

"A GLIMMER OF HOPE"

You're sitting on a peeling blue bench in a courtyard located between two elementary school buildings. First, second, and third grade artwork (hand-drawn and sloppily colored in pictures of the kids' activities from last summer) decorate the windows. A welcome cool breeze whips through the thick humid air on this warm afternoon in late September. It's been only a few days since the school year started.

You force yourself to make small talk with the other parents but you're worried about your little girl. With her disease and the myriad of physical and emotional problems it plagues her with, you know all too well what an awful uphill struggle getting an education and interacting with other children will be for her.

Still, you try to act like you have no worries. You try your best to smile at the other mothers and far fewer fathers. "Act normal" you tell yourself. "Don't show them how much I hurt inside

So, you chat about the weather and try your hardest to laugh at the stupidly inane jokes one woman sitting next to you tells. Oh, how you are trying to keep your mood light on some level. It is almost as if by pretending to be carefree, you can fool yourself into becoming so.

Yet, the dark clouds that hover over your daughter's life never seem to dissipate. Hence, on this cheerful bright sunny day your spirit is as gloomy as ever. And so...

Hiding your sorrow and fear, you're sitting on this old bench in the school courtyard, surrounded by many moms and a couple dads. Like all of them, you are waiting to collect your grade schooler.

However....

Unlike them, you won't be shuttling your daughter home, or taking her to ballet class or soccer practice. Instead, you will drive her to what has become her weekly ordeal at the local hospital. There, your brave little 8 year old will try not to cry as her blood is drawn, and do her best not to show her fear (which never goes away) when she suffers through her radiation treatments. Your heart for your little girl because you know the sheer hell that cancer of the bone and its complications has made of her life.

After-school activities are impossible for your child, even playing at home demands too much energy. She is bald due to the chemotherapy sessions. She wears braces on her legs and will never know the joy of running. She has a tragically limited attention span, too. Yet, the teachers and counselors at this public school have chided you for being "over-protective".

They strongly insisted that your daughter needed to be "main-streamed" the better to be integrate her with normal children. But that really bothers you because you know how mean kids can be to those who don't fit in.

Your child was atleast in the special private school you'd been sending her to, even though it was always a long drive. But when they raised their annual tuition fee last year, you couldn't cover the costs anymore. So, now you've started sending her to this nearby (free 1st-6th grade) public grammar school. The principal reassured you on your daughter's first day of attendance that "everything will be fine." But, despite what he said, you've been worried sick ever since you enrolled her here.

Kids who are frail often get picked on or bullied, and as a matter of fact, you remember your own bad experiences at school because you were bi-racial in a lilywhite school district down south. Plus, you know your daughter (with her disabilities) is behind a much larger 8-ball than you ever were.

You try your best not to be troubled, but the metaphor of the "pink monkey" haunts your conscious. You read about the "pink monkey" when you were in college. A concept derived from the Robert A. Heilein novel, "Stranger in a Strange Land." It goes like this: "If you take a monkey out of a cage of other monkeys, dye him pink and then put him back with his peers, they will tear him apart simply because he is now different from them."

The moral of course is: to overcome prejudice against those who are not like ourselves. But, you wonder fearfully, "could grade-school students ever be mature enough to know such a thing? This has you sitting on pins and needles. Before, in the private school, your daughter had numerous supports. Now? Things had changed. This new school was never intended to serve, help and care for children/kids with special needs.

This has the anguish you feel in your gut making you almost physically ill. "Have I sent my precious only child, my innocent baby into the lions den?" Such questions torture you!

Suddenly, your train of thought is broken by the blaring of the school bell. You will be lucky if your daughter even so much as makes eye-contact with you when she emerges from the school building she's been in since 8:00a.m this morning. Your little girl is mad at you for pulling her out of her special needs school (thus taking her away from that comforting environment) and sees it as an act of betrayal. If that bald-headed little angel had stuck a knife in you, it couldn't hurt more!

As usual, you know your daughter will be sad and droopy as she approaches you. Worse yet, due to the heavy braces she wears on her legs and the perpetual washed-out condition that constant chemotherapy keeps her in, your daughter is always the last one out and behind all the other children in leaving school.

This time, however, she is taking a very long time to reach you. Too long, infact. Concerned, you wander over to one of the windows that look in on one of your daughters classrooms, but you find it empty.

