

## ***Countdown***

**By Deborah Wiles**

I am eleven years old, and I am invisible.

I am sitting at my desk, in my classroom, on a perfect autumn afternoon — Friday, October 19, 1962. My desk is in the farthest row, next to the windows. I squint into the sunshine and watch a brilliant gold leaf fall from a spindly old tree by the sidewalk, and then I open *Makers of America* to page forty-seven because it's social studies time. I love social studies, love everything about it, and most of all I love to read aloud.

Mrs. Rodriguez, my teacher, has skipped me twice this week — twice! — when we read out loud during social studies, going down each row, desk after desk. I am determined not to let that happen again.

Mrs. Rodriguez wears square shoes with thick soles, and glasses on a beaded string around her neck. After conferences last week, I heard Mom describe her to Daddy as thick-waisted. Her fingers are the strong, blunt kind that put me in mind of my grandmother, Miss Mattie, who runs a store in Mississippi and is always hauling around boxes of boots or barrels of pickles. Miss Mattie's fingernails are cut straight across, but Mrs. Rodriguez has short, pointed nails that look like little triangles.

I thought she liked me. When we practiced duck-and-cover under our desks the first week of school, my headband popped off my head and I didn't even try to retrieve it — I just kept my head down and let my hair fall all over my face. Mrs. Rodriguez complimented me right in front of everyone and told me I was a perfect turtle.

"Carol," she says now, "will you begin, please, at the top of page forty-seven?"

Carol's desk is in front of mine, on the front row. She begins reading:

"Enemy Indians attacked the marching men as they made their way through the wilderness. Fever laid many of them low. But they were not men to turn back. Day after day they pressed on. At last, after three weeks, Balboa's Indian guide told him that, if he would climb to the top of the mountain just ahead, he could

look over to that 'other sea.' Only a third of the Spaniards were strong enough to attempt the climb with their leader. But at the break of day, those men set out from the forests toward the bare mountaintop."

We're getting to the good part (I read ahead), and I am so determined not to be skipped again that I dangle myself over my desk as Carol reads, then I incline sideways like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, in an effort to make sure Mrs. Rodriguez sees me.

I crook one foot around my chair leg, for ballast. This is a slow and subtle maneuver (thank you, Word Wealth Junior); I don't want the other kids to notice me, while at the same time I imagine Mrs. Rodriguez spotting me and saying,

Heavens to Murgatroyd, Franny, you are the best read-alouder in the entire fifth grade, and somehow I missed calling on you all week! Go ahead, dear, read away. Read twice!

Instead, Mrs. Rodriguez says, "Thank you, Carol. Jimmy, pick it up, please."

I slump against the back of my chair like a lump of biscuit dough. I am thunderstruck. Sick to my stomach. This makes three times Mrs. Rodriguez has jumped right over me — she must be doing it on purpose, she must be. Here I am, all set to read the part where Balboa tops the mountain rise and discovers a mighty ocean on the other side, but Jimmy Epps gets to read the heroics!

And he's a moron. All right, he's not a moron. I don't know what he is. I barely know him. But he's not a good reader, I know that. I start to raise my hand, to protest, to stick up for myself, but I can't. Even after two whole years in this school, I still feel too shy to speak up. I just don't have it in me.

Jimmy — who picks his nose at recess — doesn't sound the tiniest bit heroic. He can't pronounce "Isthmus of Panama" — he stumbles all over the entire "Isthmus" and I get to read nothing — nothing! — in the entire social studies period. Again.

I stop paying attention. I pull a thread out of my sweater and start knotting it in a half hitch, the way Uncle Otts taught me.

Kids drone on, one after another, in order, down the neat, straight rows, but I no longer hear them. Why does Mrs. Rodriguez hate me, why? It makes my heart hurt like it's a washrag and Mrs.

Rodriguez has just wrung it out and slapped it against the side of the sink.

I can't stand to think about it anymore, so I focus on adjusting my headband — I'm wearing my best one today, the wide red one with little teeth on the bottom that comb my hair when I push it onto my head. Then I look out the window to find something else to think about.

The sun is blindingly beautiful this time of year. I cup my hands at my eyebrows to shield my eyes. There's my brother,

Drew — Mr. Perfect — and all the other third graders lining up on the playground to come inside. He doesn't look the least bit like astronaut material. He's all angles and bones and too short. He looks like a little-bitty Uncle Otts. I'm going to tell him so on the way home from school.

The bell rings — we never had school bells in Hawaii — and

Franny-hater Mrs. Rodriguez proclaims, "Time for second recess, class." The third grade marches in to school, the fifth grade marches out. We don't pass one another — we're on opposite sides of the school — so Mr. Perfect and I don't see each other. That's fine with me. It's hard to be in the presence of saintliness all the time.

I file past Mrs. Rodriguez, who is waiting to close the classroom door. She smiles at me as if nothing has happened, but I won't look at her — I look at the checkered floor and keep walking. You have skipped me three times, I telegraph her, as the pit of my stomach burps my lunch into my throat. You probably don't even remember my name.

The darkness of the hallway blinds me — I am still surprised by the hallways with no windows and the closed-in way people go to school in Maryland. At Pearl Harbor Elementary School, the hallways had no walls. The classrooms had windows on both sides. Sunshine drenched everything. Camp Springs Elementary School feels like a cave.

I trudge down the steps, past the new black and yellow signs that look like bumblebee bull's-eyes, and step into the sunlight and the noise of kids who have been set free-free-free! But I feel deflated, which is almost worse than invisible.

I've forgotten my book — The Clue in the Diary, my newest

Nancy Drew — and without a book I don't want to be alone at recess — it looks bad and people think there's something wrong with you.

Already there's a kickball game going on. Do I want to play kickball? No. I'm a terrible kicker. Do I want to play jacks with Carol and Marcy? No. They don't like me all that much. Do I want to jump rope? I'm a great jump-roper, and there's my best friend, Margie, in the jump rope line, waiting her turn. She's deep in conversation with Gale Hoffman, a girl who lives in the neighborhood behind ours and whose mother lets her wear lipstick already and do whatever she wants.

When Gale went trick-or-treating last year, she knocked on our door at eight o'clock, when everybody else was already long home. I was upstairs trading candy with Drew, but I heard everything. Mom answered the door, gave Gale a Tootsie Roll, and told her to go home, it was too late to be out trick-or-treating.

Even my toes were embarrassed. Gale's mother is divorced, and

Mom doesn't want me associating with Gale, but Margie likes her, and Margie's mother doesn't seem to mind.

I hold my head high and make for the jump rope line. "Hey, Pixie!" I yell at Margie, waving. Eight girls look my way — I hate that — and Margie lifts a hand in return.

"Hey, Dixie," she says, but she doesn't sound as enthusiastic as I do. She brightens when she says, "Gale has the best idea for a Halloween costume!"

"Oh, yeah?" I risk a big smile for Gale and hope she'll smile back. "What is it?"

But before Gale can smile, before anyone can answer, the sky cracks wide open with an earsplitting, shrieking wail.

It's the air-raid siren, screaming its horrible scream in the playground, high over our heads on a thousand-foot telephone pole — and we are outside. Outside. No desk, no turtle, no cover.

We are all about to die.