

OH, TO HAVE A FRIEND!



SHE WAS 15, A SHY AND FRIGHTENED NEWCOMER WHO WONDERED IF SHE WOULD EVER BELONG!

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Forty years ago as a lonely immigrant girl in Canada, I had a experience so hard to describe that it took me many years even to try. Yet the story needs to be told, for it points up how intimately God knows His children.

That October day in 1952 as I listened to the lunchtime chatter in my high school homeroom, the ache in my throat made it hard to swallow my meal of dark rye bread. *“Won’t I ever belong? I thought!*

I was fifteen. Two years earlier I’d entered Lord Tweedsmuir High in Surey, British Columbia, a frightened newcomer from Germany. Shy and awkward anyway, I’d been too ashamed of my limited English to reply when someone spoke to me.

As the months went by my English improved but my sense of belonging did not. Everything about me was different from these outgoing Canadian girls—my accent, my hand-me-down clothes, my thick blond braids. (Too beautiful to cut, my mother said when I pleaded that all the other girls wore their hair short).

Even the lunch I brought from home, My classmates brought sandwiches on thin-sliced white bread. I had thick black rye and jam. I was the odd one, the outsider! In two years I’d made not a single friend!

I stuffed my uneaten lunch back inside my desk and fled from the happy babble of the classroom.

Through crowded halls I pushed my way to the library. Books at least were my friends---but not that day!

As I glanced up from reading, I saw through the window an ordinary scene. Two girls sat on the grass, heads together, talking. Such longing rose inside of me that I knew that I was going to cry. Oh, to have a friend—just one friend with whom I could sit and talk that way! I escaped from the library and dodged into the bathroom, where I could lock the door and let the tears come! And I said, LORD JESUS, I’M SO LONELY!” To talk to Jesus was natural to me. I’d been taught that He cared for each of us personally. I’d gaze at paintings of Him, thinking how friendly He looked, how I’d have told Him anything if I’d lived back when He was living on Earth.

After school I stood as usual at the bus stop on the fringe of a knot of schoolmates. One of the girls turned to me. “Helen, are you going to the school dance on Friday?” I shook my head no. “Why don’t you come, she coaxed.

I shut my eyes against a memory...At the last dance I had stood on the sidelines for what seemed hours. At last a boy walked up to me—but what he did was yank one of my braids. Everyone laughed. No, I’d never put myself through that again! The girl beside me fell silent, then turned back to the others. I mounted the big yellow bus and scanned it for a seat by the window where I could keep from meeting people’s eyes. But the window seats were taken. I slumped down beside a girl who smiled at me. *“She’s friendly,”* I thought. *I’d like to say something friendly to her.”* I was so tongue-tied. Through out the half-hour ride I said not a word!

Close to tears again, I stumbled off the bus and hurried into the old farmhouse. As usual our rented house was empty.

Mother, who had been widowed in World War II, worked up to ten hours in the vegetable fields each day to support herself and us four children. Come to think of it, my younger sisters and brother seemed to have no trouble making friends in our new country. They were probably off playing with the neighbor’s kids at this very moment! It was me—something was terribly wrong with me! Dropping my books on the kitchen table, I ran into the bedroom, slammed the door shut and fell across the bed. My body, so flat and long and lanky, shook with sobs!

I sat up abruptly! Someone else was in the room! Hastily wiping my eyes I looked around. Nobody! But—someone was here! I could feel it! Not someone---SOMEONE! There was an aura in that little room and I could almost touch it! LOVE such as I had never felt before filled the space all around me!

“JESUS!” I whispered, “*Is that You?*” He answered not in an audible voice, but with a LOVE so tangible I felt HUGGED! Although I saw nothing physical, an image burned itself into my mind: a friendly face with smiling eyes, so vivid that even today forty years later, I see them still! Eyes that DANCED! “*You know what? I LIKE you! You’re My friend!*”

As I sat there on my bed, the glorious, gracious words kept coming! “*Have you forgotten that you belong to Me? I will never leave you or forsake you! I’m here with you now and will always be with you! Don’t be ashamed! I love you just as you are!*” For a long time I sat there basking in love beyond my conceiving, hearing those words of unconditional acceptance! When my family came home they found me humming as I prepared Supper.

The next morning I opened my eyes to find the joyful Presence still filling the room, as though He’d waited for me to wake up so we could start the day together. When I boarded the yellow bus He did too! During class it was as though He were standing beside my desk. We did math problems together. We wrote essays together! Even in gym class, which I had always dreaded, I could feel Him running beside me!

At lunch break that day one of my classmates asked me if I would help her with a problem. She hadn’t understood the teacher and felt sure I had. Wondering why she had singled me out, yet thrilled that somebody had, I slid over and made room for her at my desk—not even trying to hide my chunk of bread! Later at the bus stop, I stood with the familiar cluster of teens. My Friend, Jesus, whispered, “*Aren’t they a great bunch of kids? I also love them dearly!*” I turned to stare at them with new appreciation! Friendly eyes met mine. Later that week some girls invited me to join the Glee Club and I eagerly accepted!

The fact that my peers now *wanted* to be with me never ceased to amaze me! One day one of my sisters hinted at the reason. “Helen, what has happened to you: You’re always so happy now!” I looked at her in surprise! True, I was supremely happy, but I hadn’t been aware it showed.

For three glorious months my Friend and I walked in this indescribable companionship! I had never felt so completely believed in, and understood! He was always smiling at me, a BIG SMILE of Delight and Approval! And it was impossible not to smile back at the world around me. Every morning when I got up He was there! All day He walked beside me. In the evening my last awareness was of Him!

Then one dreadful morning I awoke to an empty room! The joyful Presence was Gone! Panic seized me! “JESUS!” I cried! Silence! I must have sinned in some terrible way! Frantically I searched my conscience. I confessed every sin I could recall and begged Him to forgive my unknown ones. But the almost palpable sense of His Presence did not return.

Grief-Stricken! I opened my Bible! Where were those words Jesus had spoken to me three months before, right in this room? I found them in the 13th Chapter of Hebrews: “*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee!*” 13:5

Then I said, “JESUS, did you say *never* so that I might know today that You are still with me, even though I don’t feel You?” I whispered. This glimmer of hope in time became a growing reality! No matter how I feel, Jesus is always with me. His love and acceptance are a fact independent of my moods and feelings! It was only much later that I understood the double gift Jesus gave to a clumsy immigrant girl! He came as a tangible Presence to assure me of my value in His sight, and to show me the value of friendship! Then He withdrew this special feeling. “*You will find me in my written Word!*” He seemed to be saying, “*And in so many different ways!*”

HE STEPPED A LITTLE DISTANCE BACK, TO MAKE ROOM FOR FAITH AND CHARACTER TO GROW! ISN’T THAT WHAT A BEST FRIEND WOULD DO?