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 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, tease 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, 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.