

FICTION

JESS BOND

Letter to Carol from Mrs. James

YOU HAD THE OLDEST, saddest ten-year-old face I had ever seen in my twenty years in an elementary classroom. You stood there that late October morning, shy, a tall, bony, sadsack child. Your eyes were too big in your face and your faded cotton dress gave off a sour, unwashed smell.

The principal beckoned me to join him in the hall. I could see that he was making an effort to sound cheerful. "Mrs. James, this is Carol."

I smiled at you and gave you my welcoming speech. "Welcome to our grade five classroom, Carol. I'm glad you're going to be with us. Come on in and meet the class."

Your anxious face didn't change a flicker.

I glanced down at the admission sheet Mr. Barton had given me. The information didn't surprise me. Your family moved around a lot. You had already attended a dozen schools, so the pain of meeting another group of kids and a new teacher was not a new experience for you.

Your new address was one of those run-down streets south of the school. Neglected, shabby houses, most tenants on welfare.

Our school missed inner-city status because half of the children lived north of the school in neat bungalows with neat gardens and working-class parents.

I felt you flinch as I gently put my hands on your shoulders and introduced you to the class. Not many welcoming faces. Children are often cruel in their indifference.

I assigned Nancy to take you on a tour of the school, to show you where we stored things, to be your class buddy until you got used to things. I knew Nancy wouldn't let me down. She was a kind, peaceful child, and would be your buffer in a strange, new place.

I also wasn't surprised to find out during that first week with us that you were reading three years below grade level. Your handwriting was pinched and illegible, your spelling and arithmetic skills non-existent.

It was your third week with us that you made your first morning visit. Being a morning person, I did planning and board work between eight and nine.

The class knew this was my quiet time. It was obvious you didn't know this when you poked your head in the room and asked me if you could help me.

"How did you get in, Carol? Weren't the outside doors locked?"

You looked as if you might cry.

"It's alright. Come on in. There's some paper cutting you can do for me."

So it began. Each morning, while your classmates were still at home, you would arrive offering to help me. If I didn't have a job for you to do, I made one up.

I sensed that you had little to eat, so I kept a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter in the back cupboard. The first time I told you to help yourself, you said, "No, thank you, Mrs. James." Hunger won out. You began to make your morning sandwich slowly and carefully and ate it just as slowly and carefully.

Gradually I added a small carton of milk and an orange. You would spread out a paper towel, arrange your breakfast to one side of your desk, and eat in small, slow bites as you concentrated on the work I gave you.

By then I had added some writing and math drills during our morning time together.

You began to have short bursts of confidence and started to tell me things. The first thing you told me was that you prayed every night that your father wouldn't move your family again. You said, "I like it here a lot, and my work is getting better, isn't it Mrs. James? I'm starting to make friends. This class is like a family to me."

Later, you told me that you planned to stay in school. "Not like my sister," you said. "She dropped out in grade eight. She's a prostitute, you know." You said that in the same tone you would say, "She's a store clerk."

You confided, "I'm not anything like her. I'm going to finish school and get a good job. And I'm going to have my own apartment."

You were so serious. And so needy.

There was a big change in your appearance. My friend, and our Home Economics teacher, Helen Blake, found some nice skirts and sweaters for you to wear. She taught you how to wash and iron your own clothes, and she bought you shampoo and conditioners. I think you became as attached to her as you were to me.

You had been with us four months when we began the unit on the Middle Ages. You had made good gains in your academic work but you still wouldn't take part in class discussions. You never offered to answer a question.

I had chosen *The Secret Door*, a wonderful book set in England in the Middle Ages, for our read-aloud time.

It was no surprise when halfway through the book the class asked if we could make up a play. Drama was a special interest of mine and I encouraged the class to write and perform their own plays.

My response was, "Sure, let's do it." The planning began.

A week later every chalk-board surface in the room was covered with the first draft of our play. It was full of court jesters, brave knights, a beautiful princess, and an ugly, evil dragon.

The committees were formed. Script, casting, props, and costumes. I loved observing as the class sorted out their individual strengths and talents.

A few Friday afternoons later we had the committee reports. Nancy's casting committee was the last to report. She passed out copies of the list of characters and the class members chosen to play the parts.

I'm sure you and I were the two most surprised people in the room when we read that you had been chosen to play Princess Anne. I can still see the look of astonishment on your face.

"Carol has long, blonde hair and she's very pretty," Nancy said. She looked directly at you. "There aren't many lines to memorize, Carol. Will you do it?"

You looked around the room shyly, then nodded your head. I thought how pleased Helen Blake would be. I knew her first reaction would be to begin planning your costume.

The next few weeks were a rush of rehearsals, finding props, making costumes. You worked very hard on your lines.

The rest of the school and the parents were our audience. The play was wonderful and so were the performances. The audience clapped and clapped and you all had to take a second curtain call.

All that happened ten years ago. I have such a vivid memory of you in that long, pink, lacy gown. Helen made that dress herself and she also made you a pink, cone-shaped hat trailing yards of sheer, white curtain material

You didn't miss a cue or flub a line. I thought it would make you sad that none of your family attended the play. But afterwards, at the party, you were the centre of attention and there wasn't a happier child in the school auditorium.

You were only with us for two months after the play. We were told that your father was in some kind of money trouble, and late one Saturday night, packed you all up and set out for Montreal.

We tried very hard to get in touch with you. Your old neighbours knew nothing. We waited for your new school to send for your records, but that didn't happen. I even put an ad in the Montreal papers. "Carol, who played Princess Anne in our grade five play, please write to Mrs. James, care of: Edith Cavell School, Halifax."

You're twenty years old now. I think of you often, and wonder what your life has been like since that long-ago time when you were in grade five and played the part of Princess Anne.