

## JIMMY

*By Troy Lynn Pritt*

Jimmy was ten years old, his sister Anna was nine, his brother Mike was four. They had a mother and a father but Jimmy was the designated adult.

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There was a knock on the door. Jimmy's mother grabbed little Mike and whisked him to Anna's room. Surprised at her sudden action, he stopped wailing.

"Anna, someone is at the door. Please watch Mike while they are here."

"Yes, Mother." (They had to call her "Mother." She said that only low class, ignorant people said "Ma" or "Mom.")

There was a change that came over Mrs. Poole whenever she was in the presence of those whom she called "people of quality." Her bearing no longer had its usual weariness and despair. She stood straight and walked confidently. Her voice altered and she sounded like a completely different person. The children could see a change and hear the difference in her voice. They couldn't know that she had

stepped into a wholly different place and time, or so it seemed to her.

Opening the door, she said, "Why, hello, Miss Holmes. How nice it is to see you. Won't you come in, please."

(Miss Holmes was the Parish Visitor for the Presbyterian church.)

"Thank you, Mrs. Poole. It has been such a pleasure to have your three children in Sunday School. They are there every Sunday. I know that when children attend Sunday School so faithfully that it is because they have parents who know the importance of Christian teaching. You haven't been coming with your children.. We would love to have you take part in our women's class."

Miss Holmes was dressed in a attractive cotton dress with a flowery print. It had a white lace removable collar. She wore a white straw hat with a wide, wavy brim decorated with a large daisy. She was wearing light beige nylon stockings; her shoes were white, low heels with dark blue trim. Seeing her, Mrs. Poole imagined that she too was in a summery dress. She could smell the rose water she fancied she had splashed on after her bath. She was entertaining Miss Holmes in more genteel surroundings than a house in a

low-rent project. There would soon be a pitcher of lemonade and nice tall frosted glasses brought out by the maid.

*What is taking the maid so long?.*

"Mrs. Poole, you must have come from a Christian home and church background yourself. What church did you grow up in?"

"My mother and her family were United Brethren. That is the church to which I belong; Jimmy and Anna were baptized in that church."

"I am familiar with the United Brethren. The church where Jimmy and Anna have been attending Sunday School is Presbyterian. It is the only Protestant church in this community."

"My husband and his people are Presbyterians."

"Invite him to come with you."

"Yes....you do that."

The mention of her husband suddenly brought her back to reality. She felt uncomfortable. She was ashamed of her shabby dress and run-down shoes.

"Where are the children?"

"Jimmy is at the library. He sometimes stays until they close at 6:00 PM. Anna has Mike back in her room

entertaining him. "

"Well, I will run along. Please remember that you have a cordial invitation to the women's class at the Presbyterian church. And your husband can come to the men's class. They both meet while your children are in Sunday School."

"Thank you for coming to see us, Miss Holmes. Come again whenever you can."

Mrs. Poole went back to the sofa torn between hope and despair. There was no food and no money in the house. It was payday. If her husband came home from work, they would go over to the Acme Market and buy several bags of groceries. If he didn't come home...

Mr. Poole would sometimes go on drinking sprees of two or three days. These would begin on a payday. He was paid every two weeks and by payday there was no money or food in the house.

The next day there was fork toast, one slice for each of the children. Mrs. Poole said that she wasn't hungry. There was no bus fare so Anna and Jimmy couldn't go to school that day. There was no more food the rest of the day. That afternoon Mrs. Poole found a dime while sorting

the laundry

"Jimmy, I found ten cents. I want you to take the bus to Monument and Kresson Streets and see if your father is in the saloon. If he is, tell him to come home. We need money for food before the store closes."

"Yes, Mother."

When Baltimore had streetcars, the terminus of several of the streetcar lines was at Monument and Kresson Streets. A block long street car barn was there. Half of the old car barn was still used by the Baltimore Transit Company to park buses. The other half was now a large saloon.

Jimmy was afraid to go on the bus alone when mostly grown-ups would be on it. He was afraid to go into that big saloon. He had only seen it from the bus window.. What would he do if his father wasn't there? She had only given him enough bus fare to get to Monument and Kresson. How would he get back? Jimmy knew that he couldn't tell his mother that he was scared or ask her what to do. She'd just cry.

