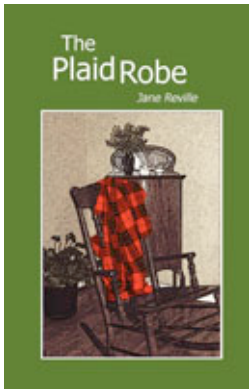


The Plaid Robe

Jane Reville





The Plaid Robe is a memoir of a girl who transitions from bliss innocence to austere realism. The upheavals of the sixties merge with her journey from an innocent fifties childhood. Step back for a nostalgic jaunt to air raid drills, summer evenings playing red light, hairnets, stockings with seams, gloomy hospitals and polio. As the tale weaves into her adulthood, see her struggling with God, her marriage, and the complexity of the times.

The Plaid Robe

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First Edition

1
Red Glasses and Ketchup



Mother dragged me up the crest of the hill, crying, to catch the blue school bus. She had packed my new red eyeglasses tightly into the outside pocket of my red canvas book bag, fastening the two buckles on the flap so they would not fall out. I wanted to hide them in my tin lunchbox with the ketchup sandwich.

My classroom was the second room on the left of the long hallway that led into the brick school building. I entered by pushing open a heavy wood door with a glass window in its middle. The cloakroom with two doorways occupied the rear of the classroom. It was a punishable crime to enter the cloakroom through the exit. If you were bad in class, you sat in that cloakroom. Hanging my jacket on a peg that lined the back wall, I ambled to my wooden desk with the attached chair and inkwell hole.

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Miss Stark, dressed in a wool gray pleated skirt and white blouse, sat at her desk in front of the classroom. John, a quiet boy next to me, often presented me with rare gifts such as the gray china donkey that I received yesterday. I wondered if he had a crush on me. Della Mae teased me that he did.

We stood for the pledge and sang *My Country 'Tis of Thee* followed by The Lord's prayer and Bible readings. I placed my eyeglass case inside the desk. No one saw. When Miss Stark turned to write on the blackboard, I put my hands inside the desk, fidgeting with the case in order to remove the glasses. Knots twisted in my stomach as I lowered my head to put them on. Miss Stark turned around and exclaimed, "Class look! Jane has glasses. You don't need to sneak them on."

My face blazed three shades of red. I was Plain Jane with glasses. Boys don't make passes at girls that wear glasses. Everyone stared. I wanted to hide under the desk, but I was saved by sirens blasting.

"Class, line up. This is an air raid drill."

Silently we filed down the hall corridor, to the back cement stairs, to the dark dusty basement. Having trouble adjusting to my glasses, I clutched the rail. Light bulbs swinging on chains made my classmates' shadows long on the cement floor. We sat next to the concrete block wall with our backs tight against it. Raising our knees, we covered our heads with our arms and tucked our heads between them. We could not see the spiders or other critters lurking in the corners. At last, my glasses were hidden. We sat for a long time without talking, waiting for the "all clear" announcement. Dank dustiness penetrated our nostrils and soiled our dresses. Cold seeped into my undies.

4 Blossoms, Bubbles, and Boom



The smell of paste floor wax drenched the air as I entered my house after first removing my saddle shoes. The wood floors shined so that I could see my face reflected in their glow. Sliding on the newly waxed floors, I noticed that the velvet drapes and wool carpets had disappeared. Spring had come and so had Nanan and Aboo, the spring cleaning brigade. Light from outside streamed through the freshly washed lace curtains. Bright red and yellow slipcovers protected the living room chairs from our summer sweat. Red floral print adorned the sofa. Walking across the straw carpet in my socks, the hard grass prickled the soles of my feet.

"Mother, I'm home," I called as I threw down my red canvas book bag and my metal lunch box with Hopalong Cassidy in his black hat with his white horse, Topper. My

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plastic thermos had leaked chocolate milk making the wax paper soggy that had previously wrapped my sandwich in neat folds. The smell was nauseating after being closed since lunchtime. My ankle socks had slipped down towards my heel, my plaid dress had ketchup stains from my ketchup sandwich, my hair was knotted, and my face was red from running as Mother swooped down to give me a hug. Her short, white, wavy hair gleamed along with her smiling eyes.

"Everything smells fresh and clean," I exclaimed.

"Yes, they all came today to help. Aboo polished the furniture while John and Nanan washed windows and I waxed the floor. It does look nice. Go change your clothes and go out and play while I make the dinner."

"What're we having?"

"Potpie."

"Can I just eat the crust?"

"Don't be silly, Jane Lee."

