

MONDAY, MARCH 22, 1943

**German Tanks and Guns Battle
Eighth Army Units in North Africa.
U.S. Forces Suffer a Sharp Setback.**



**German Radio Claims That U-boats
Sank 204,000 Tons of Shipping in a
Convoy Battle.**



**1943 Draft to Call 12,000 Men Daily
As President Warns Nation It
Faces Reverses in War.**



Meatless Days in Restaurants.



1

I WAS LATE that Monday morning because my shoelace broke just as I was leaving for school. Meant I had to use some string. Now, you might think string would be easy to find, but it wasn't. String was something you gave away for the war effort. Besides, my sister had already left for school and my mother was at her job at the Navy Yard. Those days me and my family lived in Brooklyn. During the war. When I was eleven.

Like I was saying, I was supposed to be going to school. Class Five-B, Public School Number Eight. P.S. 8, we called it. The school's real name was The Robert Fulton School, but I never heard no kid call it that.

Anyway, by the time I finally got going down Hicks Street, I was so late no kids were there. Just grown-ups wearing big coats and dark hats. Me? I was dressed in my regular school outfit: bomber jacket, brown corduroy pants, plaid flannel shirt, and a snap-on glossy red necktie that almost reached my middle. Hanging round my neck

was what we called a dog tag. Sort of this tin disk with your name and address stamped on it. All us kids had to wear them. You know, in case the enemy attacked like at Pearl Harbor and people wanted to know who your body was.

The name on my tag was Howard Bellington Crispers. But the thing was, the only person who ever used my full name was my mom. And see, she only did when she was mad at me. So mostly people called me Howie. Which worried me, because it wasn't on my tag. I mean, how were they going to identify me if my name wasn't right? By my looks?

Back then I wasn't very tall. But my ears were big, plus I had the same old blue eyes and carrot-colored hair. Though Mom was always making me brush that hair down, it never stood flat. And no matter how much I was in front of the bathroom mirror pressing my ears back, they didn't stay flat neither. These days, being sixteen, I'm taller, but to tell the truth, the hair and the ears, they haven't changed much.

The other thing, that morning it felt like it was going to rain. Which meant my shoes—with the string lace—might get wet. Not so jazzy because, like everybody, we had ration coupons for only three pairs of shoes a year. For the

whole family. The point being, you did what you had to do because in those days, no matter what happened, you could always say, "Hey, don't you know there's a war on?" See, it explained anything.

So anyway, there I was, going down Hicks Street carrying my pop's beat-up wooden lunch box. Inside was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white Tip Top bread wrapped in paper, plus a graham-cracker snack and this dinky bottle of Borden's chocolate milk. My left hand was holding a canvas satchel with my schoolbooks.

This Hicks Street was narrow, squeezed tight by three-story brownstone houses with stoops. The neighborhood also had some old wooden houses, plus apartment buildings. My family lived in one of them apartments, a narrow third-floor walk-up with four small rooms. That included the kitchen complete with a few of your regular Brooklyn cockroaches. Didn't bother me. Everyone had 'em.

Them days, go along Brooklyn streets and you'd see tons of little flags with big blue stars in front windows. The flags were saying your family had someone in the war. Some windows had more than one star. There were gold stars too. Gold meant your someone had been killed.

There was this blue star in our window because my

pop was in the merchant marine. He sailed in the convoys going 'cross the North Atlantic bringing war supplies to our troops and allies. That meant we never knew where he was. When he wrote—wasn't often—his letters were censored. Which was because, like people said, "Loose lips sink ships." And let me tell you something—it was true too. Tons of ships were torpedoed by German subs. Wolf packs, they called them. And sailors—gobs of 'em—drowned. So I worried about Pop. A lot.

Oh, sure, I'd see him for a few days every couple of months. But it was always a surprise when he came. He'd be dirty, red eyed, needing a shave, and you wouldn't believe how tired. Most of his leave he just slept, except when he got up to eat apples. He loved apples. Ate 'em like they'd just been invented. Core and all, only spitting out the pips.

When his time was up, he'd sail off. We didn't know where. I don't think Pop knew. Anyway, we weren't supposed to ask.

Still, I was better off than my best friend, Duane Coleman, who we called Denny. This Denny, he never saw his pop 'cause his father—a tailor—was an Eighth Army GI. That's General Infantry. The Eighth was fighting Rommel,

the Nazi general, in North Africa. No saying when Mr. Coleman would be home. *If* he came home. All us kids were scared of getting one of them telegrams from the government that began, "REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT . . ."

