for me to catch my breath to accept or refuse, he turned and walked away.

I had never met anyone so conceited! I thought briefly—for one micro-second—of running after him and telling him I would not go out with him on Saturday or any other time, but after waiting two years for this unbelievably thrilling moment, I could only stand and gaze after him. I floated off to tell Kitty the wondrous news.

After work on Saturday, I met her downtown and we returned to the school so I could prepare for my date. Kitty, who was almost as excited as I was, said she would tag along, discreetly of course, to watch the romantic fireworks.

What a disappointing night for all of us! For two years I had dreamt of the big night, a memorable night when I would blossom forth, enchanting my date with my wit and my irresistible charm. Instead, I walked around in a daze, unable to think, speak, or even look my date in the eye. It was truly one of the most unbearably painful nights I had ever known. Instead of loosening up as the evening progressed, I retreated further and further into my shell.

When it was over, we walked home in silence, my mind reeling with all the witty remarks I should have made that evening. I was convinced he must be overjoyed to be taking me back—he was used to more exciting dates. Knowing that I would never date him again, I wanted to burst into tears.

As I reached out to open the door, he grabbed my hand, pulled me towards him, and gave me a quick, brotherly kiss. My knees buckled and I staggered against the rough cement wall, blinded by the radiance of a million galaxies crashing together in joyful celebration of my first love; my heart and my breathing stopped as I soared above the universe to join the choirs of rejoicing angels.

"Do you want to go out with me again next Saturday?" he whispered.

Would I? I'd crawl through hell for him! "Oh, yes!" I whispered breathlessly, uttering my first complete sentence of the evening.

He laughed softly. "I'll meet you here then after you get off work. Night now," he whispered, softly stroking my cheek once before disappearing down the long hall to the boys' quarters.

The choir of angels escorted me as I floated up the stairs on a blanket of soft clouds. I fluttered into our dormitory, my stunned mind still trying to understand the unexpected turn of events.

"We don't need a night light with you around," Kitty noted disgustedly. "What happened?"

"He wants to see me again next Saturday," I sighed.

"*What!* I was so sure he wouldn't ask you out again. Oh, Janie, you were so pathetic! I was embarrassed for you. What happened after I left?"

"Nothing. We walked home, he kissed me, then asked me for another date." I tingled all over with the memory of the too-short kiss.

"I don't understand it. I just don't understand it," Kitty muttered, shaking her head. Neither did I. "I must have missed something," she said.

The next day, while I was floating around mopping the main hall, lovingly and gently rubbing the spot where my true love had stood, Mr. Stewart poked his gray head out of his office and motioned me inside. For once I did not mind, or wonder what I had done.

He was all smiles as he ushered me in. "Congratulations, Janie," he said gaily, pumping my hand. "I heard you went out with Johnny last night."

"Yes, I did," I answered, completely confused. Mr. Stewart was against dating. He thought it was something that could wait until after graduation.

"I'm so glad," he said, still pumping my hand. "I wish you both all the best. Listen, did he bring you to the door or did he leave you before you got to the door?"

I looked at him and frowned. He knew that all doors except the one in the main entrance were locked at night and that the only way we could get to our respective dorms was through that door. "He brought me to the door," I answered.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" he said, releasing my hand and rubbing his hands in glee. He reminded me of a leprechaun. "That's really wonderful! I'm so glad for both of you." He dismissed me then.

I walked out of his office in total confusion. I had difficulty concentrating on anything that day, but his actions and words were totally incomprehensible. Maybe he thought we were going to get married and raise our own little tribe of super-intelligent papooses.

My following dates with Johnny weren't much better than our first. I could not understand why he kept asking me out, and I dared not ask him for fear he might start wondering himself. We dated until he left at the start of June for his summer job in another town. Before leaving, he presented me with his ring, which I wore proudly and constantly on a chain around my neck.

## *Chapter 20*

IN June 1958, two years after I left the island, I returned to it. Indian Affairs had failed to contact me or send me a ticket, but I did not panic. Between the money an uncle had sent and what I had saved during the year, I had enough to pay my own way.

"Would you stop at Indian Affairs and ask them what they're going to do about Samson?" Mr. Stewart asked as I boarded the waiting train. "He hasn't been home for two years either."

When I got to Moose Factory, three days later, I dropped in to see the agent there. Moose Factory was the Indian Affairs headquarters serving the Hudson and James Bay area. "What can I do for you, young lady?" he asked pleasantly.

Wasting no time on introductions, I presented him immediately with the problem. "Mr. Stewart wants to know if you're going to pay Samson's way home."

"Wait a minute. Who is Mr. Stewart, and who is Samson? For that matter, who are you?"

"Janie Matthews. I'm from Fort George."

"Janie Matthews. Of course. Wait a minute, Janie. I have to get something from my office." It was obvious he did not know who I was. A few seconds later he came out of his office, beaming. "Janie, Janie, Janie," he greeted me enthusiastically, shaking my hand. "Janie Esquinimau. How have you been? How did you get here?"

"On the train."

"Yes, yes, I know. Sit down, will you? Now tell me, how are you doing at school? No problems? Staying out of trouble?" I nodded or shook my head as fast as he hurled the questions at me. "Good, good. We haven't had any bad reports about you."

It didn't look as if they had had any reports about me at all, I felt like pointing out. "What about Samson?" I asked.

"Samson. Is he the boy who left Fort George when you did?"

"Yes."

"Oh, don't worry about him. We'll send him a ticket. We always take care of our Indians. You know that. Now, what about you? Are you going back to school this fall?"

"I don't know. I can't afford it. I spent all the money I had paying for my tickets home," I answered sadly, hoping he would offer to reimburse me.

"Oh, don't worry about money. I told you we always look after our Indians. We'll get you back. We'll take care of everything. When are you going back to Fort George?"

"Tomorrow."

"All right. Behave yourself while you're at home. I expect to see you back here in August." He shook my hand energetically.

