



No Journey Back to Prison

A voice in his mind reminded him that it's not over until it's over--until the final chapter has been written. The other voice told him to prepare for the journey back to prison. The hands of the clock in his small room appeared to wave goodbye to the hope he had fought so hard to keep for a future in the free world.

The social worker had begun to encourage him shortly after his case was assigned to her. She had done everything in her power to help him find employment so that he would not have to make the journey back to prison. Now, it was up to a higher power. He had heard of the miraculous true stories of others who were the recipients of the salvation of God. But, that morning he had opened his eyes to the day on which the trip back to prison was scheduled. It was all over--or was it? Read this true story of the intervention of God for salvation.

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As Seth filed off the big, gray bus along with the others arriving in Waterloo, Iowa at the Mohawk Half-way House for Men, he thought, This is it. I'm not going back. Waterloo is going to be the place where I get my new start.

Seth was tall--six-foot, three inches. He had celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday in prison a few months earlier.

Seth had been raised in Dubuque, Iowa. That's where all of his school chums and running buddies lived. His Burt Reynolds looks had brought him much attention from the ladies--young and old. It was also the place where he, along with some of his buddies had started his life of crime.

When he was a teenager, doing time in the detention center had been a breeze. After a few chores and group counseling he and the other residents could hang out shooting pool and hoops. But the past four years spent cooped up in a tiny cell for close to twenty hours a day, or watching his back when on the yard, had been a living nightmare. Well, no more! He was staying out of prison if he had to mop floors or flip burgers.

Six weeks wasn't very long for a stranger in town to find a job--especially a guy with a prison record. Three weeks passed with no job offers. Seth lit a cigarette and began pacing back and forth. "I'm gonna end up going back to the joint," he said aloud. Help me God to turn my life around, he prayed silently. "How's a man supposed to change when no one will give him a chance?" he mumbled.

"Hey, how's it goin'?" Seth's roommate, Warren Jenkins was home from work. Warren was a happy-go-lucky, twenty-two year old from Waterloo. He had returned there from prison because with acquaintances who could give him a job--at least on paper, he didn't have to worry about going back to prison.

"Man it's rough. My stomach is in knots. I don't want to go back to the joint." Seth was shaking his head from side to side as he spoke through clenched teeth.

"Hey, what happened to all that confidence you had when you first got here? Cool it man! Somethin' 'ill turn up." Warren paused for a moment. "Matter a fact..." Warren snapped his fingers as he recalled information he thought would be helpful to his roommate. "There's a place called TECA. Ah-ah-ah, it stands for Training..." He paused. "I forgot. Anyway, it's up on East Fourth Street. I hear there's a lady there who really tries to help us guys."

Seth had stopped pacing. "Have you been there?" he asked looking intently at Warren.

"Naa-aa, they got two days a week they call "walk-in days". But I forgot what two

days. All the other days you gotta' have an appointment.

"Man, why haven't you been over there! I'm callin' right now and find out if I can walk in tomorrow." Seth left the room to go to the front desk to use the phone. When the call ended, he had an appointment for nine o'clock the following morning with a Manpower Specialist, Lucille Walters. A surge of hope rushed through Seth. "Please, God. Let there be something to this Program," he whispered.

Seth arrived for his appointment at eight-thirty. Cathy, the receptionist buzzed Lucille to inform her that her nine o'clock appointment had arrived.

"He can wait," came the reply. Lucille Walters was a tall, attractive, forty-two year old divorcee. She was raising an eleven-year old daughter named, Danielle whom Lucille adored.

Lucille rose from her desk and strolled through the Reception area to get a look at this "Mr. Seth". Was he dressed for an interview? He was early--that was a good sign. Lucille returned to her desk, buzzed the receptionist and asked her to send in her 9:00 o'clock appointment.

Seth, wearing a gray polo shirt with a black waist length summer jacket and neatly pressed jeans entered her office looking for all the world like he was scared out of his wit. He carried his paperwork directly in front of him, holding its edges with both hands as though it were something fragile. His hazel eyes spotted Lucille. A surprised look came over his face. Oh, she's a black lady, he thought.