Now, I was small, but Denny was smaller. I mean, the guy was waiting for his growth spurt like Dodger fans waited for a pennant. You know, "Wait till next year!"

Denny always had this serious look on his face. Maybe it was his wire-frame glasses, which not a lot of kids wore. Or his slicked-back black hair. Or the white shirt and the bow tie he was always wearing. Red suspenders too. Straps, we called them.

Most mornings I walked to school knowing Denny would be waiting for me in front of Coleman Tailors and Cleaning, his family's business. Going to school, we'd talk about war news, our dads, radio shows we heard.

Big radio fans, most late afternoons we listened to *Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy* and to *Captain Midnight*. Because of those radio shows, me and Denny knew America was swarming with spies. The night before, Sunday, *Suspense* was all about this dog that had been trained to carry messages for a Nazi spy, but turned patriotic for some kid. Pure *wham*.

Point is, a lot of them stories were real stuff. Instance, there were these Nazis that got dropped off at midnight by a U-boat right near Amagansett, Long Island—just miles from Brooklyn. Then they took the Long Island Railroad to the city to do sabotage. Except the FBI caught them. It was true too. You could look it up.

So, see, if Denny and me could have found one spy, just one! Jiminy! It would have been the bestest thing in the whole world. Because, see, Denny and me, we had this secret pact that said we weren't supposed to have no secrets from each other.

Now, also, on the way to school, we always passed this newsstand. It was run by this old blind guy—Mr. Teophilo. Mr. Teophilo sat on a wooden orange crate behind a board set on bricks, which had all these city newspapers—morning and afternoon—spread out. Understand, we wouldn't buy any papers. Just read the headlines. Sure, it was scary stuff, but we wanted to know.

This Mr. Teophilo—don't ask me how, 'cause like I said, he was old and blind—he always knew when we were passing by or standing in front of him. You'd come close and he'd turn in your direction with his eyes closed and his face not shaven so good, with this droopy white

mustache. Plus this pure gold chain around his neck. Least Denny and me thought it was pure. Don't ask me why we thought that—we just did.

Anyway, we'd come close and Mr. Teophilo would call out, "Hey, Howie. Hey, Denny. Things are looking good." Or, "Things are looking bad."

Or, like that morning, as I passed him, he said, "Hey, Howie, you're late! And things aren't going too well in North Africa neither."

Except that Monday I was worried about something else besides the war. See, I'd flunked my regular Monday math test so many times my mother said to me, "Howard Bellington Crispers, you get one more failing grade, you can forget about going to Saturday kid movies."

That was serious. The Saturday before, I'd seen Chapter Six of *Junior G-Men of the Air* at the Victory Movie Palace. It ended with this kid hero—Lionel Croft—flying his nifty biplane into a Nazi ambush behind the clouds. I *had* to know what happened.

So there I was walking along, with Lionel Croft and the Monday math test chewing my mind, when suddenly I saw Dr. Lomister, the principal of my school, P.S. 8. And the point is—because this is the way this story really

begins—Denny was always saying our principal—this Dr. Lomister—was a Nazi spy.

2

OKAY. Seeing Lomister on the street was like seeing King Kong walk by in his undershorts. Not only was the guy *not* in school, he was standing on a brownstone stoop pressing a doorbell button. The thing was, the way he kept turning around made me think he felt guilty about something.

Lomister was this big galoot, a whole lot taller than the other P.S. 8 schoolteachers, who were all women. Dr. Lomister and the custodian were the only men in our school. Why Lomister was called Doctor, I didn't know. Except it didn't have nothing to do with sick. I mean, the guy should have been a drill sergeant, not a principal. He was that nuts for rules. *All* rules. Let me tell you, that guy knew rules like Brooklyn kids knew how many games the Dodgers were out of first place.

Lomister had rules for everything. No tie, no belt—go sit in his office. Get caught running in the halls or shouting—

go sit in his office. Don't pledge allegiance to the flag right—go sit in his office. Write on the basement floor with chalk—go sit in his office. I don't know. Maybe he just liked company. I mean, nobody wanted to be with him.

See what I'm saying? He was a drill sergeant. Fact, Denny and I used to argue about how come Lomister wasn't in the war.

"Bet you anything he dyed his hair gray so he wouldn't get drafted" was my idea.