Because it's "hospital day" as you both call it (and you know she hates what the well-meaning doctors and nurses put her through), you consider the possibility that she may be hiding. After all, she's done that before on "hospital day." But then again, you also know that your little girl has been particularly weak these past few days.

Thus, ever fearful of the most terrible of senarios, you imagine your tiny, near helpless child, passed out somewhere, or possibly dragging herself across the blacktop-out of sight from you-desperetly trying to keep up with her peers.

Oh! How sadly you know that the short walk from her classroom to you has been enough, recently, to make her wince in pain. So, with your daughter's condition having deteriorated in the past few weeks, you can't help but be upset. Of course, doctors have told you that even though your child will never be able to walk without braces, her bone cancer can be held in check, and with on going treatment, will soon go into remission.

But they're not with her everyday as you are. they don't see her sinking spirit as you do. That's what has you so beside yourself with grief. The other parents here in the courtyard could not possibly know or understand your deep dark sorrow.

Just then, you hear the joyful bubbling of children's voices. You are stunned to see your daughter strolling happily-if still slowly-between two other smiling little girls. The two blond, pig tailed young ladies flanking your daughter have slowed their pace to match that of hers.

To your relief and amazement, you can see how gleefully happy your daughter is. For once... Oh, thank God! For once! Your little girl has a bright smile on her face. And, clearly, she is not in pain. Astonished at this developement, you look on in disbelief, for you can painly see that these two giggling, happy-go-lucky, third-grade young ladies are lovingly bonding with your child. And so, for the first time in months, you find yourself a moment of joy! For these girls, flanking your daughter, are treating her like they would treat any other classmate they'd taken a shine to. They are bumping elbows and cupping their hands to each other's ears to whisper someshared girlish secret. Without a doubt, these two have accepted your daughter as a friend and a confidant. It's a miracle!

These pretty little girls who are healthy, normal, and strong. These girls who seem like the kind who are very popular, have accepted your disabled child as one of their own! Somehow, they do not see-or see beyond-her leg braces and bald head. The ravages

wrought by cancer and radiation apparently don't matter to these two. They have embraced your child as part of their "in-group." To them, atleAST, SHE IS NO "pink monkey."

As you watch these sweet pig-tailed cherubs, merrily gabbing to your daughter as they lollygag along, these two girls flanking her on the right and left begin to play a rather boisterous game of tag, as one attempts to hide behind your child's back squealing with delight, while the other tries to grab her.

Your first reaction is to intervene. After all, your little girl is very fragile and easily exhausted. But.... You stop dead in your tracks when you see the look of delight on your daughter's face at this playful bit of fun, and you're elated by how much she is enjoying the company of these two. How laong has it been since you've seen her expressing such happiness. And so...

With one stern disapproving glance at this pig-tailed duo who are using your daughter's body for a game that looks like a cross between tag and hide & seek, this girly horseplay immediately comes to an end. Although, for once, you wish the gaurd hadn't been so diligent in his duties. Quietly now, the three girls continue on their way.

This positive interaction with her peers may seem like a trivial matter to most people but, to you, it is downright monumental. After two years of witnessing the heartrending battle your only child has fought with cancer, she-to your spirit-crushing dismay-appeared to be losing that fight. Every day you watch in horror as the disease sapped more and more of her will to live. However...

Being befriended by these two blond-haired angels seems to have installed in her a new strength and a new happiness. Indeed, this is the first good sign you've seen in a long, longtime that maybe... Just maybe she was going to find a way to overcome this disease. You've longed to see this tiny creature, the fruit of your womb, whom you love and value more than life itself, happy, for once.

Now, God has given you that gift and so, the healing power of friendship; of school girl comradeship might well work a healing upon her broken spirit, even if not her body.

As the two girls escort your daughter right up to you, she says, "These are my two new friends, Mommy. They really like me!"

Taking her in your arms, you hold your little girl tight w/ tears in your eyes. This is what you've been praying for! It's just a minor thing, of course, and your daughter is still very weak. Years of painful treatment are still ahead of her too. Nevertheless, you are grateful to the lord for allowing you to see a glimmer of hope, however small it might be. And, on the drive to the hospital, you recall an ancient Chinese proverb: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."