



An Orphanage at Home

It was a cold evening in January as Twila Hammond dried the last of the supper dishes and placed the kettle in the cupboard where it belonged. She had offered to finish up the dishes to give her older sister Marilyn more time to study for a science test. Twila couldn't honestly say she loved to work—least of all dishes—but at thirteen, it wasn't the trial it had been when she was younger.

As Twila glanced around the kitchen to see if she had forgotten anything, she remembered that she hadn't swept the floor. It wasn't important to her, but she knew Marilyn never considered the kitchen work finished until the floor was swept. As Twila pulled the broom from the closet and began swishing the dirt to a pile in the middle of the room, her mind wandered to the stories Dad had told at the supper table. He was doing some painting for an older couple who were full of stories. Mr. Becker and his wife had spent twenty-four years teaching Native American children in remote villages of Alaska before they had retired and moved back to Wisconsin where they had grown up.

Twila's broom moved slower as her mind went over the details Dad had related. *Maybe I could teach school someday*, she thought. *Not just in the United States, but some place far away. Alaska?* She rejected the idea. It was too cold there and from what she had heard, the sun hardly shone in the wintertime. She wanted to go somewhere warm. *Maybe Costa Rica—or India!*

The broom had totally stopped now. Twila cupped her hand over the end of the broom handle, propped her chin on top, and stared dreamily down at the floor. *Yes, India. That's where I want to go!* Twila envisioned a mud hut schoolroom, with a thatched roof and rows of darling dark-eyed children with jet black hair.

"Cotcha!" Twila jumped and looked up to see Marilyn grinning at her from the doorway. "So what were you dreaming about this time?" Marilyn wondered.

Twila flushed a little and started sweeping again. She was known as the daydreamer of the family. Although in recent years she had tried hard to overcome her habit, she still occasionally got caught. She looked at Marilyn and said saucily, "Wouldn't you like to know!"

But the thrill of her daydream had taken hold of her, and she couldn't quite resist telling Marilyn. "I was thinking about those stories Dad told about the Beckers teaching school in Alaska. I think it would be so much fun to teach school somewhere far away. Not in Alaska, but maybe some place like India."

Marilyn pulled out a chair and sat down. She propped her elbows on the table and said enthusiastically, "I thought too it sounded like fun to teach school in some foreign place! But I think I'd rather go to Africa or South America." She paused. "But if I went to Africa, I'd rather start an orphanage for abandoned babies than teach school."

Twila's eyes lit up. "Hey, I like that idea! Can I come with you? Let's you and I both go to Africa or India or somewhere and start an orphanage when we grow up."

Marilyn grinned. "We can spend our lives taking care of orphan children and be two old ladies working together." She stood up suddenly. "But if I'm going to study for my science test, I'd better get with it. I came to the kitchen for a drink, not to talk about starting orphanages."

Twila put the broom away. “It sure would be fun though. I hope I can do something like that someday.”

Marilyn drank her water and tipped her cup upside down in the sink. She said seriously, “I’m sure it would be fun and interesting. But it would be an awfully big responsibility.”

Marilyn went back to studying her test while Twila grabbed a book and wandered into the living room. She curled up at one end of the couch and began reading, her dreams momentarily forgotten.

Her three younger sisters lay sprawled on the floor playing a game of Trouble. Their laughter and friendly competition made it hard for Twila to concentrate on her book. She finally gave up and sat soaking in the peace and tranquility of the evening.

In the office, Dad was talking on the phone with a work customer. In the rocker nearby, Mother sat holding three-year-old Robbie. She walked her fingers up his back and said, “Spiders crawling up your back!” He giggled when Mother tickled him. He loved the little games Mother played with him.

Robbie wrapped his arms around Mother’s neck and said, “I love you, Mama.”

Mother gave him a squeeze in return. “I love you too.”

Robbie laughed again and replied, “I love you too, too, too!”

Twila’s gaze drifted across the room to where her little sisters were playing. Rita, Connie, and Suzanne were stair-stepped in age and size. Rita was nine, Connie was ten, and Suzanne was eleven.

With the palm of her hand, Connie pushed down on the bubble of the Trouble game to shake the dice. “Oh, good!” she cheered in delight when she got the number she was hoping for.

Twila had a sudden insight. *Connie’s the only one with whom Mother never had the chance to play all those little baby games she’s playing with Robbie now.* It was hard to believe. It seemed as though Connie had been with them forever.

Connie and Robbie were grandchildren to Mrs. Weatherby, a next-door neighbor to the church school that the Hammond girls attended. Almost two years ago, Mrs. Weatherby had fallen and broken her hip. When she was no longer able to take care of her grandchildren, Social Services placed Robbie in the care of the Hammond family. Connie had gone to stay with another family who was licensed to foster older children.

The Hammonds were delighted to have Robbie join their family, but their hearts had gone out to Connie, who was now separated from her little brother. Dad and Mother had gotten their paperwork updated so Connie could come to live with them. Just two months ago, they had gone before the judge, and now Connie's and Robbie's adoptions were complete.

Adoption day had been an exciting day for everyone in the family, but especially for Connie. She was pleased to finally be a Hammond and thrilled when Dad and Mother gave her the middle name of Ann. *Ann* was part of Mother's name, so it was special to Connie. It seemed to make her feel connected to Mother. Now on every available scrap of paper, Connie would proudly scrawl her full name, *Consuela Ann Hammond*.

There were laughter and groans from the girls as Suzanne triumphantly moved her last button home and finished the game. Laughing and talking, the girls put the game pieces back in the box, and Rita put the game away.

With a sigh, Suzanne leaned back against a chair and announced, "What we need is some excitement around here."

"By all the noise you girls were making, I would think you had enough excitement just playing that game," observed Mother.

Suzanne tipped one of Robbie's tractors upside down and gave one of its wheels a spin. "Oh, I'm not talking about that kind of fun. I'm talking about foster children excitement. Mother, haven't

you gotten any calls about a child needing care? It's been weeks since we've had anyone!"

Rita twirled the end of her curly blonde braid around her finger and said wistfully, "I wish they'd bring us a baby again. Robbie's so big, he's not a baby anymore."

Suzanne grinned. "Well, I wish Wyatt could come back again. He sure livened things up around here."

"He definitely did," Mother replied. "But I'm glad he can be back with his father. Mrs. Gunther says it's going well for him there. And no, we haven't gotten any calls in quite a while. It would be nice to have a little one again, but I think the Lord knows we need these quieter in-between times too. We can catch our breath and get prepared for the next child."

Somehow, though the Hammonds had not really planned on it, they had started taking in older children as well as babies after their paperwork had been updated to allow Connie to live with them. In the last eighteen months, several children of different ages and needs had come through their home. Wyatt, a lively six-year-old, had been with them the longest. They would have been glad to have him become a part of their family, but though they missed Wyatt, they were happy he and his dad could be reunited.

One time, two-month-old twins had come to stay with them. For once the girls felt as though there were enough babies to go around. During the day Mother changed diapers, rocked babies, and fed bottles. In the afternoon the girls would rush home from school to help take care of Robbie and the babies and assist Mother in catching up with the housework. Though it was a busy time, the girls had loved having three babies in the house.

Some of the children stayed only a few days, some a few weeks, and others several months. And then to the joy of the Hammonds, there were Connie and Robbie, who had become a permanent part of the family.