"A draft dodger?" Denny said. "Tell me another while that's still warm!"

Denny and me, we talked slang a ton. "Dressing up with words," my mom called it.

Anyway, I said to Denny, "Could be he's the last son of a last son. They don't have to go."

"Yeah," he said, "and your grandma drives a tank. He could've volunteered. My old man's fat, short, and bald, and he's fighting in North Africa right now."

"Well, maybe Lomister's got flat feet," I tried. "Flat feet don't march."

"Money from home, Jackson. He could've joined the navy."

"You're sitting on a block of ice," I shot back.

"Hey," Denny cried, "bet you two Wheaties box tops and six warm Mason Crows, I know what he is."

"Okay, what?"

"He's a spy."

"Tell it to the marines," I said.

After all, like we both knew, at regular Thursday morning school assemblies, Lomister was always giving these boring speeches that "this war is to protect our country. Because our country is run by rules, not men." And that we had to follow the rules for "our boys over there." You know, bunch of patriotic flak.

Thing is, the guy was always making a fuss about how early *he* got to school—before *anyone*, for cripe's sake. I mean, one of his favorite sayings was "You have to start early to bring our boys home early."

Not even my kid sister, Gloria, who drooled over school so much she got there twenty minutes before I did, arrived before Lomister.

But see, there was Lomister, *not* in school. He was on this stoop. Breaking his own rule about being early! And the way he was acting made me remember what Denny said: Lomister was a spy.

So I ducked behind a car to see what was going on.

3

THE FRONT DOOR to the brownstone opened. Whoever opened it stayed in a shadow. That was so suspicious it made me crack my knuckles, which I did whenever I was nervous, though my mother said I'd grow up deformed.

Anyway, next thing, Lomister took off his hat and went inside, shutting the door behind him. Just like the movies.

Now, Lomister went up the front steps—the stoop—that led up to the second floor, where the main door was. But see, next to the stoop was another set of smaller steps that went *down* a little ways to the lowest floor of the house. And next to those steps was a fenced-in place with a steel door that opened to a chute, which was used for delivering coal to the house furnace. Get the picture?

That morning the basement steel door was propped open a couple of inches. Probably because the coal man was coming. The minute I seen that, I knew I could open it more and get into the house and snoop around. And hey, if Lomister was a spy and I could prove it, then Denny and

me could tell the FBI. We'd be big-shot heroes with our pictures a front-page extra on the *Brooklyn Eagle*.

But there was a whole other idea which went through my head faster than the lightning that turned Billy Batson into Captain Marvel. It was this: If I got to school late, I wouldn't be able to take the math test. If I didn't take the math test, my teacher, Miss Gossim, couldn't fail me. If I didn't fail the test, my mom couldn't make me miss Chapter Seven of *Junior G-Men of the Air*.

What's more, as I was standing there trying to make up my mind, it started spitting rain.

All of which should explain how come I ran across the street, climbed over the low railing, and lifted that steel door.

I was going inside.

4

OKAY. This chute I told you about was a long U-shaped metal slide, shiny because of all the coal that had slid down. It went from the inside lip of the steel door right on

down into the house basement.

So what did I do? I sat on the door frame, legs dangling into the slide, lunch box and satchel under one arm, holding the steel door wide open with my free hand. Then I hitched forward and let go of the door.

Trouble was, the steel door dropped a lot faster than me, so I got me a *bingo-whacko* on the old bean. I'm telling you, sliding down the chute into the basement, I was seeing tons of stars. And all of them were in my head.

Next second I was sitting woozy at the bottom. But light was coming from somewhere, so I could see some stuff. I was in the basement all right. It was long, low, and hot, with stale, dusty air thick as butterscotch pudding. Place smelled rotten too. From garbage, I figured. At the far end were steps leading up, and a weak lightbulb glowing up top.

Next to where I came down was this big, bulky furnace with fat pipes that ran out from its top section. Looked like a giant robot octopus with silver arms. Nearby was a shovel for tossing coal into the firebox. The coal pile was real low. That figured.

Anyway, I was sitting there when the furnace turned on with a roar. Flames licked around the edges of the fire

door, throwing out more light. Now I could see stacked cardboard boxes and a workbench with tools. There was an old tennis racquet too, plus a couple of baseball bats. Also some old trunks and suitcases sitting right next to—get this—a couple of filing cabinets.