"Please have a seat Mr. Myerson," Lucille said gesturing to the chair directly at the side of her desk. She remembered the day she had rearranged her office because of Mr. Calvin Lovelace.

"...alright, I need to take a work history prior to your incarceration." Calvin

Lovelace was squirming. He'd turn his back to Lucille to watch the doorway, then turn back, partially facing her to answer the question.

"Mr. Lovelace. Is there a problem?" Lucille finally asked as she impatiently placed her pen on her desk and rested her hands--fingers intertwined on the desk pad in front of her. She was waiting!

"This may sound kinda' stupid," Calvin Lovelace began. "But people who have been in the joint won't sit with their backs to a door. You see, in there you've got to WATCH your back all the time."

Lucille eyed him a few seconds, questioning the validity of his statement. She then rose suddenly. "Will you help me turn my desk around?" she asked.

Caught off guard, Calvin mumbled, "Ah-ah-ah, yeah."

With the client's chair now at the side of her desk, Mr. Lovelace and all the other half-way house residents could be more relaxed. While moving her desk, Lucille thought of her oldest son, Timothy, who had done time at the Fort Mason Maximum Security Prison--the same prison the guys she was now interviewing everyday were from. Wherever Timothy was she hoped someone would give him the same consideration.

Fear of someone doing you harm was an awful feeling. The beatings she endured while married to Timothy's father, Robert had left her afraid to speak her mind, leave her home, or even try to have one friend. It seemed anything she did resulted in a beating. Well, that was a long time ago. And it would never happen again because she'd never marry again. Never!

Mr. Calvin Lovelace was now comfortably seated at the side of her desk with his back to a wall.

"I'm sorry to be such a bother, you know, the desk and all..."

"No problem." Lucille smiled at her client.

Most of the men at the half-way house, including Seth had learned of the rearrangement of Lucille's office. Most appreciated it. However, none commented directly to her except Seth. He sat down, shifted his weight and cleared his throat while Lucille read through his paperwork. She looked up from the pages and said, "Well, let's see if we can't get you workin'."

"Sounds good to me." Seth grinned nervously. "By the way..." He paused. "Thanks for..." Seth made hand, eye, and head gestures indicating the room rearrangement.

Lucille smiled. "No problem. I see that you mostly did construction work before your incarceration. Are you interested in returning to that at all?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I like it because I like the physical labor, it pays good, and you get to take winters off and draw unemployment. During the winter is a time when you can work on some of your own ideas. You know, things like hobbies that you know you can turn into a job if only you had the time."

"I know," Lucille responded thinking of all the half completed short stories she'd written, and hoped to get published someday.

"I'm gonna' make a quick call to the owner of a construction firm to see if he needs any help," Lucille explained as she thumbed through her Rolodex. She

lifted the phone receiver and began to punch out the numbers. After a short pause, she spoke into the receiver. "Hi Evaline. How are you?"

I wonder if she looked at my arrival and departure dates, Seth thought as he grew more nervous by the minute. It would be disastrous for him to get so close to freedom and then be sent back to prison.

"...so he's not there? Lucille responded to Evaline. "Will you please have him call me as soon as possible. I'll be here 'til four-thirty this afternoon. Thanks. Bye." Lucille hung up the phone and looked at Seth. "I've known Mr. Ducalski since I was a kid. If he can help us out, he will. I'll keep callin' and we'll get you something."

"Well." Seth sighed shifting in his seat. "I go back in a couple of weeks." His stomach was in knots again. Big black Al will still be there. Seth thought. I just can't go back to that place! Seth couldn't understand how people could live their lives in and out of prison. Once was enough for him. He was learning that life after one gets out of prison was like always being between a rock and a hard place.

Seth looked into Lucille's eyes. "I really want a job. Not just to stay out of prison--although I would hate it if I had to go back." He chuckled nervously. "I'm tired of this life I've been livin'. I know you must hear that a lot, and I don't know how I can convince you that I really mean it." He shrugged his shoulders. There was a brief silence. Lucille believed him. Nevertheless, he would get her test.

