



halls of our tiny five-story apartment building and down the narrow, steep stairs into the street.

It was really late by then, and the streets were empty except for all of us standing there. Some people were wrapped in sheets over their nightclothes. "Thank goodness it's summer," Mother said. Hardly anybody was fully dressed.

Soon the fire engines woke up the entire street and people came from everywhere to see where the fire was coming from. But it was only in the basement.

The firemen came with their boots and helmets and big fire hoses, and in no time they put out the fire. Afterward they let my brother Andrew and some of the other boys climb up in the fire truck and try on their firemen's hats.

The adults gathered in groups and talked softly so that we kids could hardly hear. There was a new little boy among us whom nobody knew. He was Mr. and Mrs. Mullen's little boy, from the fifth floor.

The superintendent brought him down in a wheelchair. Nobody knew him. Nobody knew he lived there. His mother and father were very quiet people; hardly anyone ever saw them. Mr. Mullen was a night watchman in a warehouse, so he went to work late and came home early. And Mrs. Mullen only came out to buy groceries and go to church on Sunday.

The little boy looked very strange as he sat twisting and turning in his wheelchair and reaching out to the other children, trying to grab their outstretched hands. He attempted to speak, but only grunts came from his mouth.

Some of the tenants remembered hearing strange sounds coming from the Mullens' apartment, and after that they'd hear "Shh, shh." Mrs. Potter, their next-door neighbor, said, "I would have never guessed that they had a little boy living there. We all thought that Mr. and Mrs. Mullen lived alone."

"What's wrong with him?" one of the neighbors asked his mother. "Is he your boy? Does he live in the building?" another

neighbor asked. But Mrs. Mullen didn't answer. She just kept looking at her son and he at her. He seemed so happy and she so sad. There were tears in her eyes and his too.

The men in the building gathered around the boy's wheelchair and lifted him up and carried him upstairs. My mother and some of the other mothers put their arms around Mrs. Mullen. "God don't put no more on us than we can bear, Mrs. Mullen," my mother said softly. "We understand."

The next day on our way to school we saw that same boy sitting in his wheelchair across the street in the sun. It was Kenneth Mullen, Jr. We knew now that he was six years old and he had never been out in the sun until now.

They said he had a disease that made him act funny and talk funny, in grunts and groans. But Mr. Parker, who had a medical degree though he worked in the post office, said he was a smart boy in the mind but his body was sick, and that his disease was called multiple sclerosis and there was no known cure for it.

After the fire Mr. and Mrs. Mullen didn't have to hide their little boy anymore. People in the neighborhood now knew him and loved him too.

Everybody going to work and to school stopped by to see him. Just like that, Kenneth Mullen, Jr., was no longer the boy whom nobody knew.