Now, them file cabinets wowed me. See, from radio shows, movies, and comic books, I knew that private eyes, superheroes, and secret agents *always* found what they called criminal-eating evidence in file cabinets. So there I was, surer than ever I was in a spy nest.

Soon as I got my head back straight, I stood up from the chute and headed for that flight of steps.

Grabbing the shaky banister, I went up. When I reached the top, I put my ear to the door. Didn't hear nothing. I tried the door handle. Wouldn't budge. Hey, more proof that whoever lived in the house had something to hide, right? Over our place we *never* shut doors. "You want to be private," we'd say, "go join the army."

Anyway, the door being shut, I went back down to the basement and tried to think what to do—other than leave. That's when I noticed another door, half the size of an ordinary door. It was set into a wall maybe three feet off the ground. No regular door handle, either, just a latch.

Right below were these garbage cans.

I shoved the cans to one side and tried the door. It was stuck, so I used two hands to yank. *Pop!* It opened! Set into a shaft was a large, tall box with ropes attached to its top. Two more ropes dangled in front of it. A broken dinner plate was lying on the bottom.

What I'd found was a dumbwaiter.

Now, in case you didn't know, dumbwaiters aren't "dumb" like in "stupid," but "silent." They were small elevators used for sending food and stuff from one floor of a house to another. Or they hauled garbage to the basement, which explained how come there were garbage cans down there.

Soon as I understood what I'd found, I got thrilled. See, I figured I could get into the box, pull on the ropes, and get into the house above.

Then I thought, Whoa down! I was chasing Nazi spies. Going up could be dangerous. But right off I said to myself, Hey, Howie, what's more important, math test or spy nest?

Being patriotic, I climbed into the box.

5

LET ME TELL you something, that dumbwaiter wasn't just tight, it stunk to high heaven. I had to sit with my head against my pulled-up knees, fingers of one hand squeezing my nose while my other hand grabbed hold of the rope dangling in front of me. When I jerked the rope down, the dumbwaiter, with me in it, went up.

Now, I have to admit, I worried what would happen if, you know, the ropes broke or the box got stuck. But guess what? Didn't happen. Every time I yanked the rope down, she went up-sa-daisy.

Sure, there was some squeaking. Nothing loud. And whenever I stopped—and it was hard work, so I stopped tons—it stayed put.

Now, soon as I moved out of the basement, everything went dark. *Super* dark. Then, going higher, I saw light seeping through cracks. I kept pulling the rope, coming to a stop only when—*bam!*—I slammed against something.

In front of me was this square line of light. It looked

like a door, so I pushed at it. Wouldn't give. I pushed again. When it still wouldn't budge, I squirmed around, got on my knees. With my body behind me—all seventy pounds—I shoved. The door burst open so quick I plopped onto the floor.

I was lying there trying to catch my breath when I heard a voice.

"This teacher," I heard Dr. Lomister saying—because I could be at the North Pole and I'd still know his voice—"this Miss Gossim, she must be immediately fired."

6

NOW, TO UNDERSTAND this story, you have to know right off that, far as I was concerned, the only thing worth going to school for was this Miss Gossim. Veronica Lake? Betty Grable? Lana Turner? Pretty nifty movie stars. But to me, nothing compared to Miss Gossim.

Miss Gossim was what we called a dilly, a dish, an angel-cake package with tutti-frutti icing on top. Full of smiles too. With frilly blond hair, blue-gray eyes, plus

lipstick-red lips. There may have been dirt in the world—wasn't a speckle on Miss Gossim. I mean, she wasn't just clean, she glowed. A regular flower. Like the kind which my class visited on a Brooklyn Botanic Garden field trip.

'Course, she could be strict. No gum chewing. If you were caught chewing, you had to stick the gum on your nose. No note passing. Caught passing a note and she'd read it out loud to the whole class. No writing on your desk neither. Do that and you had to stay after school and get it off. Least her rules made sense, not like Lomister's.

And Miss Gossim liked to laugh a lot. She had one of those laughs that made you join in. Or she said things like "Oh, let's forget long division and tell jokes." She would too.

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Amos."

"Amos who?"

"Amos-quito bit me."

Miss Gossim was kind, always asking us about our military dads, brothers, sisters, moms. You know, where they were. How they were doing. She even kept a map in the classroom to show it. All them teachers did that, only, see, Miss Gossim wasn't just doing it—she *cared*. So, natch, we

told her everything. I mean, that map was telling kids like me I wasn't the only one with family in the war.