"Well, Mr. Seth, when you get your job... And you will get one before you have to climb on that bus back to Fort Mason, just remember it was God giving you another chance." She was looking into his eyes. "If you're sincere, I will do everything in my power to see to it that you stay out of prison.

Seth believed her.

Lucille took a slip of paper from the holder on her desk and began to write. When she was finished she handed it to Seth. "Be there at 7:30 tomorrow morning. This agency has access to job information that's not available to us here at TECA. Mitch, the guy who runs the program is a friend of mine. He'll help anyone I send to him. You have to get there at 7:30 in the morning though."

Seth folded the paper and stuck it in his inside pocket as he rose to leave.

Lucille stood up to escort him to the door.

"I'll be there," he said shaking her hand.

When he left, Lucille wondered what Seth's reaction would be after he'd taken two buses to keep the appointment and learned in less than five minutes that there was no job referral. What would he say? What would he think? How would he react towards her the next time they met? Would he lose it? Would he give up? If he passed the test she'd see to it that he didn't return on that bus.

It was 10:30 the following morning when he called.

"Lucille?"

"Oh, good morning Seth," Lucille greeted cheerfully.

"That guy you sent me to see said he didn't have anything." Seth's voice was calm. "Man, I was there only a few minutes after taking two buses across town.

It was very disappointing."

Lucille was listening for any sound of anger. But it wasn't there. Disappointment, a little desperation maybe, but not anger. She knew it! He was making a genuine

effort to stay out and turn his life around. She'd see to it that he was given that chance.

A chance that just might come through sooner than either of them thought. Seth had no idea that Lucille had spoken with Mr. Ducalski earlier that morning. The contractor had informed her that he would hire Seth in a few weeks if he got the government contract for which he had bid. She said a prayer for Seth that he would hold on.

"I have a couple of newspaper possibilities I'm gonna' check on. Is there anything more you'd like me to do today? Seth asked.

"No, but I would like to see you prepare a resume'. I'll help you with it if you like. I'd like to get it started sometime during the next couple of days."

"A resume'?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you more when I see you again. Why don't you come in Monday afternoon at 1:00 pm. And we'll get started."

"I don't think I really have anything to put on a resume' Lucille," Seth responded.

"Believe me, from looking at your work history, yes you do. I'll see you on Monday. Okay?"

During the following week Lucille kept Seth busy so he wouldn't get discouraged. She had him read the true story of a P.O.W., who kept courage and belief that he would return home someday. They worked on the resume' and Lucille set up the VCR in the visitor's room so Seth could watch some of her favorite videos--all dramas of underdogs overcoming the odds. Lucille had a few

such stories of her own.

The day before Seth was to be returned to Fort Mason Prison he stopped by to say good-bye and to thank Lucille.

"I know you really tried. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be this time," Seth said sadly.

"Please don't give up Seth. I haven't. Mr. Ducalski is going to get that city contract and hire you."

In her spirit she knew Seth wasn't going back. It didn't matter that tomorrow was the return date. God was going to intervene in this man's life. God was going to honor the prayers she had said for Seth. He was going to honor the sincerity of Seth's heart. Seth grinned and walked out of her office. It was 1:15 pm.

"Stay near the phone," Lucille called out to him rising from her seat and leaning over her desk to throw her voice.

At 3:30 pm. Lucille's phone rang. It was Mr. Ducalski. She knew it was him before she lifted the receiver.

"This is Lucille," she answered. She then held her breath.

"You know that fella' you been buggin' me about?" Mr. Ducalski was shouting to be heard above the equipment noise in the background. "Can you get a hold of him right away?"

"I sure can," Lucille responded, tears welling in her eyes.

"Get a hold of him and tell him to get downtown to the corner of Sycamore and East Fourth as fast as he can. Two guys just walked on me!"

"He'll be there in a few minutes." Her fingers were trembling as she punched out the numbers to the half-way house.

