

A
GENTLE
HABIT

A book of short stories

by Cherie Dimaline



The Bead Fairy

“If addiction does not take a person’s mind away from the
yoke of reality, it’s not worth doing.”

-Anonymous

Pearl Harbor hit Sault Ste. Marie like a traveling midway bringing fresh blood, cheap toys and the crash and sparkle of a kind of hope that can only be delivered on shiny trucks driven by cigar chomping toughs. In 1941 this place must have looked like Rockefeller Centre on Christmas Eve. Fear of the Nazis brought the Navy--US and Canadian--out in full dress. Anti-aircraft stations were built and manned and the bars and diners along Main Street rejoiced. Parties were thrown and invitations delivered; finally women didn't have to settle for the most height-appropriate boy from their senior class. The Soo was basking in its shiny moment in time. Then, shortly after the war ended, the military, embarrassed by its reactionary excessiveness, pulled out, leaving behind a tiny base and a skeleton crew. The women who snagged up soldiers breathed a sigh of relief that they were in the right place at the right time as they packed up their trunks and toddlers and waddled away to the next station, their prize husbands leading the way.

By 1983, the year I was eight, Sault Ste. Marie was a greying place for steelworkers and their offspring, a fine town to raise a family, far from the dangerous multiculturalism of the city. I was a quiet kid with a mushroom cut and front teeth two times the size of the baby teeth around them. I lived with my parents, my older brother, and my maternal grandmother in a bungalow in what was known as the Halfbreed Projects, the neighbourhood that crept outward from the hockey arena like a brick scab around a high sticking wound.

For the most part, my life was routine. I took the bus into school where I got good grades, played road hockey with my brother and our friends and was madly in love with a boy. But not just any boy, Hugh McIvroy.

Hugh was one of the only white kids in the whole school, the rest of us being bussed in from the reserve or from out by the arena. For sure he was the only blonde, and he was the tallest kid in the school, even taller than some of the teachers. He stuck out above the rest of us like a dandelion in a field of crab grass.

He was so fair that he shone, and I imagined the air around him affected like the sunny spokes of the Virgin Mary's halo. I searched for the right word to describe him, to adequately capture his beauty in the pages of my diary. I found that word one day while watching cartoons after school.

It was early spring and the snow was still crusty on the ground, freezing the gravel bits into peanut brittle-like asphalt. I was watching TV in my long johns after running home from the bus stop. My grandmother, who was in charge while my parents were at work, was in the kitchen making chicken noodle soup. I waited patiently on the couch.

During the first commercial break there was an ad for a shampoo that promised to 'make your hair so silky smooth, so soft and manageable people would say it was radiant.' And there it was, the word.

Radiant.

Hugh McIvoy was radiant. His godlike status was cemented by the fact that he shared a name with my father who was the strongest man in the world. I was anxious riding in other people's cars especially when weaker, less rugged fathers drove them. I knew that in our own car, I was safe, because even if I got trapped underneath its wreckage, my dad could easily pick up the Ford Fairmount, lift it above his head and the toss it into the ditch like a crumpled-up pop can.

My school was a rectangular bungalow with a larger building attached like an afterthought, proudly housing our full size gym. We had an expansive schoolyard with a huge field, a smaller playground full of dangerous looking metal equipment suitable only for some sort of dark, contortionist circus, and a seasonal ice rink. Between the field and the building was a 20-foot swatch of gravel.

Every recess, the bell would sound and hundreds of cooped-up, hyperactive, sugar infused grade schoolers would burst out of the doors like styrofoam balls out of a slit bean bag chair. They would yell and push and scramble their way over to the field, the smaller kids running for the deadly metal playground, the boys scrambling to the rink, dependent on the season. Inevitably, the weakest of the

group would be pushed underfoot on the slippery gravel, suffering the kind of evil scrapes that look like they're no big deal but that hurt for days. By lunch the nurse's office would have a line-up of pink-kneed patients waiting for her iodine and sharp tongue.

In every place, no matter how mundane or leeched of imagination, there is a mythology that makes it unique. At my school we had our own set of traditions and mannerisms. We had a certain way you dressed to indicate where you came from. (Rez kids wore denim jackets. If a townie came to school in a denim jacket, he had better be prepared to fight for the right to wear it. Only kids in grade six or younger wore shorts in the warm months, but the grade sevens and eights could wear them in the winter.) We had a certain manner in which things were done. (Grade threes owned the playground, grade sixes, the basketball nets and grade eights, the rink.) But by far, the oddest indicator of our individual existence, what set us apart from any other school in the region and which could never be adequately explained, were the beads.