The next morning while I was waiting for the luggage and mail to be loaded into the plane, a nurse from the sanatorium came up to me with a small, squalling bundle in her arms. "Are you going up the Bay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Oh good! Drop this baby off at Old Factory, will you?" she said, thrusting the infant into my arms.

"Wait a minute!" I called as she left. "Who am I supposed to give it to? I don't know anybody at Old Factory."

"The baby's name is on a tag under that blanket. The mother is still in the hospital, but I'm sure the baby has relatives who will take care of him until she gets out. He's been fed and changed, so you don't have to do anything except hold him and make sure he gets off at the right place."

As soon as I was seated comfortably inside the plane, I peeled back the layers and layers of blankets that covered the baby. Judging from his blotchy red face, his piercing cry, and his crossed, vacantly staring eyes—when he stopped crying long enough to listen to my hushing—he was no more than a month old. I tried to pacify him by jiggling and bouncing him furiously in my arms, but he only screamed louder. As soon as we were in the air, however, he calmed down and went to sleep.

At our stops in Rupert's House and Eastmain, all the old women insisted on seeing him. They showered us both with kisses, nodded knowingly, and told me how beautiful he was. I smiled and accepted the compliments. I did not even attempt to explain.

At Old Factory, I handed the sleeping baby to the first Indian who poked his head through the door. "oowan-oo?" he asked, startled.

"I don't know. It just says 'Baby boy Marks' on the paper," I replied. He nodded his head, smiled and disappeared into the waiting crowd of Indians. They all descended upon the poor little infant with shrieks of joy and laughter. I was glad to see him welcomed so heartily.

I travelled alone for the next sixty miles, and when I got off the plane at Fort George, friends and relatives soaked my shoulders with joyful tears and cracked my ribs with over-zealous hugs. They were overjoyed at seeing me once again—still alive, unmolested, and obviously not yet an alcoholic.

As we walked home, enveloped in a great cloud of dust stirred up by our long procession, I tried to adjust to the great changes that had occurred during my short absence. The island seemed to have shrunk to half its normal size. Erosion from the spring thaws and the swift river had always been a problem, but I knew this did not account for the island's dwindling size. I had seen, and finally realized, how vast the world was, and now I realized just how tiny and insignificant this beloved island, this island that had constituted my whole world for fifteen years, was in relation to the larger world.

Even the language seemed to have changed. I had difficulty understanding it, but I had even greater difficulty trying to make myself understood. It had been a red-letter day when, two months after I had left the island, I discovered that I no longer thought or dreamt in Cree, but in English. I found myself having to reverse that process once again. When my relatives repeatedly laughed at my "funny accent", I refused to speak any more Cree.

The people, too, had changed. Friends I had grown up with not only refused to come near me, but giggled and

retreated, or shyly whispered "Geniesh", when I greeted them. Everybody seemed to have aged considerably in the two years I had been absent. My dear mother looked twenty years older than her thirty-seven years. The lines in her radiant face had doubled in number and had been etched deeper by the hard life.

She told me about the new house they had. The minister had told them to tear down their old shack to make room for the new school that was being planned. It was to be built right over the spot where their old shack had stood. (Actually, the new school was built ten years later on a different site.) Reverend Montgomery had promised the church would build them a new house as payment for my stepfather's many years of faithful service as interpreter and catechist in the Anglican Church. (Fifteen years later, they are still waiting.)

She told me about my grandmother, too ill to meet me, waiting impatiently for me. "She has a bad heart, you know. She's supposed to do as little as possible, and she's supposed to be on a diet, but you know your grandmother. She doesn't think the Great Spirit will let her live a few extra years just because she's skinny."

I knew my grandmother would never go on a diet. Death held no frightening mysteries for her. The life hereafter was just as certain to her as life on earth; it was a beautiful and joyous life.

"Oh, there's the house," my mother said, pointing at a tarpaper-covered shack. She must have seen the look of dismay on my face because she added, "The outside isn't finished yet."

I walked in expectantly, but I was appalled at the shabbiness and seediness that surrounded me. Had I, for fifteen years, lived amid such utter poverty? Had I become a snob—as my friends had predicted I would—looking down at my own people and their old ways? My outlook and my feelings, I told myself, could not have changed so drastically in a few years.

The two-room shack was clean, but placed against a city slum, the slum would look like a palace. Against one ill-fitted, beaverboard wall was a heavily gouged wooden table loaded

with an assortment of cracked and chipped porcelain. Around the table was an odd mixture of seats: one wooden chair with a missing back, a wooden bench as heavily gouged as the table, a two-foot piece of tree trunk, and the old fold-away bed, which was always left unfolded and which collapsed when some unsuspecting visitor sat too close to either end.

Against the opposite wall sat an old wood-stove with an oven door that would not close. Against this stove was the twenty-gallon water container into which everybody dipped their cups as they needed a drink. Beside it sat a ten-gallon slop pail full of dirty dish water, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and bones. Right next to it was a soap-scummed wash stand with a badly chipped white porcelain basin in it. There were no other furnishings in the front room.

The back room was jammed with three wooden beds of varying sizes, one broken-down dresser, an old steamship trunk, and cardboard boxes filled with clothes and other belongings, Draped over the clotheslines that criss-crossed the room were clean, ironed clothes. Six people—my three sisters, my brother, my mother, and my stepfather—slept in this room.

"You can sleep on this bed," my mother said, pointing to the fold-away bed in the front room. "It's the only one with a mattress."

When she suggested I eat, I told her I wanted to see my grandmother first. Actually, I wanted to get away for a while, to try and regain my perspective.

"How can they live like that?" I asked myself repeatedly. Yet, I could not deny the fact that they were completely happy even though they lacked what I had come to consider the essentials of life—electricity, indoor plumbing, all the comforts of modern living. I realized that a person could have all these things and still be unhappy. Love and happiness were all that mattered.

