

Meg's First Day

BY DEBORAH KENT

I had practiced the walk to school three times the week before with Mom and my brother Sam, and the principal had even given me special permission to enter the building and learn where my classes would be held. Now, at the corner, I paused to review my directions: left on Prospect to the corner of Willow, across the street and left again down the long hill to Mulberry, across Mulberry, and half a block more to the signpost that marked the entrance to Ridge View High School. I used to envy Sam, his walks to school—friends ringing the doorbell, the group growing larger and noisier as it neared the school yard. From my bench on the front porch I would listen to them, running through the piles of dry leaves in the fall, throwing snowballs in the winter, teasing each other and making jokes about their teachers until their voices faded up the street.

The school bus was never like that. I would sit in the corner of my seat, reading a book or losing myself in daydreams, trying to draw away from the hubbub around me. No one had ever said so, but I was always sure that only weird kids had to take a bus and go to special school. The friends I made there never seemed as good as Sam's friends, who lived in the neighborhood, who could come over after school to play or do homework. There were voices ahead of me as I walked down the hill, the light, laughing voices of girls my own age.

"That's not what she told me," said the one on the right. "She told me he hung up on her."

"Yeah, but Sue, you can never believe what she says. She just likes to go after sympathy."

"I think she was telling the truth," said the one called Sue. Her voice was a little deeper and huskier than her friend's. "She was real upset, crying and all."

Suddenly I was afraid that they would turn and discover me behind them. Had they ever before seen someone who was blind? The rumble of traffic ahead told me that I was nearing Mulberry Street. I tried to tap my cane more lightly, left, right, left, right, right, assuring me of a clear path in front of me.

The girls had stopped, and I drew up beside them. "Paula's like that, though," Sue's friend said. "She can really put on a big act, and then..." However, her voice trailed off, and I felt them staring at me. My cane rang against the pavement. The tip dropped down to the street. I put out my foot and found the curb.

"Hi," I said into the silence.

A hand grasped my left wrist. "Careful," said Sue. "This is a real busy street."

"Are you going to school?" I asked as she propelled me forward. "Yeah, are you?"

"Yes," I said, and I could think of nothing at all to add. What was Sue thinking, what was she wondering about me? If I could find the right words maybe I could put her at ease, maybe I could restore life to their conversation and it would go on where it had broken off, only now I would be part of it. I would find out about Paula and the boy who hung up on her. I would make them see that I was just another fifteen-year-old starting high school today—a little scared, but everybody was scared, and maybe we were all really worried about the same things.

"I can walk by myself," I said at the far curb, and pulled my arm free. For a few moments no one spoke, and my words echoed in my ears, too harsh, too resentful.

Still, when Sue's friend asked finally, "How are you going to manage?" I felt a flash of anger. "Manage what?"

"Oh, you know—getting to classes, and what the teacher puts on the board—all that stuff."

I was explaining about visiting the school, about my Braille books, about being able to manage just fine, when Sue cried, "Darlene! Darlene, you nut, where've you been all summer?"

Then they were dashing ahead, melting into the laughing, chattering crowd that swarmed along the sidewalk. I felt like the only outsider as I pressed into the throng, alone and silent in the babble of greetings and gossip, clumsy and conspicuous with my white cane and my enormous book bag. I wished I had let Sam come with me after all.

I never found the signpost. As I searched for it through the crowd, my cane tangled among hurrying feet, and a boy exclaimed, "Why don't you watch where you're going?" But the signpost was quite unnecessary. I let the crowd sweep me around the turn, up the walk and through the heavy double front doors of Ridge View High School.

A week ago the corridor had stretched wide and empty, an avenue that lay so straight and clear I longed for a pair of roller skates. I could feel its height and width by the echoes my footsteps set bouncing from the walls and ceiling, and I walked a true course directly down the center. I had known that on this first morning it would not be the same, but nothing had prepared me for this frantic confusion. In the jostling crush of bodies I abandoned the use of my cane and fought ahead with one hand outstretched.

I don't know how I found the stairwell at the end of the hall. A bell rang, and feet thundered around me on the hollow treads. At least, I assured myself, no one had time to stare at me, to notice my uncertain steps and outstretched hand. At least for the moment I was no different from everyone else.

My homeroom, Two-Fourteen, was the third door on the right on the second-floor hall. A week ago I had found it easily by sliding my hand over the tall metal lockers and counting the doorways. But today I couldn't even reach the wall. I counted my steps and listened for clues, but my feet grew more and more unsure. At first I was afraid that I hadn't walked far enough, then that I had passed the door, and at last I seized a shoulder that brushed past me, and asked, "Where's Room Two-Fourteen?"

"This is Two-Twelve right here." It was a girl's voice, thin and nasal, with the hint of a whine.

"I must have passed it then." I turned back, so flustered that I forgot to thank her.

But she followed me protectively. "It must be this one," she said, grasping my arm just above the elbow. "Yeah, Two-Fourteen you wanted, right? This is it right here."

"Thanks," I said. I tried to free myself, to enter Two-Fourteen firmly on my own this first morning, but her fingers fastened more tightly and she pushed me ahead of her into the room. "I'm okay," I insisted, but she propelled me farther, and I was sure that the eyes of the entire class were fixed upon us.



"Here's a seat for you," she said. Her voice was loud in the relative quiet. "It's the first seat in the first row. That'll be easier for you." Her fingers relaxed their grip; she was gone.