Miss Gossim never got mad. Most she'd ever do was look at you sort of sad eyed and say, "Howie, I'm *very* disappointed." 'Course, if she said it, you'd feel worse than a Giants fan in Ebbets Field. I mean, I'd have done anything to get her smile back.

Rolanda was her first name. I heard the school secretary, Mrs. Partridge, call her that. I knew it must be true because she and Miss Gossim were friends. I never heard that name before. But to me, that name, *Rolanda*, was so magic I kept it to myself. Didn't even tell Denny, who, like I said, was my bestest friend with our secret pact about not having secrets. The thing was, when it came to Miss Gossim, things were different.

At night when I was in bed and the lights were out in the room which I shared with my kid sister, Gloria, I'd get to thinking about Denny's dad, or how hard Mom was working at the Navy Yard, or like I said, my math. Or, most of all, I'd worry about Pop sailing by Nazi wolf packs loaded with torpedoes just waiting to ambush him.

Thing is, to get all that stuff out of my head I'd pretend a smiling, perfume-smelling Miss Gossim was leaning

over me. Understand? She was my emergency brake, my life raft, my parachute, my own private rescue squad.

"Good-night, Howie Crispers," she'd whisper into my ear.

And I'd look up into those blue-gray eyes of hers and whisper, "Good-night, Rolanda Gossim."

Then, *wham*, like magic, them submarines would sink. The war stopped, Pop was safe, and I could sleep.

Only now Dr. Lomister was going to fire her.

7

ANYWAY, THERE I WAS, in this long, narrow hallway of the brownstone. The only light was coming from a window at the other end. The ceiling was high with some kind of leafy-design plaster molding. On the wall, blue wallpaper with pictures of clouds and birds on it. Hanging from the middle of the ceiling was this chandelier with dangling bits of glass. The light was off.

Looking toward the other end of the hall, I saw the curvy tip of a banister. Which must have belonged to steps

leading down. My escape, I figured, if I had to make tracks.

In the middle of the hallway—on the right—was a door. To an apartment, I guessed. At least, Dr. Lomister's voice was coming out from behind it.

Another voice—a lady's—said, "What possible reason is there to fire her?"

"Wilma, I'm not free to say" came Lomister's voice again. "Just take my word for it. She must leave."

I crept closer.

"Gilbert, didn't you tell me that this Gossim woman was one of your best teachers?"

"Teachers," Lomister said, like he was the local Mussolini or something, "must follow rules too."

"Can you find a replacement?"

"We'll manage."

"And what about the children? Will this upset them?"

"They won't care. A teacher is a teacher."

I cracked my knuckles.

"Well, since you've requested it, I suppose I'm willing to act," this Wilma went on. "How much notice are you going to give her?"

"One week. Next Monday will be her last day."

"Gilbert, isn't this unusual? It certainly hasn't happened

since I've come on the job. And in the middle of the term. Plus, I must admit, I'm curious. For you to come here at this hour—"

"It's a very personal matter, Wilma. I have no desire to embarrass the young woman. Besides, she and my secretary are close friends. And may I remind you, there's a war on. Strict moral standards must be adhered to. We must show the children that everybody—even adults—follows established rules."

So this Wilma ups and says, "Very well, Gilbert—if you wish it. I'll send someone to your office this morning with the paperwork."

"It'll be best—"

Now I was listening so hard my big ears were almost inside the apartment. So the second I realized Lomister was coming out, I tore to the end of the hall and dove back into the dumbwaiter. I was just reaching out to pull the door shut when the voices got louder, like they were in the hallway. I snapped my hand in.

"Thank you for coming by," the woman said.

"Wilma," Dr. Lomister said, "I do apologize for coming so early."

"I'll take care of things," the woman said. Then she

said, "Oh, dear. That dumbwaiter door is open. It'll make the hall smell."

"I'll fix it," Dr. Lomister said.

I made a grab at one of the ropes dangling before me and yanked. Instead of going down, the dumbwaiter went up. *Bang!* It smashed into the top of the shaft. I grabbed the second rope with both hands and pulled. This time the dumbwaiter went right. As I dropped, the door above me slammed shut. Everything went dark again.

8

FIGURING IT WAS SAFE, I let go of the rope and I took a deep breath, which was a mistake because I gagged on the garbage stink. But with the dumbwaiter staying put, I sat back. I had to think over what I'd heard.

