

*The Charms of a School Girl*

*by Frederick Wickert*

The strong breeze slanted the cold rain onto her right side as she strode up the hill past the stone wall in front of the church. Her long dirty blonde hair hung straight and limp, wet from the rain. Her oval shaped face, devoid of makeup glistened a little, highlighting the early beginnings of a tan. Eyes of pale green took in the cars parked at the curb as she strode by on strong legs and muscular thighs, revealed by the soaked baggy black pants stuck to them.

She walked with long, ground eating steps, clenching the pant legs in her fists, holding the flared out split bellbottoms above the wet sidewalk, causing them to flap and swirl around the now dirty, once white sneakers. Her gait included a light bounce to the step when the right foot landed as she walked.

At sixteen she was tall and large framed for her age, giving the appearance in her movements of an athlete.

She wore a gray, loose fitting sweatshirt with two parallel half inch wide navy blue stripes around the collar of knit material. The sweatshirt was unusual, having ruffles sewn on the ends of the sleeves, a black half-inch wide ribbon woven through the ruffles around the wrist. Two wide black straps came over her shoulders and down the sides of the shirt. The straps supported a large yellow back pack with black trim, shielding her back from the rain as she walked.

Every few minutes the girl turned to look over her shoulder, seeing no one. Her countenance revealed neither relief, nor disappointment.

Good thing I got out of there early, thought the girl. Maybe I can get all the way home in peace. When softball practice was canceled because of the rain, I just knew I was going to have to put up with him again. I don't know why the stupid jerk won't leave me alone. I have told him I don't want to be his girlfriend. Softball practice doesn't get out until after his dad says he has to be home. Maybe he won't catch up before I get there.

I wish I had listened to Mom and put on jeans this morning. These pants are a mess. I'll have to wear shoes tomorrow. These sneakers will never be dry by then.

I hope old lady Joslyn didn't give Sis too much homework today. I don't mind helping her but when she has a lot to do, I have to work late on my own. At least she don't have some doofus boy hanging around that won't get lost when you tell him.

If we're good enough this year, we might make the sectional finals. The away games should keep that doofus away from me for a while. Maybe it will make him lose interest and find some other girl to bother.

"Melissa Fraser, Melissa Fraser, please come to the office," blared the PA system.

Apprehensively, she approached the four foot high, dark brown counter, dulled by multiple coats of dirt and wax. The wood at the bottom chipped and dented by many shoes.

The secretary bounded up from her chair. "Melissa, your mother has been in an accident and taken by ambulance to Oneonta Hospital. We don't know the extent of the injuries."

Standing for a moment in disbelief, queasy at first with a lump in her throat, legs quivering, she felt her cheeks burning as the blood rushed to her head. Her stomach flipflopped as she fought panic. Taking a deep breath, she asked the secretary to tell Sis to meet her at her locker.

Melissa walked home with Sis, her mind racing. How am I going to take care of Sis and the dog? We depend on Mom for everything. What will I do for money? Maybe it isn't serious. I've got to call the hospital.

After the call, Melissa knew Mom wasn't coming home, and she had to calm down. She called her father.

"Dad, can you take us to see Mom?"

"Honey, you know I can't."

"Well, what can I do about Sis?"

"Oh, I guess we can take Sis for a while."

"No Dad, you know she doesn't like your wife. I'll find a way, but can you at least send me some money?"

"Okay Melissa. Do you really think you can handle everything? I'd like to be more help, but you know how it is."

"Yeah Dad, I know how it is."

How are we going to see Mom? The bus goes through here at 4:00 P.M. and comes back from Oneonta about midnight. That isn't good for me or Sis.

I'd better get the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello Melissa, now don't hang up. Wait until you hear me out. This is Arnold."

"I told you not to call me."

"I know, but Mom told me about your Mom and I just wanted to offer some help. You need transportation and I have a car. I can drive on my junior license until 9:00 P.M., time enough to see your Mom and get back home."

"If I let you take me you'll be expecting me to go out with you. I won't do that Arnold Wargo."

"No, no Melissa. I'll leave you alone, I promise."

"Well, I'll call if I need you."

Doofus, she thought, of all people. I hate it.

Melissa called her Mom's boss. "Vern, this is Melissa. I was wondering if you could take me and Sis to see Mom at the hospital?"

"Gee Melissa, I really wish I could help you but I can't."

"Well, can you think of anyone else who might do it?"

Vern said slowly, "I'm sorry Melissa, I can't think of anyone at the moment."

As the tears slid down her face, thinking she'd rather die than ask that doofus, shivering in disgust, she reached for the phone.

