

Clean Nails and Shiny Shoes

It is 1940. I am in grade two. I am a big girl with brown eyes. Thick brown braids hang down my back. When I smile you can see I have a front tooth missing. I am waiting for the permanent one to grow in. Like everyone at St. Hilda's School for Girls I wear a navy tunic with a pleated skirt, a white long-sleeved shirt, a navy tie and long black stockings.

Every morning we line up by grade in the school auditorium for inspection and prayers. Miss Bishop, our school principal, watches as we line up. She stands on a little platform at the front of the auditorium so she can see everyone; particularly me. I stick up like a giraffe because I am the tallest girl in grade two. Our class stands right at the front, behind the grade ones. A prefect, one of the senior girls, marches up one row and down the next, checking us over. She inspects us to be sure our hands are clean, our shoes are shined and everything is in order. When no one is looking I give my shoes a quick shine by rubbing them on the back of my black stockings, just like I have seen the older girls do.

After inspection we recite the Lord's Prayer. Then Miss Bishop reads from the big Bible on the stand in front of her. For my first two years at St. Hilda's School for Girls I am the only Jewish child attending this Protestant private school in the West End of Calgary, and somehow I feel I don't quite belong. I repeat the Lord's Prayer along with everyone else. I want to fit in. My parents have told me it is all right for me to say the Lord's Prayer. At the end of assembly we sing the school song.

"Forty years on when afar and asunder parted are those who are singing today..." My teacher, Miss MacCaskill, explained to us that the school song is about how we will remember St. Hilda's School for Girls when we are grown up.

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She was right of course. But I remember it for reasons that Miss MacCaskill would not have imagined. I remember it because I didn't feel I belonged there. I didn't want to go to St. Hilda's in the first place. My mother had decided to send me there. She saw it as her chance to give me, her

youngest daughter, a good education, now that the family had moved from the country town of Beiseker to Calgary. My father must have agreed to this though. He drove me to and from school each day and provided the money to pay for the school tuition. My parents were not as strapped for money as they had been in the Depression. Still anything that involved extra expense had to be carefully considered. The decision was not discussed with me.

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When my mother tells me I will be going to St. Hilda's much of my excitement about starting school disappears. I am disappointed. I wouldn't be going to the same school as all of my friends in the neighbourhood.

My stomach churns. Why was I different from my friends? "You'll get a fine education at St. Hilda's, Sylvia" my mother says. I don't understand what she means. "Isn't Connaught School where all the kids go okay? Won't I learn the same things there?" I ask my mother. "You'll learn special things at St. Hilda's like art and music, as well as how to read and write." In spite of how disappointed I am, I know fussing about it wouldn't change her mind. I have tried making a fuss before and it doesn't work. My mother always says, "I don't want to hear any more but moms, Sylvia". She pretty well decides what my sisters and I can do. My father doesn't interfere much. I don't get angry. I am scared to get angry with my mom. I am afraid if I do she will get angry with me and will stop loving me.

All the other children in the neighbourhood go to Connaught Public School just a few blocks away from where we live. They walk together to school and home again. When they talk about school, their teachers, about what they are learning at school and what happened at recess I feel left out. We still play together after school, but it isn't the same as before.

The girls at St. Hilda's were all supposed to look the same in their uniforms, but of course they didn't. The uniform didn't change that fact that I was taller than all the other girls in my class. The worst part of the uniform was my stockings. I hated them. They were itchy and bagged at the knees and I had to wear suspenders with garters under my tunic to hold the stockings up. The older

girls got to wear thinner, smooth stockings and I wished I could wear ones like that too. I was happy that at least I could wear plaid ribbons on the ends of my braids. Everything else was black or navy. The prefects were lucky because they wore red ties so that we would know who they were. We had gym outfits under which we had to wear bloomers. I didn't see why we couldn't just wear shorts and blouses. When I asked our gym teacher this question she said "Young ladies who go to St. Hilda's must wear proper gym clothes, Sylvia". The bloomers were blue. They had elastic around the legs and that made them kind of puffy. They stuck out from under the short skirt of our gym outfits. I was embarrassed. It was like having your underpants show. If any of the kids on my block ever saw me in my gym outfit I knew they would sing "I see London, I see France, I see somebody's underpants".

