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! 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 ratted, 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.