“Arnold, this is Melissa. If you let me pay for the gas, and if you understand there is no way I’m going to date you, you can take us to Oneonta.”

“Sure Melissa, I understand. I’ll pick you up in half an hour.”

The P.A. system crackled. The voice began to say the words. “We have a happy announcement to make. The Stamford High School girl’s softball team has won a place in the Section “C” state championship finals. Congratulations girls. Good job.”

Melissa Fraser sat numbed in her seat. It happened. It actually happened. Her dulled senses would not allow her to acknowledge, for a moment, the hearty congratulations she was getting from the suddenly boisterous students around her. She slowly began to come out of it as she became aware of the teacher trying to get the class back under control.

As she came out of the building, after class, Melissa saw Tracy, her catcher approach across the lawn. “Hi Tracy. Did you hear the announcement?”

“Sure did. Way to go Melissa,” Tracy beamed. “We never would have made it without you.”

“Don’t say that Tracy. After all, it is a team. We all did it together. It wasn’t just me,” Melissa blushed.

“Yeah, I know, but you are the starting pitcher. You are the one that counts the most.”

“Please don’t say things like that Tracy. It isn’t fair. If you didn’t do such a good job catching, and if the infielders and the outfielders didn’t do a good job, it wouldn’t matter how good I was, we still couldn’t win a game. Besides, you can’t forget the batters. If they didn’t make any runs we couldn’t win either. Everybody on the team is important. Not just the pitcher.”

“Okay. I stand corrected. But you have to admit it Melissa. You are the best pitcher we ever had. You really make a big difference.”

“Well thanks for the compliment, but I still say, a pitcher is only as good as the team that backs them up. Now I’ve got to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“Oh, you mean about your mom and everything.”

“About my mom being in the hospital, and about Sis and the dog, and who is going to take care of them. Dad won’t take the dog and his new wife really doesn’t want Sis or me around. She doesn’t come right out and say it but I know she doesn’t want us there. We have to go away for several days for this tournament. That means I can’t visit Mom in the hospital if I go. That won’t be fair to Mom. I don’t know if I can even go Tracy. I hate to let the team down, but what can I do?”

“Wow. I never thought about all of those things. You’ve just got to try Melissa. We can’t do it without you. Have you told the coach yet? He’ll go nuts!”

“No. I haven’t seen the coach since the announcement, but he knew what I was up against all along. I’m sure it has crossed his mind. I’ll see you later Tracy, I’ve got to go.”

Melissa sought out the coach. “Hi Coach.”

“Hi, Melissa. Are you all pepped up for the tournament?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Coach. You know my situation. I don’t know what to do. I have to find someone to take care of my sister, take care of the dog, and I just don’t think it’s fair to leave Mom in the hospital and not go see her for the days the team will be away. I don’t know what I’m going to do Coach. You might have to go to the tournament without me. I hate to let the team down, but I may have to.”

“I know, Melissa. I know it’s been tough on you. I know that some things we just can’t change, but I also know that you will do the right thing, whatever that may be. You take your time. I’m sure things will work out for the best, and that’s all anybody can ask.”

“Thanks Coach.”

“Sure. Good luck.”

That night, as Melissa and Sis arrived at the hospital, Melissa was surprised that Mom already had heard the big news about the tournament. Mom said, “Melissa, you’ve worked hard for this and I don’t want you to miss it. I want you to go if there is any way you can.”

“You really mean that Mom? You won’t feel bad if I don’t come and see you? It will last most of the week.”

“Melissa, I will feel a lot worse if you don’t go, and I will really feel worse, knowing it is because of me. No, by all means, you go to that tournament and play your best. Don’t you worry about me. I’ll be just fine, and I will also be proud of you, whether you win or lose.”

“Gee, thanks Mom,” she said as she gave her mother a big kiss on the cheek.

“You have other things to worry about Melissa. You have Sis and the dog to provide for. You know Sis is too young to leave on her own.”

“I know Mom. I’ll do my best, and get your approval before I do anything.”

“That’s my good girl.”

Melissa thought for the rest of the evening about her dilemma. Asking Dad just won’t do. A bad situation all around. Sis out of school for a week, and Dad’s new wife might object and not like it and be unfriendly to her. Sis doesn’t like her anyway. Dad won’t take the dog either. I might have to put him in boarding, and I won’t do that unless it is the last resort. He hates being in a cage and I don’t blame him. Slowly and reluctantly, she knew what she had to do.

