

JINNY

By Jacqueline Moore

I was new to town. I was new to the culture. That depressed mountain town was the wrong end of the world for me. I was scared and lonely. The town was clan oriented and bloodline was the passage to acceptance. I was 'a-kin' to no one. The community was cautious of strangers, and I was the worst kind. I had New York license plates on my British Sunbeam Arrow. And I talked funny. It didn't matter that my roots were from the southern side of the Mason-Dixon, I talked Yankee. I had carried more than my license plates south from New York.

I had five years of New York educating under my belt. Three of the years were spent teaching second grade in an affluent suburban neighborhood. We were 13 miles from Manhattan, on the western shores of the Hudson. Ours was the area city-dwellers dreamed about and worked hard hours to earn the chance to move to. Well-groomed yards held well-groomed children. The schools were supported by high taxation and the results were worth the cost. I loved working there.

My first husband's need for change brought us to this Smoky Mountain town. I had my teaching experience to fall

back on, and I had hoped the town could use another substitute. I prayed the town could use one. We had no money and my husband had no job. The town did not have an abundance of educators and the school board welcomed my application. Soon, a steady stream of sub calls followed. The summer brought that dreamed-for telephone call. Would I be interested in a one-year contract? Oh, yes!

The classroom was dingy, the books were old. The town couldn't support the funding needed to go first-class. There were no special classes for special children. There were no special classes for normal children. The classroom teacher could choose to teach music, art and gym. She didn't have to. I met 35 children that first day of school. Records told me that four were mentally handicapped. The records did not tell me that one was also physically handicapped. Her name was Jinny.

The special-ed kids were used to sitting quietly in the back of the room and coloring. Jinny couldn't handle crayons very well. She couldn't handle herself very well. After my experience in New York, I could barely stand what I saw. My loneliness and anger at living in the mountains was re-enforced by this classroom of overgrown misfits. How could the school board neglect these special kids? How

could they expect me to do the work of five people? My self-righteous indignation grew as I got to know the other children. My New York kids weren't like this. My New York kids had shoes and didn't come to school barefoot. They had gas ranges in their kitchens, not wood burning stoves. My New York kids had swimming pools in their backyards, not out-houses. The New York kids got the Jewish holidays days off. These kids sang grace in the school's cafeteria. The differences for me seemed insurmountable. But, we were broke, so I didn't quit.

Grudgingly putting on my gym teacher hat, I took the class out for a game of kickball. The kids knew the rules. I officiated. The first several pitches of the ball were met with resounding kicks and fast running.

Even the ones with no shoes did OK. *Hmmm*, I thought, maybe these kids haven't been neglected. They knew how to play games together. Then Jinny came up to the plate. She could barely move. She dragged her leg and her spastic arms offered her little balance. Her face contorted as she walked. After two pitches, a sideways jab of her leg connected with the ball.

A big, rough-looking boy named Tony came running at her from the sidelines. I was sure that he was going to

knock her down for ruining the game. I held my breath in fear. Tony grabbed Jinny by the hand and became the balancing factor she needed to run. None of the others on base advanced until Jinny was safely on her way. As the game progressed, Tony stayed by Jinny as long as he was needed.

What I learned that day is something I will never forget. Whatever those mountain children lacked in worldly goods and ways, they made up for in love. They cared for each other in a way I had never experienced before. All the things I had considered important were not. The most important thing in the whole world was Tony helping Jinny run those bases. It was a beautiful sight.

That year was a very happy year. I loved every minute of it.