**One Great Day**

By Melissa Wilmoth

Watching her play was like watching a lactose intolerant person drink chocolate milk. I just didn’t understand it. Why did she always keep to herself? Why did she pull her hair out strand by strand instead of playing tag with the other children? Why did she nibble at her bottom lip until it cracked and bled? I was Mrs. Bell. I was a school staple. Almost everyone in the Nebraska school district knew and respected me. I took each child into my weathered hands and did my best to make their world just a little better. I had been an elementary school counselor for almost 25 years; but in that quarter of a century, I had never seen a creature like her.

Her name was Jocelyn. She was eight years old. She was ghostly pale with long dark hair. Her large green eyes seemed almost out of place on her tiny gaunt face. Whenever her name was called, her reaction reminded me of a deer catching a glimpse of a hunter. Apparently, she was used to being reprimanded.

Her teacher had come to complain for the second time today, but I couldn’t seem to pinpoint the trouble. For the first time in my career, I felt helpless and ineffectual. I had always prided myself in being the counselor that every student wanted, and I relished assisting the youngsters to resolve their problems and grow into valuable members of society. That was the truly troubling aspect to Jocelyn. I had no idea how to go about trying to make things better for her. I didn’t know where to begin. How do you help someone that doesn’t want to be helped? I even tried pulling out some of my own silvery hair to experience a sliver of her young life. It brought tears to my lined eyes, and it brought me no closer to understanding her. I put my hair back into the crisp, tidy bun the children were so used to seeing me wear and opened the squeaky drawer of my old desk to retrieve Jocelyn’s file.

I read over the facts that I could almost recite by heart at this point. She was an only child. I had already spoken with her parents. Her mother was a raven haired beauty, and her father had the piercing green eyes. Seeing Jocelyn’s features split so perfectly in two was quite a surreal experience, but otherwise it was a routine meeting. They were nice. They didn’t ignore her. They didn’t beat her. By all accounts, they loved her very much. If anything, they might have seemed a little afraid of her.

Her classmates, however, treated her like she didn’t exist. They didn’t make fun of her. They didn’t tease her. They never spoke to her. In one of our weekly meetings, I asked her if it hurt her feelings that the other children were so cold towards her. She seemed confused by the question. “No. I like being by myself.”

Her teacher didn’t know what to make of her. Jocelyn’s writing disturbed Mrs. Harper more than any other student. It wasn’t that it was morbid or menacing. Jocelyn’s writing was like being in a dream. It was confusing and beautiful all at the same time.

***Just at that moment, Jacinda’s head struck against the balance beam. She lost her footing and started to slip. She thought that she might hear her mother call out to her. She thought she would hear angry voices yelling at her for making a mistake. Instead it was as perfectly silent. She began to fall. Down, down, down. She fell away from the world. She fell so slowly that she had plenty of time to think about where she was falling to…***
When I read it, I immediately conjured up visions of “Alice in Wonderland”. I mentioned this to Mrs. Harper, but she was not amused or impressed in the slightest. I never did like the old bat. Mrs. Harper didn’t have an imaginative bone in her squat body. Perhaps that’s why Jocelyn’s presence irritated her so.

It was snowing outside. I could see Jocelyn from my office. She was taking handfuls of snow and placing them on top of her head like a crown. Then she would parade around like a queen for a few moments before shaking the show from her head like a wet puppy. I knew that unless I talked to the child Mrs. Harper would be back with a laundry list of unusual behavior tomorrow morning.

I tried to imagine what I could possibly say to Jocelyn. I spent all day rehearsing. As the last bell rang and the sea of children started to rush towards their buses, I was waiting outside Mrs. Harper’s classroom. Jocelyn was the last to leave, and she walked painfully slowly. She intently studied her hands as she left the room.

I stopped her by crouching in her path, and she looked up as if she had been expecting me to be there all along. She gently took my hand and looked deeply into my blue-gray eyes without saying a single word. This action was so affectionate that suddenly every word of my planned speech flew from my mind. So I reverted to the question that I had asked myself over and over while in the privacy of my office. “Jocelyn, what’s wrong?” I asked her simply. She smiled broadly. It was the first time I’d ever seen her do so. She was amazingly beautiful. “Nothing’s wrong, silly. Today’s been a great day!” Then she took off her boots and walked out into the cold and snow barefoot, beaming from ear to ear.