The next day, Melissa asked Arnold Wargo if she could ride to his house with him after school. Arnold had been driving Melissa and Sis back and forth to the hospital each day. Arnold’s mother was her Mom’s best friend. Until Arnold began taking her to see her mother at the hospital, she had always avoided Arnold, but now they had become friends.

“Well hello Melissa, what a pleasure to see you here. Congratulations on going to the tournament.”

“Thank you Mrs. Wargo. Actually, the tournament is why I am here. I can’t go to the tournament unless I can make arrangements for Sis while I’m gone, and since you are my mom’s best friend, I wondered if you could take her for a few days. I’m real sorry Mrs. Wargo, I don’t want to impose and I’ll understand if you can’t take her, but I had to ask.”

“Well of course you did Dear, and I won’t have it any other way. I’d love to have Sis stay here, and she can bring your dog too. We’ll have a merry old time, won’t we Arnold?”

“Yeah, sure Mom.”

Melissa got instant approval from her mother and informed the coach. It was all set. Melissa was going to the championship tournament.

The tournament got off to a good start. Stamford defeated Medina on the first day. The second day, they played Olean, and won again in a close game. The third day, Stamford felt the strain as they went into the tenth inning against Bath. The tenth inning was scoreless and the two were locked in a three to three tie. In the bottom of the eleventh inning, Stamford broke loose with a pair of base hits and won the game four to three.

On the fourth day, Stamford had to face Penn Yan. A school that had won the championship title three times. They were really tough. Coach told them not to worry. They didn't know how tough Stamford was, and therefore would be a little cocky, possibly causing them to make mistakes. All Stamford had to do was be ready for the mistakes and capitalize on them. Coach was right. Stamford won nine to three, due in large part to a couple of costly errors made by Penn Yan. On the fifth day, Chatham proved to be easier than expected.

The sixth and final day had arrived. Stamford and Whitehall were the only undefeated teams remaining, and would play for the championship. The girls were charged up and ready. The coach warned them to take their time, stay relaxed and not to make any mistakes. The time had come.

All went well. The girls performed smoothly. The game was tight, but Stamford went into a one run lead in the top of the 9th inning. All they had to do was hold on for the last half of the inning and the championship was theirs.

Melissa took her time on the mound. The first batter hit a ground ball to right field and got on first. The second batter hit a fly ball to left field. After the ball was caught, the runner advanced safely to second base. Melissa struck out the third batter. They were now down to the wire. This was it. It was the bottom of the 9th and two out with a runner on second. Tess Baker, the best hitter in the state came up to bat. A double, triple or home run would win the game for Whitehall.

Melissa and Tracy have been working on a drop curve, which Melissa has never used in a game. Her repertoire included a good knuckle ball, a fastball and a curve ball inside or outside.

Tracy walked to the mound. “Melissa, Tess will be expecting a fast ball on the first pitch. Throw her off with a knuckle ball. If you get the chance, I think now is the time to try that drop curve.”

Melissa agreed. When Tracy was in position, Melissa threw the knuckle ball. She could see the grin on Tess Bakers face, and knew she was thinking what a fat, slow target it was. Whooooosh!

“Steeerike,” shouted the Umpire.

Melissa thought, she's surprised and rattled now. She's crowding the plate. She thinks I'm going to throw a fastball and wants it to be a little outside. I'll fool her with an inside curve.

The sharp crack was heard as the ball was hit on the handle, going foul over the back stop, breaking the bat as well.

Melissa was getting butterflies in her stomach. The batter is down two strikes. This is it. Now is the time for the drop curve. It better be good she thought as she let go of the pitch. It was to Melissa a scene in slow motion. She had put all the spin on the ball that she could. She could see the smile on the batters face. She could read her thoughts, as she saw the ball coming straight down the middle towards her. Melissa knew

Tess Baker was thinking she was going to hit that ball out of the park. Then she saw Tess swing so hard it spun her around as the ball suddenly dropped and curved away from the arc of her bat. Melissa saw the stunned look on the batter's face, at the sound of the ball hitting the catcher's mit.

The roar of the crowd drowned out the Umpires call. The ball game was over. The season was over. Stamford was the new Class "C" state champion.

At a happy reunion back in Stamford at the Wargo home, Melissa squealed in delight, "I can't believe it, Sis. Arnold really took you to see Mom every day while I was gone and helped you with your homework too? What a guy."

Arnold laughed. "Your good news isn't over yet. Your mom is coming home from the hospital early next week."

Melissa turned to Arnold and said, "Thank you so much. Gee. I didn't know life could be so great. After Mom comes home, do you want to come over in the evenings to study for final exams?"