By the time I got to my grandmother's shack, I felt better. I raised my hand to knock on the door, but remembered just in time that knocking before entering was considered "white" and snobbish. I barged in. My grandmother, who was

sitting on the bed making a new gill-net, looked up and started, dropping the net. Tears streamed down her beautiful brown, deeply wrinkled face as she held out her loving arms to me.

"Geniesh! Geniesh!" she cried.

I walked into her open arms, blinded by my own tears, and we embraced and kissed. She stroked my face repeatedly. "wasa, Geniesh! wasa!" she sniffled.

We chatted for some time; I, laboriously and embarrassed that I had forgotten so much of my language in two years, and she, ignoring my embarrassed attempts, reaching out to stroke my face lovingly or crush me to her in a bear hug. When I told her I had to leave, she sent up a prayer of thanks to the Great Spirit for letting her live long enough to see me once more. (She lived another twelve years, long enough to see me six more times and to see the first two of my four children. Each time, she told me she was lucky to see me again; she was expecting her death notice any day.)

When I walked into our house the second time, I did not see the shabby surroundings, but only the warmth and love which filled the room. The old familiar odour of stewing goose and freshly baked bannock assailed my nostrils, and for the first time in four days I began to feel hungry.

My mother ladled out some stew, fishing around in the pot for the drumstick, and placed the steaming plate in front of me. She cautioned me not to eat too much warm bannock or I would get bloated. She sat down opposite me, dabbing at her moist eyes, and looking at me with such love and joy in her face that I began to feel uncomfortable.

"Why don't you eat?" I asked, hoping to get her mind on something else.

"No, no. I'll wait until you've eaten all you want," she said. "I cooked it for you."

"How come Lillian and Susan aren't in school?" I asked, referring to my sisters who were fighting and screaming outside.

"They don't go to school any more."

"Why not?" I exclaimed. Lillian was twelve and Susan was nine.

"Reverend Montgomery kicked them out of school. He says only the Indian children can go to the Indian schools. The white-status children can't go there anymore. Only Indians." Since my stepfather was a white-status Indian, so were my half-sisters.

"Well, isn't Sharon in school?" Sharon was my fourteen-year-old sister. I had assumed she was in school when she hadn't come around to meet me.

"Oh, no. She's working at the school now. She's been working in the laundry for almost a year now."

"Why, that's terrible!" I cried. "They should be in school. Why don't you send them to the Catholic school then? I'm sure the Catholics wouldn't care whether they were Indian or white-status."

My mother was horrified. "We can't do that! Reverend Montgomery doesn't want the Indians sending their children there."

"But they have to go to school!" I insisted. "All children are supposed to stay in school until they are sixteen."

She sighed. "I know, but what can we do? He's the minister."

"That doesn't give him the right to act like the king around here," I muttered disgustedly. "If you people would stop treating him like a god, maybe he'd stop acting like one."

My mother gasped. "Don't talk like that about the minister!"

It was useless to pursue the matter. I knew my mother could never think of a minister as a human being, a man with faults and prejudices like everyone else. I left the table and went into the back room to unpack. She followed me.

"What's that?" my mother asked, pointing to the ring which had fallen away from my neck as I bent over my suitcase.

"It's just a ring," I answered nonchalantly. I was not in the habit of discussing my love-life, which up to then had been virtually non-existent anyway, with my mother.

"Who gave it to you?" she asked, just as nonchalantly.

"A boy at school."

"An Indian boy?" she asked. When I answered he was, she

nodded approvingly. "Is he Cree?" she continued.

"No, he's Ojibway."

Suddenly her whole attitude changed. "*Ojibway?* You cannot marry an Ojibway! I will not have an Ojibway in my house! Did he hurt you?"

Assuming she meant had he molested me sexually, I answered truthfully, "No. He never touched me." Her reaction shocked me. "What's wrong with Ojibways?" I asked.

"They're a very war-like tribe. I will not have a daughter of mine marry one."

I could not believe my ears! "For heaven's sake! The Indian wars have been over for centuries!"

"Maybe, but I don't trust Ojibways. Don't marry him."

"He hasn't even asked me."

"Why would he give you his ring if he doesn't expect to marry you?"

"Lots of boys do it. It's called 'going steady'. When a boy gives you his ring, it doesn't mean he wants to marry you; it means he wants you to go steady with him." She could not or would not understand the custom.

We called a truce. The next plane, however, broke the truce. Two letters arrived for me, both of them from Johnny. My mother delivered them to me. "I thought you said you weren't going to marry him," she said, dropping them in my lap.

I did not answer. I ripped the envelopes open. It was the first time Johnny had written because we had decided he should not send any letters to the school where they would be read and censored by Mr. Stewart.

"Well?" she asked when I started to read each four-page letter over for the third time.

"Well what?"

"Are you going to marry him?"

"He didn't ask me." One of the letters had hinted at marriage, but I did not want to upset her more by telling her that.

"Why would a boy write such long letters to a girl he didn't plan to marry?" she wondered.

The next mail plane put an end to her worries. A "friend",

who had dated Johnny before I had, thought someone should tell me my true love had been unfaithful.

Instead of writing him a letter full of harsh accusations and demands for an explanation, I decided to act like a mature woman by returning his ring. Around the ring I wrapped a short note: "I was a fool." He would know what it meant, I thought, and it would let him know he was free to ruin some other trusting girl's life.

## *Chapter 21*

I had no sooner unpacked when Reverend Montgomery arrived to offer me a job. His wife needed a full-time maid to care for the three children they now had—all of them adopted, and all of them part Indian—and he offered to pay me the generous salary of five dollars a week if I accepted. I did, eagerly and gratefully.

My work day started at seven-thirty, just as the children were getting up. I fed them, made certain the two girls washed and dressed themselves properly, and bathed and dressed the fifteen-month-old boy, after which I put him in his crib with a bottle while I did the dishes and tidied the kitchen. When it was clean and spotless, I took the three children out for a walk until ten o'clock.

