

TINKER BELL

by Kathy Webster

“You know smoking is bad for you?” Jessie sat sideways on the crumbling top step, one long leg dangling, the other supporting her cigarette arm. She swung her hanging leg nervously, and the Tinker Bell tattoo wrapped around her calf moved in and out of my view. Tink was a little blurry. One eye sported smudged liner and a corner of her smile had melted, giving her a demented look. She held onto that magic wand, though. Stars came from the end and shot up, wrapping their way to just above Jessie’s knee. “I know,” she blew smoke slowly into a breeze that carried it directly to my face.

I refused to react. I was tempted to ask about the crystallized tumors growing behind her lungs, discovered by that clinic doctor last month. But Jessie is alive. We never believed she would last past 30. Look at her. No teeth at 32. Skin like gray leather scarred by bad acne. Meth is a wonderful thing. She appears to be five months pregnant, but it’s not another unwanted, fatherless baby to be handed over to her mother to raise. It’s a tumor. That clinic doctor had scheduled surgery over a year ago to remove it, but Jessie didn’t show. Still, here she is, alive.

“So how is it going?” I asked. And she responded with the usual, “OK.” Four years ago, she weighed about 90 lbs. at 5 feet 6 inches tall. Four years ago, she saw demons looking at her from ceiling vents when she stayed at our home on her way to rehab. She had been ordered there by a judge in New Mexico. Meth and

heroin had taken everything from her, including her three children. I never asked her how she survived ten years while addicted. I probably know.

Her mother and I whispered about abortions, prostitution, drug dealing, but neither of us really wanted the truth. Teen Challenge took her in. At first, the boot camp existence almost killed the girl who had never suffered a consequence in her life. But God spoke to her there. He told her plainly, "This is your last chance." And she believed Him. Those words stuck with her when she got out.

She lived with some new friends and found a job as a waitress until she could hook up with a man. An ex-alcoholic, he struggled to make it, then his ex-wife unloaded his two girls at their door. He and Jessie worked two jobs apiece and the family survived. She worked at cleaning houses and caring for older people, anyone who would pay in cash. It was never steady, but she persevered.

She cleaned her own overpriced, worn-out apartment, cooked whatever they could get, and made the girls do homework and wash their hair and go to bed on time. Routine and structure did wonders for them.

I gave the girls rides to school since there was no car. They made the AB honor roll and hardly ever missed a day. "Have you had any work lately?" Another gust of smoke. "No, I really haven't been able to. I don't feel so great." She put a hand over her tumor, cradling it. I didn't know what to say. She never listened to a thing we or any doctor said anyway. Taking the girls to school kept me in touch with the family.

I helped where I could when they would accept it. So different from the days when I was afraid she would find out our address and steal from us for drug money. I had met Jessie when she was an incredibly beautiful five-year-old. Her mother and I have the kind of friendship that makes us sisters, so I lived the battles with them.

There is no despair like despair over a child. The demons of meth and heroin left claw marks deep on Jessie's body and soul. But instead of dying, she took her last chance seriously. I prayed. We all prayed. A lot.

Why were we surprised when she told us a word from God had changed everything? Jessie smiled, nodding her head so the

high bleached ponytail bobbed violently. “Thanks for the ride.” “You are welcome. Take care of yourself.” Tinker Bell grinned slyly at me as Jessie stood. The fairy waved her wand knowingly as I headed to my car.