

# ENGLISH



# MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

~Summary~

**-by Zitkala-Sa and Bama**

## The Cutting of My Long Hair

### First Day at School

The writer recalls that her first day in the land of apples was bitterly cold, with snow covering the surroundings. Besides, her first experience at the school, where she was admitted with other Native American boys and girls, was equally unpleasant. The noise made by the breakfast bell crashed into her ears. The clatter of shoes and the constant clash of harsh noises were pretty annoying. Zitkala-Sa longed for freedom, but it was useless to think of it.

### The Embarrassment

A white woman placed them in the line of girls who were marching into the dining room. The narrator noticed that they were Native American girls, who wore closely clinging dresses and stiff shoes. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and had shingled hair. She was feeling very uncomfortable in the school dress. Besides, her blanket had been taken off from her shoulders, making her feel all the more embarrassed. She found other Native girls more immodestly dressed than her, in their tightly fitting clothes. She also saw boys come in from the opposite door. A small bell was tapped and every student pulled out a chair from under the table. The narrator also pulled out a chair and sat down. But she was surprised to find that she was the only one sitting.

Just as she began to rise, a second bell was rung. All sat down and she had to crawl back into her chair again. She heard a man at one end of the hall and he was praying. The other students sat with their heads hung over their plates.

As the narrator was glancing at the surroundings, she caught the eyes of a paleface (white) woman upon her. She wondered why the woman was looking at her so keenly. After the man ceased his mutterings, a third bell was tapped and everybody started eating with a knife and fork. Zitkala-Sa instead started crying. She probably had never eaten using knives and forks. All the new changes were too much for her to take.

### The Terrible Warning

The eating-by-formula was not the end of her woes. Her friend Judewin knew some English, and she had overheard the white woman talk about cutting their long and heavy hair. The thought of having her hair cut was unacceptable to the narrator. Her mother had taught her that only skilled warriors who became prisoners in war had their hair shingled (cut) by the enemy. In their society, short hair was worn by mourners and shingled hair by cowards.

### The Narrator's Protest

Judewin thought that the school people were strong and they would all have to allow their hair to be cut, but Zitkala-Sa was ready to put up a fight. She told her friend that she would struggle first, and not submit willingly before the oppressors.

When she got the chance to escape, she crept upstairs unnoticed. She entered a large room. It was dark, as the curtains were drawn. Zitkala-Sa crawled under the bed farthest from the door. After some time, people started searching for her. She heard Judewin call her name, but she didn't answer.

### The Cutting of Zitkala-Sa's Hair

Finally, the women and girls who were looking for Zitkala-Sa entered the room in which she was hiding. She held her breath while the others searched the room. The next thing she remembered was being dragged out. She was resisting, kicking and scratching wildly. She was carried downstairs and tied to a chair. At last she felt a cold scissor blade against her neck gnaw off one of her thick braids. This was the end of her resistance. She lost her spirit.

She was reminded of all the humiliations she went through since the day she parted with her mother. She was deeply sad and nobody comforted her. She missed her mother and felt like an animal driven by a herder.

### The Entertaining Walk Home

This is the second part of the unit. The narrator takes us back to her childhood when she was a carefree child studying in the third class. The walk from school to home was hardly of 10 minutes. But it would take her half an hour to one hour to cover the distance. The entertaining sights would tie her legs and stop her from going home.

The performing monkey, the snake charmer, the cyclist who kept pedalling for many days, the Maariyaata temple and the pongal offering being cooked outside it were just some of the interesting sights. And then there were other things going on in the market like a political procession, puppet shows and stunt performances. The market was full of seasonal fruits and stalls. The narrator felt spellbound by all the variety.

## Encounter with Untouchability

One day, when the narrator was returning home, she saw a threshing-floor set up on her street. A landlord was watching over the proceedings. The people of her caste were driving the cattle. Just then, she noticed an elder of her street. He was carrying a small packet, holding it with a string. It contained some vadai and the packet had become wet. The narrator thought to herself that the packet might come undone, but still the elder was not touching it. The way he walked made Bama shriek with laughter. The elder crouched while handing over the packet to the landlord.

## Laughter Turns to Sadness

The narrator returned home and told her elder brother Annan about the incident. She was laughing uncontrollably, but Annan didn't seem to be amused. Annan told her that the elder and they were considered low caste. The landlord belonged to the upper caste. The upper caste people thought that if low caste people touched them or anything that belonged to them, they or it would be polluted'. That's why the elder was carrying the packet by its string. After hearing this, the narrator didn't want to laugh anymore. She felt infuriated and provoked. She wondered how these fellows thought so much of themselves. She felt compelled to touch the wretched vadais herself.

## Annan's Advice

Annan told Bama that because they were born into a low caste community, they were never given any honour or dignity or respect. He advised her to study hard and learn all that she could, because only education could help them throw off all the indignities.

These words made a deep impression on Bama. She studied hard. As Annan had urged, she stood first in her class and because of that, many people became her friends.