When we returned, I put the baby down for a nap, sent the two girls outside to play, then began the daily dusting, sweeping, and mopping of the living-room. All furniture had to be moved daily to make certain there were no dust particles floating around under it. Mrs. Montgomery was an extremely fastidious woman; she'd get upset over one grain of sand in the house. If I spent less than an hour in one room, she would inspect it to see what I had missed.

At eleven-thirty, she got up. She came down the stairs, yawning and stretching, moaning, "Oh dear! We have so much work to do today." While she had a leisurely brunch and mulled over my afternoon duties, I made the beds, dusted

the furniture, and mopped the floors in the two upstairs bathrooms.

Occasionally, she would come down before ten o'clock, and sip tea while bitterly complaining about the amount of work that had to be done. Just the thought of work, however, was too exhausting for her, and she would return to her bedroom after I had cleaned it, for a short nap before lunch.

After I had helped her start their lunch by opening cans and emptying them into pans, I went home for half an hour to eat my own lunch. When I returned at one o'clock, she read off my duties for the afternoon—laundering, ironing, polishing silver, washing windows and woodwork—while I washed dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Then she and all the children lay down for a two-hour nap.

About three o'clock, the baby woke up. After I had given him a bottle and a bowl of jello, I took him and the girls for another outing so that their mother could spend the next hour resting or writing letters. When we returned at four o'clock, I helped her prepare dinner. I went home at five o'clock for my own dinner, but had to return at six to wash the dishes and mop the kitchen floor.

I did this six days a week. In addition to working ten hours a day, I was expected to be on call for baby-sitting at night without any notice and without any extra pay. By the third or fourth exhausting week, I began to feel that the seven cents an hour I was getting paid was not quite enough for all the work I had to do and the treatment I had to put up with.

Mrs. Montgomery questioned me constantly about my dating habits in the city. Some of the questions were embarrassing and very personal. She seemed to believe that I led a very active sex life. She warned me about the white boy I was dating, one of the clerks at the Bay. "You know, Janie, there's only one reason that white boys date Indian girls," she would say.

Having listened to such idiocy for ten years and having finally realized that was all it was, I continued seeing the boy. I let her think what she wanted. I could have sworn on a stack of bibles and she wouldn't have believed me.

It was not her suspicious nature which bothered me so

much as the feeling that the Montgomerys thought they owned me just because they paid me five dollars a week. I was not supposed to have a life of my own. I was to be ready to serve them on a second's notice. My resentment mounted as the summer progressed, but it was not until a few weeks before I was scheduled to return to school that I finally decided I had had enough.

My mother and I were walking to church one Sunday evening when I heard the familiar call of Reverend Montgomery. I pretended not to hear. My mother, however, was terrified of what might happen if I did not go. "I know what he wants. I'm not going," I told her.

"wasa, Geniesh! He's the minister. Go!" she insisted, pushing me towards the rectory. I gave in reluctantly and took my time walking over to him.

"I was beginning to think you couldn't hear me," Reverend Montgomery greeted me. "My wife is going to church, so run inside and take care of the children, will you?" Without waiting for an answer, he dashed out.

"I'm so glad my husband caught you," Mrs. Montgomery panted, racing down the stairs. "Listen, when the children have finished eating, make sure they have a bath before you put them to bed. I promised the girls you would read them a story. The baby is still on the potty. Don't let him off until he's done something. And don't worry about the dishes; just let them soak. You can do them in the morning." With that, she was gone.

The girls squealed happily as I walked into the kitchen. "Mommy promised you would read us a story tonight," they said.

"Well, I'm not going to unless you hurry up and finish your supper," I snapped. I rushed them through their supper and their bath, then read them a short story before tucking them in.

When I came downstairs, the baby was toddling around with the seat of the potty still strapped around his chubby waist. He had done his duty all right. "Goo boy, goo boy," he said, pointing to the mess on the floor.

I laughed. "Yes, good boy," I praised him. "You know

something? I think I'll just leave it there for your mother to clean up," I told him conspiratorially. He laughed. I bathed him and put him to bed with a bottle.

When Mrs. Montgomery came home, she did not need to ask if the baby had done his duty. A whiff was all she needed to know that he had. She cleaned the floor without a word, but I could see that she was very displeased with me.

"I'm going over to the school for a while," she announced when she was through cleaning.

"When will you be back?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered. "I'm late now. I don't have time to talk." She rushed out the door.

While I sat fussing and fuming for the next three hours, I made up my mind that I was not going to spend another day being treated like some unthinking, unfeeling possession.

I slept in the next morning. At eight o'clock, I received a message that I was to start working *immediately*: Mrs. Montgomery was too tired to get up and the children needed somebody to look after them. I refused to go.

Ten minutes later, Reverend Montgomery came barging through the door. "Are you going to work right now?" he demanded.

"No," I muttered.

"Who do you think you are anyway? My poor wife is going frantic over there with no help. She was feeling miserable this morning, but she had to get up to look after the children just because you suddenly decide working is beneath you. Do you think you're any better than the other Indians just because you've had a few years of high school? Well, you aren't. Now, get off that bed right now and get to work!"

"I'm not going to work," I muttered, terrified.

Turning to my mother, who was cowering against the wall, he yelled, "That's gratitude for you! I offer her a job and what does she do? She thinks she's too good for it. I've heard of ungrateful people before, but she beats all."

He turned to me. "A lot of girls on this island would be thrilled to have your job," he continued. "If this is an example of what a higher education does for you, then I'm all for keeping Indians ignorant. If you ever get into trouble, and

that's where you're headed running around with white boys, don't ever come to me for help." He stormed out of the house.

My mother was horrified that I would think of rebelling against a white man, and a minister at that. She reminded me that he had been sent to us by God.