"Be careful, Jimmy."

"Yes, Mother"

He went across the street from their house and waited

for a bus to come.

"Jimmy, what are you doing? waiting on the bus?" It was a neighbor lady, Mrs. Krantz. She was awfully nosy, but he was glad that someone he knew would be on the bus with him. There might be bad people on the bus.

"Yes, ma'am. I have to run an errand for my mother."

The bus came and they got on. Jimmy was glad both that he could sit next to her, and that the noise of the bus motor made it impossible for her to ask him any more. He was ashamed of his errand. Too soon the bus arrived at Monument and Kresson.

He went into the saloon. He saw a very large room filled with heavy wooden tables and chairs. He saw the bar was on the wall opposite the door and it was as long as a house. Only one man was standing at the bar. The bottles of various colored spirits behind the bar sparkled like jewels. There were several neon logos of beer brands. The room was dimly lit, dank and gloomy, and the air was filled with cigarette smoke. The men at the tables were talking, drinking, smoking but none of them seemed happy or friendly. They were in work clothes soiled from the day's work. Their clothes gave off the smells of where they worked - grease

and cinders from the railroaders, a garbage-like smell from the workers at the olive oil factory, the smell of pickles from those who worked in the pickle factory across the street.

One of the men asked him, "Hey, kid, whatda yuz doin' in here?"

The challenge frightened Jimmy even more. Then he saw that his father was the man at the bar. Jimmy hurried to where his father was standing; but his father's back was still turned away from him. He tugged at his father's trouser leg.

"Hey, Tom, the old lady sent one of the brats for you." The men all laughed.

"What do you want?"

"Mother sent me to ask you to come home. We haven't eaten all day. The store will close in a couple hours."

"Here's some money. Tell her I'll come home when I'm good and ready to come home." Grabbing some bills and change off the bar, he threw them on the floor. Jimmy was shaking so hard that he could hardly pick up the coins from the dirty grit on the floor. Down at floor level the smells of beer, tobacco, urine, and vomit were in the drafts of

air. He was afraid that he would throw up or cry! He didn't want to cry.

*I won't cry, not in front of my father, not ever.*

He kept a dime for the bus fare and stuffed the rest of the money deep into his pocket. He couldn't remember the bus ride home.

Jimmy handed his mother the bills and the rest of the change.

"What did your father say?"

"He said he'd come home when he was good and ready to come home."

She gave an angry response even though he wasn't there. She slammed the money on the kitchen table, stomped into the living room, and threw herself onto the sofa, screaming and sobbing. Anna turned and silently went to her room. Mike stood in the middle of the room wailing and looking confused. Jimmy took a dollar from the money she had thrown on the table. He ran out the door to go to the Acme Market. Baked beans, macaroni and cheese, a loaf of bread. Maybe there's enough for oleo.

By the time they had eaten it was nearly bed time. Jimmy went to the room he shared with Mike. While his

mother was getting Mike ready for bed, he lay on his bed and cried his pain, and fear, and confusion muffled by his pillow.

Sometime after he had gone to sleep, he was awakened by his father coming into the house and slamming the door. There was a loud argument. He could tell that his mother was being hit. She ran into his room and hid under his bed. His father staggered through the house looking for her, then detoured into the bathroom to noisily expel two days of drinking. After that his father must have gone to sleep. The house was quiet again. His mother crawled out from under his bed.

Jimmy waited for a while then tiptoed up the hall to check on his mother. She was sitting at the chrome dinette set in the kitchen. One eye was swollen, her cheek had an angry red spot, and one side of her lip was puffy. She was humming one of the French songs she had learned in high school.

*"Alouette, gentil alouette,  
Alouette, je te plumerai.  
Je te plumerai la tête, je te plumerai la tête,  
Et la tête, alouette."*

He looked into the living room and saw a big smear of mustard on the wall; a bag with hot dogs was lying on the

floor below it. They were still warm. They had chili, onions, and mustard! He put the bag in the refrigerator. In the bathroom he got a wet wash rag and tried to clean the mustard off the wall. Then he went back to his bed and went to sleep.