"Della Mae can have my meat. You know I can't eat meat. I gag on it and Daddy makes me sit there until it is all gone."

"Go get changed," Mother said pushing me along.

I ran out of the kitchen and took the stairs three at a time. I tried to do four steps. However, my legs were not long enough. As I put on my blue jeans, I lay on the floor to catch my breath. From that angle, I could imagine what our house would look like upside down. I would have to jump over the doorframes to get from room to room. The windows would be nice and low so you could look out. I could see Daddy hopping over all those doorframes. Lord, please let my Daddy and Mommy live until I'm eighteen. Hearing the bathroom door close I raced for it. It was locked. I banged on the door.

"Let me in."

"No, you'll have to wait," yelled Della Mae.

I banged louder.

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"Go away," she shouted.

"Hurry up," I hollered.

"Girls, you'd better quit fighting. Do I have to come up there? Jane Lee, stop your whining or I will give you something to whine about."

I could picture my bottom spanked and my sister rocking furiously in her rocker, so I turned, slid down the banister, and skipped out the front door. Rounding the corner of the house, I stopped. The Japanese cherry tree was blooming. I scampered to the tree and gazed upwards. Feathery pink flowers floated in the air. Patches of deep blue sky filled the empty spots making the pink more vivid. Touching the soft velvety petals, I sighed as I whirled around. My tree had a big fork three feet up from the ground. Reaching with my right leg, I put my tennis shoe into the fork and grabbing the limb, I hoisted my body into the tree. Pink enveloped me. I leaned back on the branches to soak it in. Orange streaks from the bark covered my hands, shirt, and jeans. I sat there 'til dinner.

After swallowing the last piece of meat with my milk to wash it down, I pushed my chair under the table. Everyone else had left the dinner table a long while ago. My paper napkin held the rest of the meat. Luckily, Daddy had not noticed when he got up.

"My plate is clean," I grumbled heading to the kitchen for chores. I placed the leftovers in the refrigerator pushing aside the sprinkled laundry wrapped in a towel ready for ironing.

"I'm washing the dishes tonight. Whistle while you work..."

"I'm coming," Della yelled as she rounded the corner to dry the dishes. I scooped up a handful of bubbles and tossed them her way. She picked up the tea towel, rolled it, and swatted me on the bottom.

"Got you," she said.

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I tossed another handful of bubbles, but she dodged them.

"Janie, stop playing or we will never get done. I have a lot of homework to do. Come on I'll sing with you instead."

"Okay," I said with a grin.

Having finished our daily chore, I picked up my long division homework and headed towards the living room to find Daddy in his red easy chair.

"Daddy, I can't find the mistake."

"It's there," he stated firmly with his reading glasses in his hand and his pipe extending from his mouth.

"Is it in the long division or in its proof?"

"Look. Do it again until its right."

"But I need to practice my piano."

"You can practice piano when you finish your division and they are all correct."

"But where is the mistake?" I whined.

"Go," father said firmly with his German sternness that warned me about any further argument.

I stomped out of the living room to find my sister. Maybe she would help. I clambered up the wood stairs but she wasn't there. Curling up on my bed, I redid the problem for the fourth time finding the mistake in the proof. Then I headed for the basement to practice my piano. Our new piano teacher loved to smack hands if they were not held correctly, or if you looked at the keys, or made a mistake. I hated her. Della Mae was in the basement practicing after obeying Daddy's rule to write every spelling word that she had missed one hundred times. That was good because I didn't want to go down there by myself. Mother told me to stomp my feet on the stairs to scurry any rats, but I was not sure they would hear me. The cellar held many dark places. I knew they might jump out from underneath the stairs as I

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came down. I flew down the stairs and scurried over the dirt floor to my sister.

"I'm not finished."

"Okay."

I parked on the red wooden workbench swinging my feet. Then I spied Mother's hair dryer. It was taller than I was with large wheels on the ends of metal crossbars. My whole head fit into the silver dryer hood. The thick black cord holding the controls dangled next to the dryer. This was larger than both my hands. I switched the black knob but it did not turn on. Mother permed the neighbors' hair and sometimes cut it. She had her beautician license. Thrusting my head into the dryer, I started to sing. Sound reverberated throughout the basement.

"Hey, what are you doing?" my sister asked.