"That doesn't give him the right to treat people like dirt!" I yelled. "Who does *he* think *he* is anyway? He keeps saying he was sent by God, but God wouldn't send a person like that."

She covered her ears, refusing to listen to such talk about a man of God. I left the house disgusted with her refusal to see him for what he was—egotistical, supercilious, dictatorial, a man who used the church and God to justify his own condescending attitude and unfair treatment of the Indians.

I went to see the one person I felt I could trust, a staff member of the school who I had met through the Montgomery children. She was white, but she had always seemed sympathetic to my complaints and my problems. I told her what had happened, adding a few uncomplimentary remarks about Reverend Montgomery.

"He came here so he can feel like God!" I told her. "White people wouldn't put up with his attitude, but the Indians are foolish enough to let him do whatever he wants. It only makes him worse."

My trusted friend listened quietly, nodding occasionally, "He's only thinking of your welfare," she told me, then went immediately to the minister and repeated everything I had said. When I heard that, I decided never to trust another white person again.

When I approached the Montgomery children one day, they ran off. "What's the matter?" I asked, catching up to them.

The six-year-old girl kept on running, but her younger sister stopped. "Daddy and Mommy told us never to talk to you," she blurted. "They say you're lazy and no good."

"Oh, I see," I said sadly, and walked away. It did not matter to me what he thought, but losing his children's respect distressed me. I loved them dearly.

It wasn't one of my happier summers. Two men came to the house one evening as I was preparing to go out. We exchanged greetings and I left. When I returned home, everybody, except my mother, was in bed. It struck me as being odd because it was still early.

"I want to have a little talk with you," my mother said. "Do you know what those men wanted?"

"They asked you to cook for a feast?" I asked. She was always being asked to do such things.

"No—Ernest's son, Allen, wants to marry you. They were here to arrange the wedding. I couldn't give them an answer though because I thought the decision should be up to you. I know I should be the one to decide, but I don't want to decide anything that will make you unhappy. What do you say?"

I could not utter a word. My mind was a vacuum. I was in shock. No more school, no nursing career; only babies year after year, chopping wood and hauling water day after day. Wrinkled and toothless by the time I was twenty-one.

"I can't marry him!" I cried. "I'm only seventeen. I have two years of high school left, then three more of nursing school. You can't do this to me! I'll die!"

"I told you it's up to you," she said quietly. "I do want to see you married, not necessarily to Allen, just to keep you here on the island. I don't want you to leave again, but I know you'll never be happy until you've accomplished what you have planned, so I'll accept whatever decision you make. You're the one who has to live your life. Allen is supposed to come by and visit you tomorrow evening so the final arrangements can be made."

"The final arrangements have been made," I said. "There will be no wedding! Why did he have to go and do a stupid thing like that for? He's been going around with the same girl for three years now, and here he is asking me to marry him. Never!"

"What are your plans with Russ?" she asked hesitantly, referring to the boy I had been seeing all summer.

"None, if you're talking about marriage. I'm going to keep on seeing him though. I'm not going to be here when Allen

comes by tomorrow night. He's . . . he's so fat, and he uses so much hair cream. How can you think of marrying me off to someone like that?" I shuddered.

"Don't talk like that about my future son-in-law," she laughed.

"You and your future son-in-laws. I can't even go out with a boy without you hearing wedding bells and making plans for all the grandchildren you're going to have," I teased.

The effect my decision might have on certain members of my family—particularly my grandmother—worried me all night. I knew that she, like my mother, wanted more than anything to see me safely married off to some Indian boy before I left again. It was one way of keeping me on the island. I did not want to hurt my grandmother in any way, but I just could not bring myself to marry some boy I had never even spoken to.

What a relief when she came over the next morning and told me that she, too, would abide by whatever decision I made. She sniffled a little when I told her my answer, but she made no effort to try and change my mind.

When my suitor arrived that evening, I was waiting impatiently for Russ, my date. Allen picked up my brother's guitar and strummed on it patiently, waiting for somebody to greet him. Everybody had disappeared. The children were out. My stepfather had decided he just could not let another day pass without visiting his dear sister, whom he normally visited once a year. My mother had decided that the torn clothes she had set aside all summer just could not be ignored another moment. I paced the floor in the back room, wringing my hands, and urging my mother to give Allen the answer. She refused.

When I heard a knock at the door, I picked up my sweater and ran through the front room. Allen smiled expectantly and stood up. I opened the door and grabbed Russ's arm as I raced out.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'll tell you all about it while we walk," I said. We walked and I talked for several hours.

All he could say was, "How do you like that? How do you

like that?" Frankly, I had hoped he would come up with a solution. On the way home, he did. He proposed. I was congratulating myself on my fantastic luck when he added, "But if we *don't* get married, I want you to promise you'll never marry an Indian."

"And what's wrong with marrying an Indian?" I asked when I realized what he had said. Three proposals in one summer and all of them worthless.

"I don't want that kind of life for you," he said.

"I will marry who I want," I retorted.

We quarrelled. He could not understand my attitude when he had only my best interests at heart, he said. I went home in a huff.

When I stormed into the house, Allen was still playing the guitar even though the whole family was in bed. "I thought you were going to get rid of him," I whispered to my mother, who was pretending to be asleep. "Why is he still here?"

"It's up to you to get rid of him," she said, "and the sooner the better. He's been sitting there all evening strumming away on that guitar. It's driving me crazy. I didn't want to be rude by telling him to stop. Go and tell him your answer so we can all get some sleep."

I took a deep breath and walked determinedly into the front room. When I sat down, Allen got up and sat down beside me on the bench. I jumped up nervously and poured myself a cup of tea before I sat down again on the smallest chair I could find. I cleared my throat and coughed a number of times before I blurted out my answer.

He nodded his head sadly, then handed me a little box, which he said he wanted me to have anyway. I accepted the gift—a cross on a gold chain—to get him out of the house.