Without any discernible cause or reasoning the gravel yard, particularly closer to the building, was infested with beads. They weren't just scattered like breadcrumbs over the grey expanse either, but ground into the dust and stone like technicolour dinosaur bones. And even if you spent the whole day digging at a claimed area delineated by a finger dragged through the dirt like a shallow fence, even if you were sure you had exhausted every last bead, by the next morning there would be more to find.

No one was quite sure when the beads first showed up. The grade eights said they had been there since the school opened. They said it was because the contractors built over an ancient Indian burial ground and at night the corpses would rise and walk the grounds, which was funny to hear since the grade eights were almost exclusively Ojibway. They even said it in that spooky horror movie way, like they actually believed their grandparents were zombies roaming the schoolyard at night in tattered breach cloths and raggedy headdresses.

The unwritten rules allowed that you had to get to grade two before being able to spend recesses hunched over little patches of gravel, digging around for the multi-

coloured beads mixed into the dirt. Before that, you could approach the circles of little pigtailed archaeologists but you never expected any more to your enquiries than “none of your beeswax.”

After grade four, working in the bead quarry became foolish, the worry of children. But for those two glorious years, one could work in close companionship with their peers, digging for the extraordinary in the ordinary dust of a school yard. You felt like Indiana Jones doing that meticulous work.

The truth was, we didn't care if we had to sell our own grandparents or follow a strict code of ageist ethics for the beads; the unknown magic was better than the known mediocrity any day. We didn't think we could find that kind of voodoo in our rented homes or around our linoleum kitchen tables; it sure as shit wasn't sitting at the desk next to us eating paste during those dreary afternoons at school that went on forever. We needed the beads; they were like Christmas and summer vacation at once.

There were many theories about the bead quarry, and they were the popular topic of discussion while actually carrying out the careful excavation work. One theory, which may have grown from the burial ground story, was that powwow dancers used the school to practise their moves at night, spinning and stomping the beads right off their moccasins. The supporters of this theory searched for proof; a broken thread, a series of softened hide-pressed footprints, anything that could uphold under the scrutiny of the other camps.

The other popular origin myth was that the teachers themselves collected beads from the crafts store and on PA days, they walked the perimeter of the building like farmers, dropping seeds to the earth and kicking dirt to cover them up. This way they were sure to occupy the idle hands and minds of the students. These theorists were spurred on by the odd silence of the faculty over the recess beading. Surely artificial ignorance was a quiet admission of guilt.

The last school of thought was by far the smallest as it relied heavily on the assumed kindness of the eighth graders; the most vile predators known to kid-kind. The story went that a secret group of students, like some sort of elementary

offshoot of the Freemasons, gathered after school to plant the beads; altruism in order to carry on the fine age-old tradition of quarry work. Of course, there were several holes in this theory, the first being the general acerbic nature of eighth graders. The second being the likelihood of them staying behind after school, thereby missing their bus, therefore being forced to walk home in the cold night. Also, the grade eights were insufferable show-offs. How then could they carry off something as clandestine and wide spread as the bead quarry without bragging about it? It was an anomaly not even the theory's supporters could adequately explain.

If you were willing to believe the eighth graders were anything other than pimple-necked jerks, you might as well put your faith in the kindergarteners' Bead Fairy idea. "She takes your teeth that you put under your pillow and makes beads out of 'em. Then, at night, if the kids are real good, she flies low and drops them onto the ground. She's the most beeyoutiful of all the fairies. That's 'cause she has to be to make such beeyoutiful beads for us."

Whatever.

I spent each and every day at the quarry, weather permitting. In fact, I like to credit myself with the introduction of paintbrushes lifted from the art cupboards as archaeological tools. By the end of afternoon recess, each digger would have a little pool of unique beads to compare, just enough to fit in the depression of a cupped palm. Single coloured beads were more common; candy striped ones more rare. But by far, the prize catch was the oblong glass beads with holes so tiny one would marvel at the needle that could pass through them, with some suggesting they had to be strung with a single hair. You were lucky to see one of those in any given week.

Digging was like fishing. At the end of the day we would nod our heads at each other's outstretched palms and comment like old men.

"Nice haul."

"Yup, sure did get some beauts today."

"Better luck tomorrow. It's supposed to rain tonight, that usually brings 'em to the surface."

One day in late April, in those heady days when you can literally taste summer vacation in your ham sandwiches and bruised apples, I hit the motherload.