"Hello!" She screamed into the receiver. "Get Seth to the phone." The wait seemed unending. The resident counselor went to inform Seth that it sounded like that woman he'd been workin' with over at that program, although he couldn't be sure because she had literally screamed into the receiver. The resident counselor let his voice rise to a mimicking scream, "GET SETH TO THE PHONE!"

"Hello?"

"Seth! Seth! Mr. Ducalski just called. He wants you to get downtown to the corner of East Fourth and Sycamore as fast as you can!" Get a hold of yourself, girl, she counseled herself.

"I know how to get there," Seth responded excitedly. "And I'm on my way." The phone went dead.

"Thank you God. Thank you," Lucille breathed wiping the tears away.

Seth didn't see Lucille for the next few weeks. He was never at the half-way

house when she called.

Then unannounced, he stopped in one day to see her. It had been five weeks. When she looked up to see him standing in the doorway, a big grin spread over both their faces.

"Come on in," she motioned. "How've you been?"

"I've been just great. How about yourself?" he asked, still smiling.

"Good. Good." Lucille stood up and came from behind her desk to meet him.

"Well," Seth began. "I came by to tell you that I'm leaving Waterloo." He was still smiling. The smile faded from Lucille's face. Seth put his hands up, palms toward her to gesture that things were all right despite his leaving. She was waiting for his explanation.

"I have some great news. I've accepted a position as foreman of a new construction company in Mason City. I start next week. Don't worry though, I helped Mr. Ducalski finish up his contract. You had left the office by the time I got in every night so I couldn't return your phone calls. For a long time there, we were workin' twelve hour days.

Lucille's smile returned along with the tears.

"I'll never be able to thank you," Seth said turning towards the door so she couldn't see the tears forming in his own eyes.

Lucille walked around to face him, and gave in to her urge to give him a hug.

They said their good-byes and Seth walked out. Lucille said a prayer for the day that the lives of all her clients would turn out so well.



Child Without a Mother, Mother Without a Child

He was a baby without a mother, and without the capacity to understand that mom had departed not only his world, but this world. Where was that loving face he had seen? Why did he no longer hear the soft, soothing voice that used to sing him to sleep? And, where was that familiar scent that they say very young babies detect in the presence of their mother?

Perhaps all of these questions were boggling his mind as his arms and legs waved in the air as though they were synchronized with his wales. The little girl who was forced to care for his needs stood over him, looking down in disgust. He was a child without a mother, but all she knew is that someone had obligated her to act as a mother though she was still a young child herself.

This is one of many true stories that explore the questions and issues surrounding the problem of adult responsibilities being placed on young children, especially in the case of the immature giving care to the immature. A young child without a mother is sad, but a young child obligated to act as mother is also sad.

Twelve-year-old, Colleena didn't mean to eavesdrop on her mother, Sadie's conversation with Brother Gilbert. But it seemed ever since his wife had died in childbirth the year before, he always needed something whenever he came around. And most of the time, whatever he needed somehow meant work for Colleena even though Sadie was the one making the promise to help out Brother Gilbert. What did he need this time? Colleena stood at the foot of the

stairs listening.

She heard Brother Gilbert say, "The new babysitter is just not working out." I pick the kids up after work and the baby is always soaking wet. And Katrina always has some sort of bruise. I'm not saying that the babysitter is abusing my daughter. Maybe the bruises are from the other kids playing too rough with her. Anyway, with Katrina being only three years old, I don't trust that she can really tell me what goes on all day while she and her brother are at Ms Anderson's. "

"Well, like I told you before," Colleena heard Sadie respond, "It's our Christian duty to help one another out. Bring the kids to my house every morning until you can work something out for their care."

Colleena brought a hand to her mouth to muffle the gasp that was about to escape. She knew all too well what her mother's offer meant for her. No more coming in from school and going right back out to meet up with her best friend to play. No more doing homework without constant interruptions to fix a bottle or change a diaper or soothe a crying baby.