Most of the girls at St. Hilda's are boarders, but there is a small group of pupils like me who live at home and come to school each day. There is often more than one grade in a classroom. In my classroom there are five rows of desks, two rows for grade one pupils two for grade two pupils and one row for grade three pupils. Miss MacCaskill teaches all of us.

Day pupils have lunch at school, with the boarders. Lunchtime begins with the ringing of the noon bell. As soon as it sounds each class is sent, in turn, to wash their hands. Then we march smartly, class by class, to the dining room. I march as slowly as I can because I am never in a hurry to eat the school lunch. As we enter the dining room we pass by a long cabinet with pigeonholes. Each pupil has their own space that holds a white linen napkin in a silver napkin ring. We each pick up our napkin before we go to our assigned table. Clean napkins are given out on Monday and it is very hard to keep it clean for a whole week. By Friday mine looks all grubby. Ugh!

We sit at tables for eight with a teacher at the head and a senior girl at the foot. The teacher serves the meat or fish and the senior girl the vegetables. The food is not like the food my mother makes. Vegetables, potatoes and usually carrots or cabbage are always boiled and mushy. We often get onions served with a white cream sauce. For dessert there is usually rice pudding or tapioca or

sometimes blanc mange. Once in a while, as a special treat, we get trifle or a brick of ice cream. The trifle is made with strawberry jam. It's my favorite

Even though there are lots of rules and regulations, there are times when school is fun. Besides reading, writing and arithmetic, we do other things. We write stories and poems. Our teacher gives us good paper. She calls it rag paper. And we have special black ink called India ink. Then we copy out our stories and poems. Miss MacCaskill shows us how to make our pages into a proper book with a real cover made of cloth called buckram. We sew the pages together before putting them into the cover.

I write a poem about our winter wind called the Chinook wind. I tell how there is a long low arch on the edge of the sky called a Chinook arch and how the wind is warm, melts the snow and leaves puddles on the street. I write a story about a little girl names Ann. She has a cat named Freddie and a big sister named Joan. Joan is too old to play with her little sister, but Ann and Freddie have wonderful adventures together.

We make paperweights out of clay with a print of our hand on them. We mark them with the year, 1914, and glaze them in a colour called celadon green.

We make puppets that we sew together and string ourselves. We put on a play using our puppets. My grade does *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare and my puppet is Portia, dressed in her red court robes. I learn her big speech so I can say it off by heart. "*The quality of Justice is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.*" I am not sure what justice is but from what my teacher tells me I think it means being fair.

Miss McNeil teaches horseback riding. In the spring and the fall, when the weather is nice we have a riding lesson once a week. The school uses Mrs. Willard's Riding Academy on the edge of town. Miss McNeil is always telling me "Sylvia, think before your horse does or you will end up doing what the horse wants to do." We ride English saddle and wear proper riding jodhpurs, the kind with pouches that stick out on each side. We are not allowed to wear frontier pants like the cowboys in the Calgary Stampede. I wear my oxfords. I don't have proper riding boots like some of the girls do.

Our gym teacher's name is Miss Swanson. She is young and pretty and looks like an athlete. All the girls are divided into two large teams, the Micmacs and the Ojibways, like the Indian tribes. When we compete with each other in sports or games we wear our colours, a wide felt sash, worn over your shoulder and across your chest. The Micmacs wear red, the Ojibways green. When you enroll at St. Hilda's you are assigned to a team. I am a Micmac.

In gym we do somersaults and cartwheels and head stands on tumbling mats. Sometimes we have to run and vault over a wooden horse. I can never do that. I don't like gymnastics much. I'm not too good at them. We do precision marching as well, weaving in and out and making patterns as we march. This takes lots of practice, but I like it.

None of the girls at St. Hilda's feel like my friends, like the kids on our block. They are not like me, or I am not like them. I can't say why I feel this way, but I do. The girls who board are all one group and the day pupils are another. I am a day girl, but I don't feel close to the day girls either. Going to private school makes me different from the kids in our neighbourhood. They all go to public school.

When I am going into grade five I finally convince my mom to let me go to public school. I am happy to leave St. Hilda's School for Girls behind me.

"Forty years on when afar and asunder parted are those who are singing today, when we look back and wonder what we were like in our work and our play. Then it may be there will often some o'er us...."



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