The next evening, his father and uncle came over to cement the deal. If Allen had given them my answer, which was unimportant anyway in these matters, they did not let on. However, when my mother told them I was not yet ready for marriage, they left with no hard feelings. My refusal created a rift in my family, though.

My mother had done everything wrong, according to some of my disgruntled relatives. Not only had she failed to discuss

this important matter with anyone other than my grandmother, but she had also allowed *me*, a mere seventeen-year-old "child", to make the final decision. I was too young to know my own mind yet. However, I was considered mature enough to bear the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood.

My match-making aunt Edna, who didn't like being left out of such dealings, and who had always sworn that she would have me married off by the time I was sixteen, was furious that I had passed up such a desirable, eligible bachelor, whose desirability she based on the fact that he had a steady job and was earning almost twenty dollars a week. After predicting that I would either wind up an old maid—if I kept on being so particular—or married to some drunken, murderous white man, she refused to speak to either my mother or me again.

I felt trapped, never knowing when a long line of prospective husbands would be paraded before me. If I kept refusing, sooner or later my family would stop consulting me until they had made the final arrangements. So, at the end of August, I was only too eager to leave the island. I wanted to go back to the safety of the vast, impersonal world outside. When the plane roared off down the river, I breathed a huge sigh of relief and leaned back. I was free!

## *Chapter 22*

WHEN I returned to the Indian school for the third year, I was the only one left of the original group. Ten had quit school and one was boarding with a family in another town while she completed her final year. I also learned from the vice-principal that I was being considered for a scholarship. All I had to do was keep up my "A" average. I was very proud of myself, prouder than I would have been if I had made the same marks in an all-Indian class.

My problems at the Indian school, however, were growing.

I could not think or make a move without someone breathing down my neck. Every act, no matter how innocent, was questioned; every word, no matter how truthful, doubted. I could not blame the others for quitting; there were times when I was on the verge of it myself. I knew that I could not spend another year in the suffocating, dehumanizing, prison-like atmosphere of the school, but it took an insignificant incident to bring matters to a head.

I came home from school one day to find three letters from Russ at the foot of my bed. All of them, of course, had been opened already. When I read them, however, I could not believe my eyes. Every sentence that mentioned any tender emotion had been crossed out with a heavy felt-tip marker. They were not passionate love letters by any stretch of the imagination—I had told Russ about our letters being read and censored—but you would think they were pornographic literature judging by the number of passages that were inked over. Across the bottom of one letter, Mr. Stewart had scribbled, "Keep your mind off boys if you know what is good for you. Concentrate on your studies; they are more important."

I yanked my suitcases down from the top of my locker and started packing furiously. Miss Brady was not around and I wanted to have everything packed and ready to go before she got back. Only my friend Marianne was in the dorm with me.

When she noticed that I was packing, she bolted out of bed and grabbed my arm. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Look at this!" I yelled, waving my letters under her nose. "I've put up with having my letters read, but this is going too far. I'm leaving right now."

"Where are you going to get the money?" she asked calmly and logically.

I had not given it a thought. Miss Brady had whatever little money I had saved up and it would take a miracle for her to give it to me. I did not have enough on me to get far. I could not go anywhere where the Highway Patrol, who were always called in on such cases, could not find me. And once I was caught, reform school would be next. However, from what I had heard—from an Indian girl who had spent two

years in one for striking back at a supervisor who was beating her—reform school was no worse than any Indian boarding school.

I put my suitcases back, still packed. "I'll leave at Christmas," I said. "That'll give me time to save up some money, and I'll have plenty of time during the holidays to disappear."

Marianne went back to reading the latest Elvis Presley article. I knew she did not believe I was serious.

I wrote a letter to my mother and informed her of my decision. I asked her if I could stay in town and find a job. I had no desire to return to the island just yet.

I decided that in the meantime I would change my way of life; I would become a hedonist. I would give up trying to do the impossible—trying to please the ever-critical staff; trying to prove to white people that Indians were not savages, alcoholics, heathens, or stupid; trying to be nonchalant when some cruel, ignorant little brat came up to me with a war-whoop, yelling, "How! Shoot-um big arrow," or "How squaw, where's your papoose?" I decided that since I was constantly accused of sinning, I might as well enjoy life by wallowing in it. Trying to do all the right things had never brought me anything but problems anyway.

I decided that the evening of our next AYPA (Anglican Young People's Association) meeting was a good time to start my new lifestyle. Mr. Stewart had decreed the year before that we needed to be socially integrated and had forced all the high school students to join the AYPA. We contributed nothing to these meetings, nor were we ever asked to. So, after the first few weeks, most of the Indian children had started attending the movies instead. Only Marianne and I had been too scared, and we had attended all the meetings religiously. That night, however, I talked her into seeing a movie.

We enjoyed every moment of the movie. It seemed exceptionally long, but I attributed that to my guilty conscience. According to my watch, it was nine-thirty and we had half an hour before curfew.

But as we came out of the theatre into the lobby, the thea-

tre clock said eleven-thirty. "We can't go back to the school," wailed Marianne. "We'll get expelled or we'll end up in reform school."

"I don't think so," I said. "They'll murder us first. We can always hitch a ride out of town and disappear."

"The police will find us. Oh God! I wish I had never listened to you!" muttered Marianne.

"Look," I told her, "while we're standing around here arguing, we're losing more time. The last bus will be leaving in a few minutes, so we'd better decide what we're going to do."

We decided to face the consequences. We arrived at the depot just before the last bus pulled away. When we walked up the long driveway to the school, we knew immediately we had been missed. The front porch, normally dark and unlit after ten, was ablaze with lights. Sitting on the porch steps was Miss Daniels, the matron. She was an old, old woman, extremely wrinkled and gray, but she was as strict and as frightening as everyone else at the school.

"Well!" she said. "Where have you two been? Don't tell me you went to the meeting because the other girls came home two hours ago. I was about to call the police. Where have you been all this time?"