"I am so sick of this," Colleena whispered to herself. This was the year that her own youngest sibling, Lena turned four. Lena could now go to the bathroom by herself. She could pick up her own toys and she had finally stopped following Colleena around and begging to be picked up all of the time. With five younger siblings, there had been times Colleena felt she'd never be free of fixing a baby's bottle, or a snack. It seemed the time would never come when she didn't have to wipe messy faces and butts or break up a fight. But that time had finally come. And now, here was Brother Gilbert bringing his one-year old son, Joshua and his three-year old daughter, Katrina to take away her new found freedom.

Colleena grit her teeth. "I won't do it," she whispered. I just ain't gonna' do it, she thought with a scowl while shaking her head from side to side.

As Brother Gilbert left, Colleena heard him say, "I'll be here around six-thirty in the morning. See you then."

Everyday after school Colleena made her way home to a wailing baby. By the end of the week, she arrived home swamped with homework for the weekend and the first words she heard from her mother were, "Get the baby. See if he's wet and fix a bottle for him."

Colleena, without answering went straight to the living-room sofa where little Joshua was kicking and wailing up a storm. Filled with rage, she stood over the baby looking down at him. Suddenly, it was as though she lost control. Colleena dropped her books, grabbed Joshua and began shaking him.

"What is the matter with you cryin' all the time!" she yelled. "Stop it. Shut-up, you little brat!"

By the time Sadie realized what was happening and arrived on the scene, Colleena had regained control of herself. Sadie took Joshua and soothed him until he stopped crying.

"You won't have to take care of him anymore," she said to her daughter whose behavior had taken her by surprise. For the many years that Colleena had helped to care for her siblings Sadie had never seen her daughter display such a fit of temper.

"Brother Gilbert and Sister Smith got engaged and she'll be taking care of the kids from now on," Sadie continued as she left the room.

Remorseful, Colleena whispered, "Please forgive me little baby, Joshua."

As she headed for her room Colleena pondered if she dared tell what she knew about Sister Smith--what she had seen with her own eyes even. She tried to get focused on her homework. But the question of what would happen to Brother Gilbert's kids if they were left alone with their new step-mother kept nagging Colleena.

Finally, unable to get any real homework done, Colleena rose from her bed and went to her mother.

"Momma." Colleena then sighed and dropped her head as Sadie turned to face her.

"What is it Colleena?" Sadie whispered. She was seated on the sofa with sleeping baby Joshua beside her.

"I don't think Sister Smith likes Brother Gilbert's kids 'cause...'cause..."

"Cause what, Colleena?" Sadie's tone told Colleena that her mother was not very happy with her at that moment.

"Cause I saw her slap Katrina and make her cry. She knows I saw her. She picked Katrina up and tried to hush her up but she knows I know why Katrina was crying."

Sadie eased herself up from the couch trying not to disturb the baby and beckoned for Colleena to follow her to the kitchen.

"When did this happen, Colleena?"

" It was while we were at church one Sunday. Sunday School had just dismissed and everybody was standing around talking, waiting for church to start. Katrina told Sister Smith that she had to go to the bathroom so Sister Smith took her by the hand and started walking with her to the bathroom. Then I thought to myself, I better go too. I didn't want to wait 'til church started and then have to squeeze by people. When I got in the bathroom I saw Sister Smith slap Katrina and she started crying."

"What did you do then? Sadie interrupted.

"Well, Katrina turned to come to me but Sister Smith grabbed her up and started being nice to her. Katrina kept crying and reaching her hand out to me. Sister Smith told me to just go on to the bathroom because she would take care of Katrina. So, I did. When I came out Sister Smith and Katrina had left and church service had started. After church was over and every Sunday after that Katrina didn't want nothin' to do with Sister Smith. She would cry every time Brother Gilbert told her to go to Sister Smith. But he made her go anyway."

"Why didn't you tell me or Brother Gilbert what you had seen?"