I climbed on the crossbars and gave a push. Across the floor, the hair dryer flew with me attached. Since the basement floor sloped towards the drain next to the wringer washing machine, it stopped me abruptly as I careened into the wringer just missing smashing my fingers. I was always worried that I would get my fingers caught in that wringer when I helped mother with the wash. Slowly, I would feed shirts, jeans, dresses, underwear into the two rollers that would squeeze out the water into the sanitary tub or floor if you were not careful to swing the rollers over the sink and I would catch the stiffened clothes on the other side. Back in the machine's round metal tub with four legs the clothes would go for another rinse with clean water. Mother would put the hose in the machine to fill it. As I peered into the machine, the agitator swished back and forth to clean the clothes. Swish. Swish. Swish. Then through the wringer again. If the clothes were stained, Della Mae had to scrub those clothes on the metal washboard. Next, the basket would be dragged out the cellar door to hang the clothes on

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the wash line. I liked spinning around the clothes pole smelling the wet clothes as they dried in the sun. Some of the wooden one-piece clothespins would break as you jammed them onto the thick waistbands. Their little woodenheads would stay intact, but they would split down the middle. Monday was washday, all day, Tuesday was ironing, Wednesday was cleaning day, Thursday...

"Aghhh! Aghhh!" Della was screaming.

"What's wrong?" I yelled running toward her.

"A rat. A rat. It just ran across my foot."

I stopped midstream to leap upon Daddy's workbench.

"Where'd it go?"

"I don't know. It just ran across my foot. Do you see it?"

Della replied.

"No, it's probably lurking in the corner waiting for one of us to move."

"Daddy. Daddy. Come here quick."

"Oh, Janie. Look. It's our black rabbit. It must have gotten out of the cage and ran across my foot."

I left my perch to chase the black rabbit.

"Girls come on up. A storm is coming."

We dashed. Daddy was already on the front porch. I climbed onto the glider with Della Mae. Lightning flashed.

"One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand," my sister and I counted.

We heard thunder. Lightning again.

"One one thousand, two one thousand."

Thunder boomed.

"It's getting closer, Daddy."

"Yes, the distance between us and the storm is two miles."

Wind blew through the wide opening at the end of the porch. Pine tree branches swayed. The sky turned an ugly

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gray black as lightning forked to the ground. The smell of rain permeated the air. Large drops smacked the slate roof.

"It's coming," I screeched.

"Keep counting, girls."

Rain pelted the porch. I huddled next to Della while the wind whipped my skirt and tore up the sleeves of my blouse.

Finally, Daddy said, "Let's go in."

As we entered the hall, hail pounded the pale blue and green stain glass windows on the side of the house.

"Rain, rain, go away. Come again another day."

7 Rain



The line for the ferry chugged and spewed. Sunbeams ricocheted from windshields. Beach chairs and umbrellas poked out of car windows. Daddy and I strolled to the bay's edge and watched the water lapping at the ferry as she loaded cars for the fifty minute crossing from Sandy Point to Matapeake on Kent Island. The ferry packaged the cars like sardines.

"Look, Janie, they are starting to build a bridge across the bay," said Daddy pointing to the cranes.

"There won't be any more ferries?"

"I am not sure. Do you remember what you saw when I took you on the car ride last Sunday?"

"The figure eight overpass at Route 40, Edmondson Avenue and Hilton Parkway," Della Mae answered smugly as she came to join us.

"That's right, Della Mae."

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"There are more and more cars now so the road commission will be busy building bridges, highways, and even a tunnel under the harbor. President Eisenhower was certainly impressed with the German autobahn and he is trying to duplicate their roads here. Instead of winding roads with traffic lights, there will be large roads with ramps to get from city to city. We will be able to drive faster and get there a lot quicker."

"Daddy, our car is next. Let's hurry." I said, anxiously. "We will be late and left behind. Hurry."

We sprinted to the car. As Daddy started the engine, the man waved us into the ferry's belly. We climbed out of the car and ascended the stairs to the open deck. Hanging over the rail, we watched as the ferry pulled away from the dock into the open waters of the bay. I scanned the horizon looking for the Bay Belle, an excursion boat that was a version of the old bay steamers that would whisk Baltimoreans to the beaches along the Chesapeake such as Betterton and Tolchester. The whole family, including Nanan, Granddaddy, Charles, Aunt Jane, June, Aboo, and John, would pack a picnic hamper for the summer day outing to Tolchester. We would climb to the very top deck and sit on the benches to catch the summer breezes. It would be too hot to be inside on her middle deck even though the large windows were open. We would only go inside if a storm came. On the return journey we might go to the inside deck to listen to the three-piece oompah band playing polkas and fox trots so everyone could dance. Nanan wouldn't dance or even sit in the sun when we got to the beach. We would gorge ourselves with all the goodies in the hamper—fried chicken, ham, German potato salad, vinegar coleslaw, rolls and butter, hard-boiled eggs, and Nanan's delicious circus lemonade which consisted of grape juice, lemonade, and pineapple juice. To top off the meal we ate War Cake, which

