

## The First Day of School

*By Marilyn Reeves*

Her father lifted her down from the pickup and held one trembling hand as they walked up the path to the red schoolhouse. The other hand automatically went up to cover her mouth, even though you had to look twice to see the tiny scar. When she was still just a baby her father had sold a thousand-dollar painting and used the money to pay for the reconstructive surgery.

Carrie wasn't used to being around other children, except for her two cousins James and Owen. Whenever Aunt Alice would bring them over to visit, they would tease her about her lip.

Since her mother had died giving birth to her five years ago, Carrie and her father had moved in with her grandmother who helped raise her. Grandma let her help pick the strawberries and feed the chickens, although she wasn't big enough yet to gather the eggs, as the scolding hens would peck at her hands and face.

Carrie was small for her age. Once a month they would come to town and rent a stand at the flea market where Grandma sold her preserves and homemade pies and Daddy set up his paintings. Some of the people who came by would talk baby-talk to her, thinking she was just a toddler. It was embarrassing!

Carrie already knew her alphabet and Daddy was teaching her how to read. Grandma was teaching her arithmetic as they played "Count the Beans" at the kitchen table.

When her father opened one of the big white double doors they were greeted by a long hallway that went all the way to the back of the building. Most of the classroom doors were closed, so there was a moment of hesitation. Which one was the Kindergarten class?

Then they saw a lady standing in an open doorway beckoning them forward. "You must be Carrie," she said. "I'm Mrs. Larson. Come on in."

As they stepped inside the classroom Carrie saw the letters of the alphabet in a row of alternating primary colors on the wall above the blackboard. The other walls were covered with children's pictures done in colored crayon.

The room was filled with small desks and tables and chairs. There were shelves of toys and games and big plastic canisters filled with hundreds of crayons. And there were at least a dozen other children, who all looked up when they walked in.

Carrie buried her face in her father's coat. But then she opened her eyes and saw the face of Mrs. Larson, who was bent over and looking at her sideways with a big gap-toothed smile. She looked like a jack-o-lantern, and Carrie had to stifle a giggle.

A girl with a blonde ponytail came up and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hi, my name's Sarah. Will you sit with me?" Sarah was the prettiest little girl Carrie had ever seen, except that she had one bad arm, which she held close to her body. It was half the size of the other one and looked like a chicken wing. She enveloped Carrie with her good arm and gave her a hug. Then she led her over to an empty chair next to the one in which she'd been sitting.

Carrie looked back at her father and waved goodbye, grinning ear to ear. It was the first day of school and little Carrie O'Leary was going to be just fine.