"I tried to tell Brother Gilbert. Well, I didn't tell him that Sister Smith had slapped Katrina. But I told him that I knew why Katrina was scared of Sister Smith but he never asked me why. He just looked at me and said that Katrina would get used to Sister Smith and stop being afraid of her."

Sadie looked away into space. "I gotta' tell him. Even though I didn't see it with my own eyes and even though he might break off the engagement, I know you wouldn't lie. I'm gonna' call Brother Gilbert over here and I want you to tell him what you told me. Okay?"

"Okay, mamma."

"I don't believe her," Brother Gilbert said after hearing the story. "I just don't believe Sister Smith, a good Christian woman would do such a thing to a little girl who has lost her mother."

Good Christian woman my eye. More like Sister Smith, the she devil, Colleena thought.

"So, you're saying that Colleena is lying!" Sadie responded.

"Yeah. I don't know why, but she is." Brother Gilbert then cast a scornful eye at Colleena as he headed for the door.

"Well, we tried," Sadie said after he was gone.

That was not the end of it for Colleena. She'd find a way to prove to Brother Gilbert that he would be making a mistake if he married Sister Smith. She didn't know if Brother Gilbert would share with Sister Smith what had been said or not but somehow she had to convince Brother Gilbert that Sister Smith was not what she appeared to be.

One week after the confrontation with Brother Gilbert, a package arrived for Colleena. She hoped it would get her the proof she needed to convince Brother Gilbert not to marry Sister Smith. She tore into the box pulling out a cosmetic catalog, order forms and sample products of perfume, hair oils and make-up.

"Momma! My sales kit from the Vorlean Cosmetic Company came. Can I get started today?" Colleena picked up the opened box and carried it as she called out to where her mother was seated at the dining room table.

"Let's see what you got there," Sadie said smiling as she pulled the sample products from the box and examined them. She read the label on one of the jars, looked up at Colleena and said, "Well, if this hair grease will do what it promises, I'll be your first customer. Ummm, smell that." Sadie waved the jar under her daughter's nose. "Oh, that smells so good."

Colleena smiled. "I know Ma. Can I get started now?"

"Yeah, go ahead. But don't stay out too long."

Colleena headed straight for Sister Smith's house. She knew Brother Gilbert's kids would be there. She didn't want to think about how many times Sister Smith may have smacked Katrina. And what might she have done to baby Joshua. Colleena recalled the day she had shaken the baby and remorse set in again. If I ever get the chance to take care of you again little Josh, I promise never to be mean to you again, she thought just before ringing the doorbell.

Sister Carolyn Smith came to the door, pulled the curtain back and peeked out. Her face reflected the surprise at seeing Colleena standing there.

"Yeah. What is it Colleena?"

Colleena put on her happiest face as she dug around in her bag for one of the samples of perfume. "Well, I'm selling some cosmetics trying to raise my own money to go to summer camp. They don't cost a lot. Can I come in and show you?"

Colleena could see Katrina standing behind Sister Smith looking sad. Once inside she sat her bag on the floor, handed the perfume to Sister Smith and told her to spray some on her hand. "My mamma really likes it. Don't it smell good?"

While Sister Smith fiddled with the perfume top, Colleena eased toward Katrina, talking to her, bending at the waist and reaching out to her.

"Hi, Katrina."

The child backed away tripped, fell and started to cry. Sister Smith promptly dropped the perfume bottle, turned, bent over and slapped Katrina. As soon as the flash of Colleena's camera went off, Carolyn Smith realized she had been tricked. Colleena, bag already on her shoulder turned and ran out the door.

Sadie made the call to Brother Gilbert. And though reluctant, he came right over. The very next day Colleena heard those familiar words, "Get the baby, Colleena, and..."

"I know! And see if he's wet and fix his bottle."

Colleena lifted the crying baby, brought his chin to rest on her shoulder and began pacing and humming to him. She didn't know what the future held for this tiny, motherless child. But she realized that not many people get second chances as she had and for that she was grateful to God



Naughty Little Girl: My Step Daughter

"Daddy said, Buddy and Trina betta' not let nobody beat me up!"