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derived its name from the fact that it didn't contain expensive milk, butter, and eggs or Poor Man's Fruit Cake, another wartime recipe. Aboo and Nanan loved to cook. When we arrived at Tolchester we couldn't wait to wade in the water at the beach, ride the amusements, and eat the homemade food at the picnic grounds. I did not ride the fearsome wooden roller coaster. However, storms came quickly over the Bay with their dark, gray, cumulus clouds spilling kegs of rain on our picnic. We were caught in its wrath on one occasion—Della Mae and I, in our drenched sailor hats, scrambled precariously to a perch on top of a picnic table and waited to be rescued from the swirling torrent.

The Bay Belle, with its white gleaming decks and sides, was not to be seen today. Daddy mentioned that with the coming bay bridge people would probably go to the ocean instead of the Chesapeake beaches. We made our way back and piled into our 1949 light green Plymouth and Charles' 1944 blue Oldsmobile for the four hour drive across Kent Island to the Eastern Shore and on to Rehoboth, Delaware. Della Mae and I sat in the backseat with June and Nanan. Granddaddy, Mother, and Daddy were in the front. The other car held Jane, Charles, Aboo, John, the cocker spaniels, and beach stuff. Daddy had rented a house in Dewey Beach, Delaware for two weeks though he would only be with us on weekends.

When we pulled up to the house, a man in a plaid shirt came running towards the car.

"You can't stay here. It only sleeps six. I'll give you your money back. You can't stay here. What are you thinking?" he shouted and waved his hands in the air.

Rain pelted the windshield. Daddy argued with the man that we would all not be staying in the house, but to no avail. He gave Daddy the money back so we had to seek a realtor. Gutters swirled with the pouring rain. Roads flooded. Water

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splashed into the car windows. Rehoboth Avenue churned with knee-high water. My sister and I stayed very quiet in the back seat.

The only house not rented was a tiny place with just two bedrooms and one bathroom

"Where are we going to sleep?" asked Della Mae.

"You girls will be fine on the porch. Look at that nice single daybed. The three of you can sleep sideways and there will be plenty of room. The bedrooms do not have any floor space because of the bureaus and double bed."

"I hope Jane Lee doesn't kick in her sleep," stated June.

I stuck my tongue out at her.

"You little twerp," said June.

The rain stopped as we unpacked so we headed for the beach with Nanán. She had broken her arm at the Alameda by tripping over the sill blocking the front part of the cellar from the back. She had come in from the bright sunshine where she was taking the wash off the clothesline and didn't see it. The bone poked through her skin but she held it in place insisting that she was fine. Nanán told Aboo to get an ace bandage and wrap it while she pushed the bone into place. Aboo insisted on calling an ambulance and she finally agreed to go to the hospital after she changed her drawers and dress. The doctor told her to put her arm in the ocean and sand for therapy. Nanán hated the ocean.

Exhausted from the ride, we fell asleep under the beach umbrella. Meanwhile Nanán sat at the water's edge and let the surf break over her arm. When we woke, the sun had moved and we stared at our red bodies—lobsters, steamed lobsters.

"Well, girls, let's get you home and into a tea bath to relieve the sunburn. We better put cold tea bags on your eyes too," said Nanán.

"It hurts to sit or lie," I whined.

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We spent the vacation playing canasta under the large shade trees in the yard. In the evening, we would walk to the boardwalk to eat Dolly's caramel popcorn and to smell the saltwater taffy being pulled through the machines. I looked for a porcelain dog to buy with my allowance for my collection that grew with every trip that we took. Charles put me on his shoulders because I would tire. We ate steamed crabs. Or I should say the rest of the family ate crabs. Della Mae and I were only allowed to eat the claws. "The best part of the crab," Daddy said. If it were an R-month, a month of the year with the letter "r" in the spelling of its name, we would have eaten raw oysters from burlap bags like we did at home. The oysters were dredged by skipjacks because motor boats were not allowed to dredge for oysters. On the Alameda the men would gather in the basement drinking beer from the Arrow Brewery after eating their fill of oysters from the fish market on Broadway. The girls would be upstairs playing Parcheesi.

"Storms coming. Girls, pick up that blanket and come inside. It's going to be a hum doozie," yelled Nanan.