Suddenly I realized that my book bag had grown very heavy. I set it down, folded my cane into its four short sections, and sank onto the hard plastic seat. My heart was pounding, and my hands were clammy with sweat.

All in all, it wouldn't have been a bad day if it hadn't been for the cafeteria. Students shouted and shoved, laughed and cursed. All of the regulations of Ridge View High were not enough to establish order there.

"Let me help you." It was a girl's voice, light and friendly. Gratitude overcame my desire for independence, and I was glad to let her maneuver me through the crowd. "Here's the end of the line," she said. "I've already got my tray, or I'd go through it with you. Can you make it from here?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Ahead of me two boys were deep in a discussion of the football team, and I followed them closely as the line crept forward. At last I heard the clatter of silverware just ahead. I found the stack of plastic trays, still hot and moist from recent washing, and hunted for the bins of knives and forks. "Come on! Move it!" a girl grumbled behind me. I grabbed a handful of silverware and slid my tray along the track.

"Hey," I said to the boy ahead of me, "can you tell me what there is here to eat?"

"All kinds of slop. You don't want any." His tray moved on and I followed, wondering miserably what I was passing up. The hiss of frying and the cloud of steam wafting from behind the counter told me we had reached the hot section. "Gimme some of that," the boy said; and I knew that I was next.

"What do you want?" the thin, cracked voice of an elderly woman demanded.

"I...I don't know. What is there?"

There was a moment of stunned silence before she burst out, "Oh, I'm so sorry, honey! I didn't realize! You like succotash? Let me give you some of this nice succotash. And how about some chicken croquettes? I'll give you a couple extra. I'm so sorry!"

But the worst part of all was still to come. At the cash register I realized that I still had to find a seat. The boys had dashed ahead, and I had lost their voices in the din. I thought of asking the girl behind me for help, but when I remembered her rough impatience, I was determined to go on alone. Hoisting my tray with one hand and wielding my cane with the other, I abandoned the safety of the line and entered the dining room.

"Is there an empty seat here?" I asked of anyone who might listen when my cane encountered a table leg.

"No," was the concise reply. Waxed paper rattled, a fork scraped a plate. I stood indecisively, taking in the sounds around me, trying to guess which way I should go. "There's a seat over there," a boy said finally.

"Over where?"

"Right over there. Over there on your left."

"Thanks," I made a sharp left turn and had taken two steps when the collision occurred. The tray leaped from my grasp, and I went down to shouts and the sound of shattering crockery. Inevitably someone cried, "Are you hurt?" and several demanded,

"What happened?" Dazed and wretched, I sat on the floor amid the ruins of my lunch and my pride.

"Well," Dad asked at the dinner table, "how was your big day?" "Fine," I said, and then, in case he might not believe me, "It was a little rough at first with so many kids."

"Did you get a lot of homework?" Sam wanted to know. "Tons! I never got this much last year."

"Do you need me to read anything to you?" Mom asked.

"No, I'm okay. I even got started in study hall. Everything is working out fine," I paused, remembering the girls on the street. "I just wish everybody'd quit trying to be so darn helpful all the time."

"They don't know what you can do and what you can't do," Dad said. "You're going to have to educate them."

"But they really bug me, you know," I said. "I can understand the kids maybe, but you'd think the teachers at least would be a little smarter."

"You'll just have to be patient," Mom said. As usual, she sided with Dad. "They've never known anyone before who was blind, and they're just trying to be nice."

"Nice!" I grumbled. Of course Dad and Mom were probably right, but that still didn't make it any easier. Only in the cafeteria, when I really did need someone, had no one offered assistance, and I had been too proud to ask. Maybe I was expecting people to read my mind.

"I've got the meanest math teacher," Sam said. "She's giving us twenty examples every night!"

"My history teacher's giving us a quiz every Friday," I said with a certain pride. "And in English we have to write a composition every week."

When dinner was over I followed Mom into the kitchen and started rinsing the plates. For a while we worked together in silence, putting the food away and loading the dishwasher. So I was caught off guard when she asked with sudden urgency, "How do you really feel about school?"

"I'm glad I'm there," I said. There was a lot I wasn't telling her, but that much, at least, was true.

Content and Style

1. a) Make a chart similar to the one below. Fill in the chart the way you think Meg would.

What I Like and Dislike About Ridge View High

Good Things	Bad Things

- b) In a paragraph, explain why you would or would not want to stay at Ridge View High if you were Meg.
2. If you were this author, would you tell the story of Meg's first day at high school from the first-person point of view? Explain why or why not using examples from the story.

Social Context

3. With a partner, decide whether Meg's main struggle is external (with her environment) or internal (with herself). Present your conclusions to the class.
4. Write about a time when you felt a conflict between wishing for independence and needing help.
5. In a letter to Meg, provide some suggestions about how she might teach her fellow students to understand her needs.

Personal and Imaginative Response

6. a) With a partner, write the directions that a person who is blind would need to go from your classroom to one of the following places: the gym, the cafeteria, or the library. Use senses other than sight to make up your directions.
 - b) Trade your directions with those of another pair of students. Imagine that one of you is blind. Try to follow the directions as read out by your partner. After the walk, write about what happened.
7. As Meg, continue the story after two months in your new school. Connect some of your events with ones from the original story. Include both narration and dialogue.