Nine-year-old Angie shouted at her step-mother. The thirty-year-old Margaret squinted her brown eyes, bent at the waist, and moved toward her step-daughter with a finger pointed. "Believe me little girl,there's comin' a day when Buddy and Trina won't be around to save your behind..."

"It ain't gonna' happen!" Angie interrupted shaking her head and thrusting her mouth forward into her stepmother's face. "Daddy said if they don't protect me, he'll give them a whoopin'--so there!" The little girl's head moved ever so slightly from side to side in an effort to drive home the truth and finality of her words. Angie propped a fist on her hip, pursed her lips, and glared at Margaret.

Margaret straightened herself and stared down at Angie shaking her head. "Mark my words, the day is coming when it will be pay back time for you." Neither Margaret nor Angie had any idea just how soon those words would come true.

The note from Logan Elementary School informing of Angie's failing grades came exactly one week after the confrontation with her step-mother. The parent's conference to discuss what needed to be done about Angie's education was scheduled. Both Margaret and Angie's dad, Joseph attended. It was decided that Angie was to be transferred to the school across town where she

would be placed in Special Education classes for the remainder of the school year.

Joseph delivered the news to Angie. She was devastated. Who would protect her now?

Angie had been at her new school less than a week when she approached her stepmother one day and shouted. "You the one got me sent to that school." She folded her arms across her chest as she stared angrily at Margaret.

Margaret, who was washing dishes, turned slowly around to face Angie. "No, my dear, you are the one who got yourself into this mess. If you'd spent more time doing your homework and less time being mean and nasty to your schoolmates, maybe this wouldn't have happened." She then turned back to the sink to finish the dishes while Angie stomped out of the kitchen.

A few weeks after Angie's transfer to the new school, she, along with the rest of the family: Margaret and her three kids; twelve-year-old Lester, fourteen-year-old Thad, and five-year-old Nessa; joined by Angie's own siblings; her nine-year-old twin brother, Buddy; eleven-year-old Trina as well as their father, Joseph were all gathered around the television when Joseph called to Angie to go to bed. It was only 7:00 PM.

"But...," came the protest.

"But nothing!" Joseph interrupted Angie. "Go to bed now! You know you have to be on the bus at 5:45 in the morning. Nobody's gonna' fight with you to get up 'cause you stayed up late."

Angie pouted and rose from the floor, turned and glared at her step-mother before marching off to bed. By 5:00 AM the next morning Joseph was pulling

away from the house on his way to work and the alarm was going off for Angie. Margaret lay listening for Angie to get up. When she didn't hear footsteps, Margaret threw the covers back and went to get her step-daughter up. Angie was sound asleep.

Margaret shook her awake. "Time to get up, Angie."

The nine-year-old moaned and rolled over pulling the covers over her head. Margaret pulled the covers off of her and demanded that she get up. Angie stumbled to the bathroom where she brushed her teeth and wiped her face with a soapless washcloth. She then came to the kitchen where Margaret waited with a bowl of hot cereal. Standing at the table staring down at the bowl, Angie burst into tears.

"What's the matter with you, Angie?" Margaret asked as she approached the child.

"I can't go back to that school." Angie sobbed. "I hate it and the kids hate me."

"Why would the kids hate you, Angie? Did you go to the new school being mean to everyone?"

"No, I tried hard to be nice. They just don't like me." She continued to cry.

"What are they doing to you?"

"There's a boy on the bus that keeps hitting me in the back of my head with his ruler and none of the girls will let me play tether ball. "They all tell me to, " 'get

outa' here.' "

"I'll go out to the bus with you and make sure the driver talks to the boy. But I don't know what I can do about the girls not playing with you."

"Ma?"

Margaret gasped. It was the first time Angie had called her Ma. And it was the first time Margaret had felt any tenderness toward the little girl who had made her life miserable.

"Yeah, what is it?" Margaret answered.

"You think if we pray the kids will be nice to me?" Angie had stopped crying. She was looking intently into her step-mother's eyes.