Hurriedly, we grabbed the blanket. The wind caught the cards playing with them as I gave chase. "Run!" I screamed as thunder rumbled. The air smelled of rain. We ran into the house. But no rain came. Then a loud explosion followed by shrieks. Aboo and Granddaddy were both yelling.

"Lightning came right through that window. I was closing it and the lightning knocked down the chimney of that house across the street and streaked in this window and out the other," cried Aboo. "My arm is red."

"Caught me right in the middle of the porch," exclaimed Granddaddy. "Just look at my hand. It could have been me. Just burned my hand. Lightning touched my hand and burned it."

I sat in the corner, shaking with fright.

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We came to Rehoboth every summer, but that summer remained the most eventful. Daddy was insistent that Mother learn to ride a bike. She preferred the large three-wheeler, but he would not have it.

"Look at this tandem, Dell. It's perfect. I will pedal and balance the bike. All you need to do is follow my instructions, Dell," said Daddy.

Mother didn't look happy at the thought, but she climbed on the tandem and they were off. Mother's blue eyes behind her eyeglasses showed fear. Her round curvy body swayed precariously. She shook her platinum blonde head. They didn't even make it around the corner when Mother fell. Blood streamed from her hands and knees. Daddy shook his head. Nanan ran for the mercurochrome.

One summer we didn't travel with Mother's family, but just the four of us took the long trek North through Maryland and across the Delaware Bay to Wildwood, New Jersey. The Fowlers, our boarders at home, had suggested that we stay with their Aunt May who rented rooms at her boarding house, which was several miles from Wildwood.

"When will we be in Wildwood? Mommy, I feel awful sick."

"Not long. You girls really time things. Last time we came Della Mae had a broken arm from trying to catch the puppies when the hammock broke. And now you are feeling ill."

As our car pulled in the drive, I bolted. Running to the bushes, I threw up my lunch.

"Let me feel your head," said Aunt May. "Oh, she's burning up."

"Mommy, I don't feel well either," cried Della Mae as she ran to the bushes to throw up.

"The sea air will make them feel good," Mother said trying to make the most of the situation. "We'll just bundle

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them up and they can sit under the boardwalk out of the sun. Do you have any paregoric for their upset stomach?"

That was our summer at Wildwood—watching people's shadows, listening to chatter, hearing the squeak of the boardwalk as people passed overhead, and digging our toes in the wet, cold sand. After several days Daddy said that it would not hurt us if we went for one swim in the ocean. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me from under the boardwalk. The sand burned my feet, but I didn't care. I walked proudly to the water, hesitating when I saw the size of the waves.

"When a wave comes, jump. You'll float over the wave."

"When do I jump, Daddy?"

"I'll pull you. I've got your hands. Ready. Jump!"

The wave crested towards us and up we went. I screamed. Daddy laughed.

"Fun, isn't it?"

I nodded agreement as my red eyes dripped salt water.

At that moment, another wave slammed us. I went under instead of over. The force ripped Daddy's hand from mine propelling me into the ocean bottom. As I came up for breath, another wave dragged me under. Legs and arms entangled with mine. Yanked to the surface, spitting out water and sand, I clung to Daddy.

"Well, that was a big one. Ripped you right out of my grip," Daddy chuckled. "Grab my hand. We'll do it again."

Spitting more sand out of my mouth, I plunked down at the edge of the rippling waves. I might have drowned. I don't think this is funny or fun.

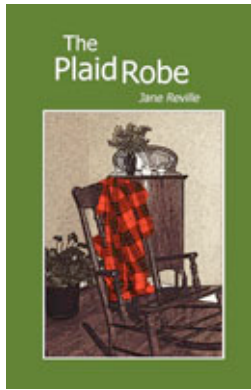
"Come on. Grab my hand. That was just a freak wave."

Fearfully, I clutched my father's hand as we crashed through the breakers. He was adamant as usual. The word "no" and "can't" do not exist. Mother, who could not swim, was calling us.

"Jump!"

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We crested another wave. Daddy regarded me carefully. He was convinced that my fear would abate. I was not. Della Mae's turn was next.



The Plaid Robe is a memoir of a girl who transitions from bliss innocence to austere realism. The upheavals of the sixties merge with her journey from an innocent fifties childhood. Step back for a nostalgic jaunt to air raid drills, summer evenings playing red light, hairnets, stockings with seams, gloomy hospitals and polio. As the tale weaves into her adulthood, see her struggling with God, her marriage, and the complexity of the times.

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