"The movies," we answered simultaneously.

"The movies!" she screeched. "What gives you the right to go to the movies while the others are attending the meeting. I suppose you were out with your boyfriends, weren't you?"

"No, we weren't." Both of us were in between boyfriends at the moment.

"Don't you lie to me! You know what happens to Indian girls who run around with boys—they end up with papooses on their backs!"

Marianne and I had heard it all a thousand times before, and we walked away from her. "How dare you walk away from me when I'm speaking to you!" she screamed. "Have you no respect?"

We kept on walking, up the stairs, into our dormitory. We undressed, washed, brushed our teeth, and climbed into bed

while she continued her diatribe. "Men are all right before midnight, but after that they turn into animals. Don't you ever forget that!" There was no way of knowing whether that information was true or not since I had never been out past midnight with any boy. I could only assume that as a spinster nearing her seventies she was speaking from past experience.

The next morning we were called into Mr. Stewart's office and we listened to him for an hour. He figured correctly that I had been the instigator and he directed all his insults and warnings at me. Our privileges—going into town on Saturdays—were suspended for three weeks.

However, I decided to continue my wicked ways. One dark night I tried to sneak out into the woods for a cigarette—smoking was a sophisticated habit I was trying unsuccessfully to cultivate. After I had squeezed through the small window, I crawled through the snow on my bare hands and knees until I rounded the corner to the dark side of the school. Then I jumped up and started running close to the wall. I slipped on the ice which had formed under the dripping eaves, groaning loudly as I went down and my knee hit a sharp-edged block of ice. When I tried to get up, my right leg collapsed under me.

"I think I broke my leg," I whispered to the other girls who were waiting for me.

"For Pete's sake!" they muttered, dragging me back and pushing me through the window. I lay on the floor trying to block out the excruciating pain in my leg.

My leg was not broken, however, and I was able to hobble around by the time Miss Brady called us to bed. I was never able to kneel on my right knee again without a stab of pain knifing through me reminding me of my sin. Taking this as a warning from above, I decided to forsake my evil ways and return to the straight and narrow path. My watch started running again.

I attended all the AYPA meetings. The others continued to go to the movies without ever being caught. In November, when the club planned a luncheon and a dance, I decided not to go. It was to be semi-formal. I had no idea what one wore to a semi-formal do, but it sounded expensive. Since the

luncheon started at four and I worked until five, I thought I had a good excuse for not going.

On the day before the luncheon, I was called into Mr. Stewart's office. "What is this I hear about you refusing to attend the AYPA luncheon?" he demanded. "And why did you talk the other girls out of going?"

It was the first I had heard of that. "I did not talk them out of going," I told him. "I only said I couldn't go because I have to work until five."

He slammed his fist down on his desk and yelled, "Work! You and I both know you're not going to work. You're going to meet some boy downtown, aren't you?"

Holding back tears of anger, I answered as calmly as I could, "Mr. Stewart, I *do not* have a boyfriend. I haven't had a date since last summer. I am working for Mrs. Hunt tomorrow afternoon. I have been working for her for two years now. If you don't believe me, ask her."

"Don't you lie to me!" he insisted. "I know you have a boyfriend. I know you are going to meet that boy who wrote you when you first came back this fall. That's it, isn't it? You're going to meet him!"

"He's over a thousand miles away! I am not going to meet any boy. I am working. No matter what you think I am, I am *not* a liar."

He jumped out of his chair, his eyes bulging. "How dare you sass me back? I will not stand for any backtalk from you or anyone else. Do you know what happens to children who sass back? They get expelled or sent to reform school."

Years of bottled-up resentment and frustration boiled over and I could not stop myself. "I did not sass you back," I screamed, tears streaming down my face. "I was merely trying to tell you the truth, but that's not what you want to hear, is it?"

"Enough! Enough!" he yelled. "How dare you talk to me like that! I've met some troublesome Indians in my life, but you are undoubtedly the worst. I have never met anyone as disrespectful as you."

"You talk about disrespect! The only time I've ever had any respect around here was when I brought home my report

card. I've had nothing but disrespect since I came here. I've been accused of being immoral, of being a liar and a thief. Sometimes I feel like giving up and doing all those things, but that would only make you happy because you'd finally be proven right. Well, I won't give you that satisfaction!"

"That's enough, Janie! You are expelled! Do you hear me? Expelled! It will take me a week to make the necessary arrangements but I want you out of here by next weekend. I don't want your kind around here."

"I don't care whether you expel me or not," I sobbed. I never could fight anyone without bursting into tears. "I wrote my mother over a month ago and asked her if I could quit school. I was going to quit at Christmastime. I even have all my bags packed. Ask the girls."

He slumped into his seat. "Quitting? What do you mean you're quitting school?" he asked, looking at me with a puzzled frown.

"I'm leaving. I've had enough. I can't take it any more."

"You can't quit!" he said, suddenly alarmed. "Think of the other children in this school. You can't let them down. You've done more than anyone else to give this school and Indians a good name. You're much too intelligent to quit. You'll be throwing away your life."

Finally realizing that *I* had the upper hand in the argument, I calmed down. "I don't really want to quit school," I confessed, "but I cannot stand this kind of treatment any more."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but I don't see why you should," he said, still wearing a puzzled frown. "We've always tried to make this school a happy place for everybody. I'll see to it that your stay here is happier from now on."

"I thought you expelled me," I said quietly, unable to resist the impulse.

"Oh well, we both said things in anger that should never have been said. I'm quite willing to forgive and forget what you said if you will forget what I said. Now dry your tears. I'll tell the girls that you are going to the luncheon and the dance, and I'll call Mrs. Hunt and tell her you can't work for her this week. I'll tell her why." He got up, walked around

his desk, and placed his arm around my shoulder. "And let's have no more talk of quitting, all right?" he said softly.