First recess was crisp and sunny and so refreshing, it whet our appetite for the season just around the corner, for those days when you could no longer pretend you were smoking with a stick and frosty breath while waiting for the morning bus. I settled in with my usual group, just east of the basketball nets. It was a prime spot since the asphalt curved out into the gravel like a blackened eddy into the ocean; so you had somewhere smooth to sit; gravel could be hard on a digger's knees and butt cheeks after a while. Right away, the first bead I pulled out of the crushed rock was a peach hued glass oblong dazzler. I held it up to the sun and basked in the 'ooo's' and 'aaahhh's' from the collectors around me. It was definitely my day. In fact, by the end of first recess, I had a dozen beads in my palm, five of them long and clear and so narrow you could slip them into a pierced ear, as demonstrated by my best friend Natalie Duquette.

Bead digging is like gambling; once you get a taste for winning, that adrenaline laced shiver of getting something for nothing, you can't wait to go back for more. By lunch hour I was drumming my fingers on top of my desk and watching the clock. I sped through my sandwich and sucked back my juice box as if it were a respirator. I was the first one at the double doors, and waited impatiently for the scream of the bell that signalled lunch recess. When it sounded, I sprang from the school like Astroboy, straight for the sandy eddy before the sharks could break from other groups and swim in.

Lunch proved to be just as fruitful as the morning break and by afternoon recess I had attained near-legendary status.

My collection was varied and colourful like a handful of shellacked Lucky Charms. Little kids craned their necks to look over my shoulders and, as per the supported hierarchy, I blocked their view and shot them dirty looks, though I did offer quick peeks when the circle started to break apart at the sound of the first bell.

I had never been in possession of an honest-to-god treasure before, so I was unclear on how to proceed. Should I thread them onto a string and wear them?

No, that would be too cheesy. Should I gift them to my friends? No, broken up into individual items the collection lost its grandeur. If there had been a school museum, I would have loaned them for display. I needed to do something magnificent, something befitting such an exquisite find. So I did the most beautiful thing I could think of, pairing together the two most stunning images I carried in my head. I gave them to Hugh McIvoy.

After gym, I made sure I was at the head of the line to walk down the hallway back to class. Rounding the last corner, I took off running, barrelling into the classroom before everyone else pushed in. Hugh's desk was at the back of the room, closest to the door so I had time to scoop the beads out of my jeans pocket and place them in the curved metal lip in his desk, beside his Number 2 pencil and an eraser he had bitten in half.

Sitting in my desk, breathing heavily both from sprinting and nerves, I wondered what he would do when he discovered the beads. He had to know it was me. He must have heard about my archaeological skills by now; even the boys took interest in a great find. I imagined his blue eyes misted over with unshed tears, his delicate features glazed with recognition, like the faces I saw on the cover of my grandmother's Harlequins. He would wait for me after school, just before we got on our respective buses; his uptown, mine down to the arena, and grab my hand in both of his. "Thank you," he would whisper, smiling at me from his impressive height. "This means so much to me."

Then I heard it, Hugh McIvoy yelling from the back of the room.

"Hey, who put this junk in my desk?"

He said it loudly into the silence of the twenty-eight students watching Mrs. Cochimilio drawing a pie chart on the board. Twenty-seven heads turned to see him standing beside his desk, holding out a handful of the most astonishing, shiny beads in the history of St. Jean Brebeuf Elementary. One head dropped to its desk with a hollow thud while the whispers began.

Why, oh why had I been such a show off? Everyone knew whose beads those were. There were some shuffling of feet and a nervous cough, but no one said a word, so caught up in the sad, exciting scandal. I didn't claim them. I couldn't. Not even when Hugh walked to the front and positioned his fisted hand over the wastepaper basket. There was a collective gasp, the bead-diggers covering their eyes and mouths in disbelief. Then he opened all his fingers at once letting the most celebrated catch scatter like jeweled rain. My heart shattered and dropped into the boney hollows of my ribcage, like little glass beads hitting the metal sides of a dented wastepaper basket.

I lost my love for Hugh McIvoy that day. I convinced myself that his pale features were a sign of weakness, like the soft underbelly of an ugly trout; the kind you throw on the rocks straight off the hook because you just know they're too stupid and weak to make their way back to the water on their own. Before school let out that year, I had completely changed my outlook on the subject of his appeal. I decided he had none. I commented at length on the clumsy nature of Goofy and how tall creatures can't be expected to have any grace anyhow. I refused to sit beside him for any reason, whether at the long lunch tables or on the bus during the end of year field trip to Pioneer Village. And when Mrs. Cochimilio bought a creepy pink-eyed white rat for the class pet, I suggested we name it 'Hugh'.

I don't think he really noticed the snubs, having not really noticed me to begin with. But even though I hated him more than my brother, even though I made gagging noises when his name was called at morning attendance, it still stung when he started going out with Melissa Johnson, a pretty redhead who transferred in half way through the year.