Miss Gossim was being fired.

Now, don't get me wrong, grown-ups did tons of stuff I didn't understand. And, sure, they were them and I was us. But see, I couldn't figure any way how Miss Gossim could have done something that deserved being fired. Just

the idea made me feeble. And as for Lomister saying us kids wouldn't care, that made me furious.

The best I could figure was like this: Lots of radio or movie bad guys fell in love with pretty ladies. When the ladies refused to marry them, the bad guys did something bad to them. Which is why they were bad. But then these good guys came and saved the women and treated them right. Which was why there were good guys. Like me.

And with thousands of guys being drafted into the army and a whole lot of them being killed, good guys like me were getting scarce. The way I figured it, in a few years I'd probably be older. Then I'd marry her.

And the thing was, wasn't the whole war supposed to be about being a free country? Didn't Miss Gossim have the right to do what she wanted?

So sitting there, I made up my mind. It was up to me to do something to make sure Miss Gossim stayed around.

Only thing was, I had to get to school first.

Working the dumbwaiter ropes, I lowered myself down. I squirmed out of the box into the basement. My books and lunch box were where I had left them, right at the bottom of the coal chute. I was just about to climb out when that outside steel door flapped open.

I jumped back. First thing I saw, it was raining hard. Really coming down. Then a voice shouted, "Hey, Rediger! Door's open. Chute's set. Let the coal rip."

Next second motors whirring, gears grinding. Jeepers creepers! A coal truck was dumping coal.

Sure enough, coal chunks came roaring down the chute in a cloud of thick black dust. Then the steel door banged shut and I heard the trunk grind away.

Me? I was spitting and choking. I mean, I was covered with coal dust thick as a fried doughnut with fudge frosting. Worse, when the dust settled, all I could see was this huge pile of coal blocking my way out. Under it was my lunch box and schoolbooks.

I didn't have no choice. I picked up the shovel and started digging.

9
OKAY, WHILE THAT was going on with me, over at P.S. 8, up in Class Five-B, the school day was getting started.

Now, my fifth-grade classroom had these windows on

room door flung open. Thirty-five kids came tumbling in like gangbusters and raced for the wardrobe, then headed to their desks. Seats dropped, desktops lifted, books got shoved away. Then everybody sat with their feet straight, knees together, hands on top of their desks. Some were dressed pretty good. A lot weren't. The girls wore skirts. The guys had ties.

By the way, if you didn't wear a tie, most teachers stuck a paper—that said TIE on it—on your shirt with a pin. But Miss Gossim had a bunch of real ties for poor kids so they wouldn't get in trouble with Lomister. Like I said, she was a peach.

Anyway, after she took attendance, Miss Gossim said, "I am so glad to see you! I just know we're going to have a fine week. So, once again, good morning, children!"

This time all the kids came back in one ragged voice, "Good morning, Miss Gossim!"

She looked up and down the rows. "I'm so happy none of you are gumdrops," she said, "afraid of melting in the rain. We'll make our own sunny day. But, first things first. Hands out!"

The kids stuck their hands out palms down, over desks. Miss Gossim marched up and down the aisles look-

ing for filth. As she went by, kids flipped their hands over so the other side could be seen.

"Always good, Denny," she said. "Billy Leider, you need to do a better job beneath your nails.

"Excellent," she said when she checked all hands. "Now remember, tomorrow is head-lice examination day. Emily, are you listening? But let's start our day with the Pledge of Allegiance." She turned toward the monitor list.

"Denny, it's your turn to lead us in the pledge. As we all know, Denny's father is with our troops in North Africa. So we know how important this is for him."

Denny went up to the front of the class and in his high-pitched voice said, "Please stand for the pledge."

Seats rattled as kids came to attention. Hands over hearts, they chanted,

"I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND TO THE
REPUBLIC FOR WHICH IT STANDS, ONE NATION,
INDIVISIBLE, WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL."

Then the kids dropped down into their desks.

"Betty Wu, you're ink monitor today," Miss Gossim

said. "While you attend to that, I'll hand out the paper for our Monday math test."

This Betty Wu had just come to America from China. You could tell. I mean, she was really polite, always wanting to do the right thing.

Betty went to the back of the room, where she got the glass ink bottle with a steel spout on the top. Holding the bottle carefully, she went around the classroom filling each desk's inkwell. As she did, Miss Gossim passed out sheets of lined paper.