I felt like pounding my head against his desk, He had won again; however, I did not feel like starting the fight all over again.

The only thing I had that looked semi-formal enough was a blue knit dress that a white woman for whom I used to launder had given me. I looked as if I had been poured into it. With the fur-trimmed scarlet coat I borrowed from one of the other girls, I looked like a prostitute, but I went anyway.

As soon as all the tables had been cleared after the luncheon, Marianne and I prepared ourselves for a boring evening as wallflowers while the other Indian girls and boys disappeared to see a show. And Mr. Stewart was so worried about them missing out on this big event of their lives, I thought bitterly.

One of the boys asked me to dance, but as soon as he discovered I was an Indian, he suddenly remembered he had made other plans. I was not surprised.

"What happened to your boyfriend?" Marianne asked, "He took off so suddenly. . . . What did you do to him?"

"I contaminated him. I told him I was an Indian. I guess he was afraid of catching some disease. You know how it is," I said bitterly.

"Yeah. Well, you got one more dance than I did," she shrugged.

After the dance, we met the others at the bus stop and we all went back to the school together. Mr. Stewart had waited up for us. "Well, did you enjoy yourselves at the dance?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," we lied.

"I knew you would," he smiled.

A few days later, I was ordered to the homework classroom to see Mrs. Mueller, our homework teacher. She greeted me with a scowl. "What have you got to say about this?" she asked, waving a letter at me. "Read it."

I took it from her and opened it up. It was a letter to me from my mother. I was furious! Now it seemed as if the *whole*

*school* had read my letters before I did. I read it through quickly. My mother had given her permission for me to quit school on one condition, that I return to the island. She did not want me living alone and working in the city.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. A girl with your brains wanting to quit. I thought that you at least would make something of your life," Mrs. Mueller said. "How can you think of quitting?"

"This is one of the reasons why I'm quitting," I said, waving my letter in her face. "Everyone gets to read my letters before I do, and if Mr. Stewart doesn't agree with something in the letter, he tacks on little notes at the bottom."

"Well, if that's all that's bothering you, I will demand that Mr. Stewart not read your mail any more. I'll see to it that your mail is delivered to you intact. All right?"

"It isn't just the mail," I said wearily. "It's a lot of other things."

"What are they? Janie, I'm your friend. You can tell me."

"Boys, for one thing. Do you know how many boys I've dated in the two and a half years I've been here?" I asked, holding up four fingers. "And yet I'm always being accused of running around and sleeping with boys. I don't know how we're expected to carry on all these imaginary affairs when we're hardly ever out of sight."

"Now, now, Janie," she said, embarrassed. "We're not talking about s-e-x."

"That's all I've heard about since I've been here."

"That's enough, Janie. I'll see to it that your mail is not opened any more. I've also arranged for you to take music lessons every Wednesday. There's a piano in the auditorium that you can practice on. Please believe that we're only trying to help you."

My mail was unopened from then on and I took my piano lessons. I knew they were a bribe to keep me in school, but since I had always wanted to play the piano, I did not mind.

Two weeks before Christmas, two men and a woman from the Education Department of Indian Affairs came to see me. They demanded to know why I wanted to quit school.

"I just don't like school anymore," I mumbled. I did not think for one moment they would believe anything I had to tell them.

"You cannot tell us you don't like school with the marks you get," the woman said. "Tell us what is bothering you and we'll try to correct it. We want to help."

"Let me see if I can talk some sense into this foolish girl," one of the men interrupted. Turning to me, he said, "We know you are not stupid. We know you like school, so what's all this foolish talk about quitting? We're not going to sit by while you throw your life down the drain. Can't you get it through that head of yours that we're trying to help. Why didn't you quit at the end of June? What happened between now and then? You aren't in trouble, are you?"

"No sir!" I answered indignantly. "I just don't want to go to school any more."

He threw up his hands in disgust. "Indians! Try and figure them out!"

"I have an idea I want to discuss with you, Janie," the woman said. "You don't have to give me an answer tonight. We'll be here until tomorrow. We've been carrying on a little experiment to see if we can come up with a solution to this dropout problem we have. We've taken a few Indian children and placed them in private homes instead of these institutions. Most of them have shown a marked improvement. If we could find a home for you in another town, would you be willing to stay in school?"

"Oh, yes!"

"It might be difficult finding someone to take you in at this time of year," she continued, "but we'll try. If we can't, we'll definitely find one next year. Please don't do anything until you hear from us."

Knowing Indian Affairs as I did, I did not think they would find a solution in a few weeks. Years maybe, but not weeks. I kept my bags packed, so I'd be ready to leave at Christmas, one way or the other. Three days after this official visit, I received word that a home had been found and that I could leave the school during the Christmas holidays. I could not believe it had actually happened.

Mr. Stewart drove me to the train station. I waved goodbye to my friends before turning my back on the detestable school forever without feeling even the slightest tinge of sadness. I could only hope that the future would be somewhat brighter.

Twice before I had started out with such hopes—once in 1948 when I had entered the first Indian school, and again in 1956 when I had entered the second one—only to end up bitterly disillusioned with life and people. I figured that during those years the accumulated time I had spent with my family was less than a year and a half. It was the end of 1958 and I had just turned eighteen. I had spent ten and a half of those years in Indian boarding schools—ten and a half years of boot camp.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the train, an hour behind schedule, jerked and ground screechingly to a halt in front of the station at North Bay, and it was almost two o'clock when I knocked uncertainly on a door marked "D" at the end of a long dark hallway in a brick apartment-building on Worthington Street. I was greeted with sleepy mutterings and shuffling feet.

The door swung open, and, intuitively, I sensed that my new life with the stern-faced old woman before me was going to be no improvement over the last ten and a half years. Gray hair in pincurls, wrinkles dripping with face cream, massive body wrapped in a boldly flowered robe, upper lip curled disdainfully, she stood glowering at me.