Margaret smiled and nodded as she reached for the child's hands. "I won't talk to God for you. It has to come from your heart and...."

"I know, I know. I have to ask for forgiveness first for the mean things I did to the other kids."

There was a pause as Angie reflected back on her behavior with the kids at her old school. What had made her do those mean and nasty things?

Since Margaret had come to live with them, her step-mother had demanded that everyone go to Sunday School. There had been much protest from Joseph's children at first. Eventually, they all came home talking about characters of the

Bible. Especially vivid in Angie's memory was the story of Joseph and his brothers. Margaret had even bought a video of Joseph in an attempt to drive home the lessons to be learned from being mean spirited and jealous as Joseph's brothers had been. Angie remembered that in the end, it was Joseph who came out the winner.

"Ma." Angie dropped her head in deep thought. "Sometimes I hate all the kids who have their real momma. I can't help it. I know it's wrong, but I can't help it." Angie shook her head as she tried to swallow the lump rising in her throat. She looked up at Margaret in anguish. "I just want my momma to come back."

Margaret heard the school bus horn signaling it was time for Angie to go. "Wait here," she said to her step-daughter. Margaret walked to the bus. When the driver opened the door, she said, "Angie won't be going to school today. But I'm wondering do I report it to you or someone at the school that there is a boy on this bus who, according to Angie, is hitting her from behind with his ruler." Margaret scanned the children on the bus and spoke loudly enough for the young man, whoever he was, to hear her words.

"Ma'am. I can handle the situation. Do you know the name of the boy?"

"No. But I can ask my daughter."

"I don't think that will be necessary." The driver turned to face his passengers as he raised his voice. "These are all good kids and if there were someone who has been hitting Angie I'm sure IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN!" He turned back to Margaret, she smiled and prayed that would be the end of it. She stepped backwards off the bus and waved goodbye.

Back in the house Margaret approached Angie, took her hand and led her to the table where they sat down. "Angie, I want you to listen to what I'm going to tell you, okay?" Angie nodded her agreement.

"Life is not perfect for anybody. I know you are a child and there are a lot of things about life that you don't understand but now is the time to start learning. It begins with not being selfish. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah," Angie answered. "It means not thinking about what you want all the time."

"That's basically right," Margaret answered bobbing her head. "But sometimes it goes further than that. It means you look at other people and even though they don't go around telling everybody about their troubles you know they have things in their lives that they don't like and can do nothing about. This is true of everybody. So, knowing that, you treat people with kindness. Did you ever stop to think about your step brothers and sister who don't have their dad?" Margaret didn't wait for Angie to answer. She answered the question for her. "No, you thought only of your own pain. Did you think just because they don't talk about their dad that they don't miss and want him in their lives even though they can share your dad?"

Angie realized just how selfish she had been. And then it occurred to her that though she had been mean to kids at her school, other kids had been mean to her that she had never done anything to. "So are we supposed to be kind to kids, I mean people who are mean to us when we didn't do anything to them?" she asked.

"As much as you can change the situation, Angie, you do that. But I'm not telling you to put up with letting people be mean to you. Like the boy on the bus. If you could have moved to another seat, then you should have. If not you should have told me, your dad, or the bus driver. You didn't do that because you knew that you had been mean to other kids and you had learned in Sunday School that people reap what they sow. Don't let anybody tell you any different or that it doesn't happen to kids. Yes it does!"

Angie didn't understand it but she felt so much better inside. She looked at her step-mother with a determination to try really hard to be a good step-daughter and step-sibling. She wished she could come back to her old school and that the kids she had been mean to would give her another chance. She said as much to her step-mother.

Margaret reached over and stroked Angie's hair as she spoke. "Angie, you know you won't have to stay at the new school always. As soon as your grades improve you can come back to your home school. And when that day comes, I'll give a neighborhood party so you can have a new start with the neighbor kids."

They heard the other kids stirring, getting up for school. Margaret stood and told Angie to get ready for school because she'd drive her so Angie could stay on track with improving her grades and return to her neighborhood school.

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