

Nice to read

"My Name is Seepeetza" -
A novel by Shirley Sterling,
Toronto 2010.



Suitable from Year 10 onward

It is the story of Seepeetza, an Indian girl who is sent to Kalamak Indian Residential School in Canada in 1958.

She describes everyday life at a residential school outside the Indian reservations and far away from the children's families, a way of life meant to "kill the Indian in the child".

Read about her first day at the new school.

Then one day Dad bought me a suitcase, some new shoes and a wool snowsuit, green like fir trees. Then he drove me to Kalamak. Dorothy went ahead on the cattle truck the school sent to pick up students. We drove for a long time. Then we came to this big building and Dad parked the truck. Mum walked in with me. The red doors slammed shut behind us and we walked down a long hallway. Our footsteps sounded hollow. When we came to the junior girls rec room we saw a whole bunch of little girls in a big noisy room. Some of them were playing. Some of them were sitting down on red benches with their suitcases, looking sad. A nun called Sister Maura came over and talked to Mum. Then Mum turned and left. I looked at her walking away from me. I heard her footsteps echoing, and I was so scared I felt like I had a giant bee sting over my whole body.

Then I stopped feeling anything.

When Mum was gone, Sister grabbed my shoulder and shoved me over to a red bench. She told me not to move. I sat there listening to the girls playing and running back and forth in the rec room when this big girl called Edna came over with her fist raised. "What are you staring at?" she asked.

Just then Sister Maura came back with Cookie. Cookie's eyes looked big and red, like she had been crying. I never saw her look like that before.

Sister told her to sit beside me and wait. We were so happy to see each other that we sat on the bench close to each other for a long time.

When Sister Maura came back she made all the girls line up and she put coal oil in our hair to kill nits and lice, even though we didn't have them. She made us get haircuts, take baths and put on smocks, bloomers and undershirts, all exactly alike. We had to put all our own clothes and things in our suitcases which she locked in a storage room. She gave us each a small closet where we put our coats and combs and things. Then she took us upstairs to make our beds. She kept yelling at us to hurry up or Sister Superior would strap us. Sister Superior carries the strap in her sleeve all the time. It looks like a short thick leather belt with a shiny tip. When someone is bad Sister Superior makes them put their hands out, palms up. Then she hits their hands with the strap usually about ten times. When you get used to it it doesn't hurt that much but your hands sting, and you can't help crying.

After that Sister Maura asked me what my name was. I said, my name is Seepeetza. Then she got really mad like I did something terrible. She said never to say that word again...