The kids took out their pens.

"We'll start with multiplication," Miss Gossim said.

"Problem one."

Suddenly the classroom door swung open. It was me, so soaked with black water I was a walking waterfall, leaving black floods all over the floor.

10

EVERYBODY STARED at me. But I just stood there, dripping.

"Howie," a startled Miss Gossim said, "is that you?"

"Yes, Miss Gossim."

"What happened?"

I looked at her, hardly knowing what to say. I mean, I knew what was going to happen to her before she did.

"Don't you think we should clean you up?" she asked.

"Suppose," I said.

Miss Gossim turned to the class. "I'll need a class monitor."

The hands shot up again. "Me! Me! Miss Gossim, me!"

"Miriam Aresenik," she said. "You can drill everyone in the twelve times tables."

This Miriam—she was tall with red hair in tight braids—came up to the front of the class.

"Now Howie," said Miss Gossim, "leave your lunch box and books here."

Side by side—Miss Gossim keeping her distance—we walked along the hallway until we got to a closet, where she opened the door. The little room was full of mops, brooms, and brushes as well as this big zinc sink. Reaching in, Miss Gossim got some old rags and began to pat me down, starting with my face. As she worked on me, she knelt. I could smell her perfume. And I could see her eyes

close up. They were really pretty.

"You were covered with black water when you walked in," she said. "As if you just crawled out of a wet coal mine. Now, Howie," she asked kindly, "what *did* you do to become so filthy?"

I kept thinking about how she was going to be fired. "Wh . . . at?" I said.

"I said you looked as though you just crawled out of a mine. What happened?"

"I . . . I fell into a coal pile."

"Weren't you looking where you were going?" she asked. I think she was trying to keep from laughing.

"I guess not," I said, not knowing how to explain.

She stood up. "Now what do you want to do?" she asked. "Do you want to go home and fetch some dry clothes? Or come to class? It's still raining. Perhaps you'd rather sit by the radiator and dry off."

"I want to stay," I said, afraid she'd be gone and I'd never see her again.

"Good for you!" she said.

Side by side—closer this time—we went down the hall, heading for class.

I was still dripping, but I was trying to find a way to

warn her about what was going to happen. "Miss . . . Miss Gossim," I said a few times.

"Yes, Howie?"

I couldn't get it out. "Thanks for . . . rescuing me," I said.

"You're quite welcome, Howie."

"I know."

Just as we reached the classroom door, she stopped. "Howie, I wish you'd tell me what happened."

"I'm all right," I got out.

She opened the classroom door and we walked in. The kids stared at us.

"Class, I'm afraid Howie got a little wet," Miss Gossim said with a smile. "He needs to sit near the radiator to dry off."

She took up the chair by her desk and carried it to the back of the room.

Grinning, I sat down by the radiator. It was hot and soothing.

Miss Gossim went back to the front of the room. "All right, class," she said. "We were just starting the math test. Howie, now that you're here, I think we should start again. But it might be best if you took the test back there."

My heart sank. I hadn't missed the math test after all.

"Denny, please take your friend paper and pen."

As Denny handed me the paper, his peepers, behind his glasses, were asking me all these questions about what was going on.

"Denny," Miss Gossim called. "Return to your seat, please."

Looking back at me over his shoulder, Denny did like he was told.

"All right, class," Miss Gossim said, "what is five times eight?"

I scribbled 64.

11

WHEN THE MATH test was done, Miss Gossim gave us a stretch time. In the scramble Denny came over.

"What's your story, morning glory?" he said. "How come you didn't meet me going to school?"

"My shoelace broke."

"Horsefeathers," he said. "How'd you get so wet and dirty?"

"Back to seats, please!" Miss Gossim called from the front of the room. "We have a very busy morning."

"I'll tell you during recess," I said.

"Let's take out our geography books," Miss Gossim said.

"We were on page forty-two. Argentina. The land of silver."

I started for my desk.

"Howie, are you dry?" Miss Gossim called across the room.

I said, "My shorts is damp."

The class laughed. So did Miss Gossim.

"Well," she said with a big smile, "get your geography book, but stay near the heat."

12

BY TEN-THIRTY snack time I was still by the radiator, pretty well dried out except for my shoes. They were still a little squasy.

About then Miss Gossim checked the clock, set down her copy of our reader, and said, "Class, you may put your books away and fetch your snacks." Then, all of a sudden,