"Oh great," I moaned to Natalie when they walked by holding hands at lunch recess. "An albino and a ginger. Their children will be practically invisible."

I was finished. I quit the quarry cold turkey. I volunteered my recesses helping out in the kindergarten room; an act that earned me 'Student of the Year' at the June assembly. I didn't even think of those stupid beads again. Not until grade six. Not until I caught Rachel Grenier in the act.

Rachel Grenier was big, the kind of big that made it hard for her to walk without waddling. Just getting around looked painful. Her deplorable physical state was emphasized on the day the whole gym class had to run laps after a disastrous prank in which several classmates found themselves stuck behind the folding bleachers. In the girls' changing room after class ended, I noticed Rachel struggling to put on her woolly tights, desperately trying to yank them over her sweaty brown thighs before Christy and her crew finished in the showers and made their way into the common area to tease the lesser of the group. No one was safe when they were around especially not the overweight, underweight, bespectacled, those with acne or, god forbid, those whose skin was not milky white.

I saw her wince as the tights rubbed over wide, red wounds slashed across and between her legs. She looked as though she had taken a serious licking with a belt. I wanted to ask her about them, though questions directed at Rachel were usually ignored as a rule. Seeing the way her legs melted into each other as she stood there, I understood that the marks were friction burns from running the track for the past forty-five minutes. Rachel paid more than anyone on the track that day, including those crushed up kids who had to be yanked out from behind the bleachers with the homemade wooden hook used to pull stranded balls from the school's roof.

Rachel wore old lady sweaters that strained around the buttonholes and thick polyester dresses that made her fat divide itself into rolls. Rachel Grenier had boobies in grade one. At lunchtime her auntie Bev would drop by to deliver lunch. Bev worked at the movie rental place in town and the store was right beside McDonalds so Rachel always got a bag with that bright yellow 'M' on the side, the bottom transparent with grease. Then she would sit at her back desk through lunch period methodically eating her two Big Macs one by one like a robot, with no emotion in her little brown eyes while the rest of the class nibbled the rind off bologna and cursed under our stinky breath.

Bev wore huge tinted glasses that covered half her face and had an Indian afro. She was friends with Mom and every time we went to rent a movie I ended up leaning against the glass counter pondering the new releases while they dished

the latest gossip. Through inadvertent eavesdropping, I knew a lot about Rachel's family, which made me feel even worse about the way she was treated at school.

Each winter after the plow had come and pushed all the snow in the cement schoolyard up into two storey hills, the bigger kids would lure Rachel over with promises of kindness and friendship. "Hey, Rachel, wanna see my new mitts?" She would eye them warily from the small slits of her eyes, her winter coat open since it was too small to stretch over her belly. She didn't really seem to feel the cold anyhow. After a while, she would nudge closer to the kids as they stood in huddles like skidoo-jacketed penguins near the bottom of the snow hill, and they'd include her in their conversation. "Hey, Rach, did you watch Scooby Doo yesterday? Wasn't that funny when Shaggy got stuck in the freezer? Ha, I bet he was farting ice cubes after that!"

Then just when Rachel was lulled into camaraderie, when she was drunk on this human contact after long droughts of complete imposed social leprosy, they would pounce, wrapping their wool scarves around her wide polyester torso. She would struggle but never scream as they tied knots and joked about her size.

"Jesus Ceeerist!" Ted Robinson would yell, "how do you even fit this arse on the toilet, lady?" Everyone would laugh, slipping on the flattened snow around their victim as they tied her up securely, as if she would run away- as if she could run away. Then, hoisting their prey like a submissive pig on a spit, they would start up the side of the snowy hill.

It took about eight of them, all older, mostly boys from the grade seven and eight classes. At the top they would stand her up straight, still bound and mute. I always secretly thought that Rachel took it like a champ. I watched from the top of the ice-slick monkey bars where I'd spend recesses turning quick somersaults with Natalie.

Rachel would stand there waiting, her eyes fixed on something far above the roof of the school, beyond the "Elmer the Safety Elephant" flag that snapped on the flagpole. It reminded me of those movies where prisoners were blindfolded and tied to a pole in the middle of a foreign yard, given a cigarette (for the longest

time this is what I thought was meant by that slogan ‘Smoking Kills’) and then shot to death.

