

Edith Rose's closest friends at the GROUP home were crowded into her third floor bedroom.

Her best friend Sammy said, "It's getting to be a habit saying goodbye to you."

Edith Rose took a deep breath. "I'll be saying hello again before you know it. This family will give me the old heave-ho like all the rest. I will show up at the front door with my trusty suitcase and you guys will have to put me back together again." Her eyes widened and her head turned to include everybody. "None of us have any real family so we know how important being a friend is. I promise I will write to each of you." Edith Rose turned and wiped her face. There was a painful silence she couldn't let go on. "Now on to the business portion of the meeting!" she exclaimed. "I have the new personal ad to send into the newspaper. Everyone needs to chip in two dollars apiece. The ad will run for five weeks and I should be back by then to write a new copy."

Sammy, with his hand on a small boy's shoulder, interrupted. "Edith Rose, would you read last month's ad? Tony is new here and doesn't know about the tricks we play on Mrs. Clemson."

"Sure, Sammy." Edith Rose picked up a newspaper and started to read. "S.W.F. (single white female) enjoys long walks on the beach dressed as a raccoon. Let's rub some peanut butter in our hair and tip over some garbage pails at midnight. Just you and me, howling at the moon until the sun comes up."

The kids giggled. "That is still funny no matter how many times I read it. Now let us hear the new ad we are sending in," said Sammy

Again Edith Rose obliged. "S.W.(washed up).F. loves children, lots of them. Because of a bowling accident I am unable to have any children of my own. Give me a call if you have at least ten kids. I like to play hard to get, so don't take no for an answer."

The new boy, Tony, tried to make himself heard above the laughter. "I don't get it. I have known Mrs. Clemson for only a few days but I don't think she likes kids the least little bit!"

All the kids laughed even harder and then they explained to Tony that this was their way of fighting back. It beat punching her in the stomach and getting sent to juvenile hall.

Sammy had that look that always scared Edith Rose. He didn't know she had thought of the funny ads so that he and the other kids

would have something to laugh about...but what would happen when she was gone?

Clara, the secretary, called upstairs. "Mrs. Clemson wants everyone to come down to the living room. Edith Rose, don't forget your suitcase."

Everyone but Sammy filed out of Edith Rose's bedroom. "Got everything, kid? How about your dictionary? You know you're lost without it." Sammy's face was red. Edith Rose started out the door but she stopped when she didn't hear his boots on the old wooden floor. She turned around to see Sammy with his mouth open, struggling to get his feelings out. "It's too late for me. This is my home now. I don't fit in a regular family, but you can still make it. There's still time for you."

"Sammy..."

"Don't talk! Listen! I'm close to fourteen and almost six foot. I can't sit on some guy's knee and call him 'Daddy'. You're only eleven. You still got a shot. Make this work! I don't want to see you come back here, and don't write me until your new family wants to adopt you." Sammy just stood there shaking his head slowly. In a soft, kind voice that he used only for her he said, "This place is not your home, it's a business."

Clara called upstairs again and Sammy and Edith Rose walked down the wide, winding staircase. She gripped the handle of the suitcase so hard the color left her hand.

Edith Rose stood in the middle of the living room of the group home that she had lived in between stays with foster families for eleven years. Mrs. Clemson, the social worker in charge of the group home, was giving her the standard lecture. "You have fallen through the cracks in the sky and into my lap like so many foster children before you. It's not easy finding homes for older children and so we must all be thankful that a wonderful family is willing to take a chance on our Edith Rose. Now remember...Edith Rose! Please open your eyes when I'm talking to you!"

Edith Rose liked to close her eyes during the "Cracks in the Sky" speech and imagine she was soaring high in the sky like an eagle flying back through the crack in the sky to a land of gardens and sunshine with an upward breeze that let you soar and glide forever. She sighed, opened her eyes, and picked up the battered suitcase that she always kept polished. Except for her clothes, it was all she owned.

"Much better. As I was saying, Edith Rose, remember my three rules: one, be warm; two, be friendly; and, three, smile until it hurts."

"That's my problem. I smile and it hurts."

Mrs. Clemson waved a finger at her and tried to speak over the laughter of her friends. "Foster families don't like funny children or dreamers. They like well-behaved, serious children."

Clara approached Mrs. Clemson with a phone. She always answered in a professional manner no matter what was going on, in case it was her supervisor, Mr. Sanders. "Hello, this is Mrs. Clemson." There was a pause for a minute. Her face was wrinkled up, which the children knew to be a sign of total confusion.

"Sir, if you are experiencing trouble with raccoons tipping over your garbage pails, you have the wrong number. Try the animal control officer...No, I will not go out with you...peanut butter would not change my mind. I need to go now." She cradled the phone ever so gently. "Good lesson for all you kids and you too, Clara," (who nodded her head vigorously whenever Mrs. Clemson talked to her) "always be polite to the public, even when they might be imbalanced or dangerous. Remember, they pay the bills."

In the car, Mrs. Clemson reminded Edith Rose that this would be her first experience living in the country. "This is a very small town, night and day from living in Portland." Edith Rose pressed her cheek against the back seat window and wondered about her future.