Sooner or later one of Rachel’s captors would let lose a strained and triumphant battle cry, issuing a warning to the smaller kids playing in the foothills below. It was a cry the kids were all familiar with and the games would stop in mid-play, pucks gliding effortlessly into open nets. Then, when every kid below was silently watching, shading their eyes from the winter sun with snow-crustrated mittens, they would push her. Once balance was lost and she tipped over that first ledge, she would begin to bounce. Then, like an obscene pumpkin in hand-me-down sneakers and scratchy nylons, she would roll.

You couldn’t help but stare. She would literally catch air on the way down, picking up speed until her face and hair blurred into one brown smudge. By the time she got to the bottom, none of the spectators were even sure she was still alive. She always was. She would stand up and just walk away while the whole schoolyard howled with laughter. She wouldn’t shout or turn to look back at her attackers. Not once did she tell on anyone to the yard teacher. Not once were there any repercussions. She would just waddle away in her wet, open coat.

Early one spring, Rachel didn’t show up for class. Miss Simpson told everyone to quiet down. It was explained that Rachel’s dad had died. They heard later that he had in fact committed suicide. I heard the full story from Mom who heard it while returning *The Goonies* movie to Bev’s store. “Oh my poor sister,” Bev moaned, leaning over the counter conspiratorially and looking over the plastic rim of her glasses.

“I mean they were breaking up for sure, but, holy jeez, what a blow that was. She really did love him. Two of her kids were even his.” I found out it had been Rachel and her two little brothers who had found their father, recently laid off and newly separated, swinging from a crooked tree in their backyard.

“Mrs. Grenier thinks it would be nice if Rachel’s friends would show up to the funeral,” said Miss Simpson, arching her pencil-darkened eyebrows, arms akimbo at the front of the classroom. Miss Simpson had a way of getting right in your face

without moving or even really raising her voice. “And, of course, since we are all friends in this class, I am sure that you will all show up to support Rachel in her time of need.” Each student looked down at their hands.

I already knew I had to go. As soon as my mom had found out about Rachel’s dad, she went to the department store and bought a new black dress with a high itchy collar. The next day she pulled me inside from an intense game of street hockey, stripped off my patched up jeans and worn Dynakid runners and slapped that dress on me. Then my tangly hair was brushed. I caught a slap to the back of the head pulling away from the comb that yanked at my sweaty bangs. Mom shined up my scuffed dress shoes that I was forced to put on even though they pinched my toes.

My dad drove out to the church on the edge of the city and ushered me across the parking lot. It was slushy outside and my sore feet got wet walking through the dirt parking lot. He pushed me inside and then left again to wait in the car and listen to the Leafs game on the radio.

Bev met me at the door and I saw myself reflected in her huge, dark glasses, a miserable little girl in wet shoes. She put a hand on the top of my head and smiled. “I’m so glad you came. Rachel is lucky to have such nice friends.” Guilt made my skin warm and I squirmed inside my good coat.

The pews were half filled with sad looking people, all in dark clothes, some wearing baseball caps and others in hand-me-down suit jackets, several wearing both at the same time. The sound of snowmobiles rolling up to the church punctuated the silence now and then as family members made their way in from the reserve. They ambled in to the church wearing camouflage snowsuits, pulling off stiff gloves and stomping snow from heavy boots.

A few kids from class had been brought by their parents- mostly other halfbreeds who lived in town, like me. We looked shyly at each other; embarrassed to be dressed up like this and mostly embarrassed to be faking friendship in front of Rachel’s whole family. Rachel herself didn’t look at anyone through the entire service. I was ashamed of this, but I also felt kind of ripped off since my big

sacrificial trip went unnoticed by the very person it was meant to benefit. She just sat in the front row, wedged in between her tiny mother and her scrawny brother like a tomato on a shish kebob.

Rachel came back to school a week later. She was still big, though now her cheeks had a sunken look to them. She stared at that far off spot over the school's roof past the flagpole more often. Sometimes she would spend a whole recess standing in the middle of the yard looking off at that spot, her open coat blowing around her like a cape.

The next winter after the plow came, the big kids found a different outsider to lure over; a pale runt with huge teeth they nicknamed 'the Beav'. He would wail with his insanely high pitched scream all the way down the snow hill, throwing his arms out at his sides, spinning them around like skinny windmills. The Beav would tumble and scream all the way to the bottom, collapsing in a heap of vinyl snow pants and pink exposed skin as his matching jacket was pushed up over his concave belly. Landed, he would lie there for the remainder of recess, safe in his defeat.

Rachel was the only kid on the playground who didn't respond to the warning cry that was issued from the top of the hill announcing the descent of this newest victim. I watched her sometimes, from the top of the icy monkey bars as she stood there with her back to the spectacle. She was no longer involved in the ritual. There was no point anymore in dragging Rachel to the top to push her down again. She was already at the bottom.
