

The Time I Was Late

December snow covered the ground, and many sidewalks were not yet shoveled. And I was late--I was going to be late for school. The earth might implode like a broken light bulb or explode like a cherry bomb, but I still had to be on time to school. I had never been late.

My report card for my first year of exposure to institutional learning was monotonously filled with A's in the rows for the subjects and 0's in the rows for days absent and 0's in the rows for times tardy and checks in all the rows for good deportment. My parents never said much about these great accomplishments, but I knew they were secretly proud of me by the way they never scolded me about school. They always got a sort of funny smile on their faces when I would bring home my report card, the kind of smile that is pretty flat and a little turned down at the ends. Then they would say, "Well, that's pretty good. Do you like Miss Larson?" And I would say "Yah." Then they would sign the report card and put it back into its brown envelope and give it back to me saying, "Now don't lose it." And that was like telling me not to lose my right foot.

Grandpa Green had told me when I started to school that he would give me a nickel for every A I got on my report card. So every six weeks I would write him a letter telling him about all the A's I got. An A in reading, an A in arithmetic, an A in spelling, an A in writing, an A in whatever other subjects I was taking, or were taking me. Nine A's, I told him one time at his house. He said, "Let's see, how much do I owe you then?" "I don't know." "Well, a nickel is 5 cents, isn't it?" "Yah." "Well, then, how much is 9 times 5?" "I don't know." "That comes to 45 cents, doesn't it?" "I guess." Then he would dole out the 45 cents or whatever the amount happened to be for that six weeks and like a good thrifty boy I would put it in my little silver metal bank that locked up with a key and I didn't have the key.

But I was going to be late for school. It was cold out and the big hand on the kitchen clock was getting down close to 4 and I had to be at school by the time it got to 6 and Mom was helping me put on my jacket and boots and hat with built-in earflaps and leggings and mittens and I was watching the clock and saying hurry up and I was finally ready to go but just before I got to the door Mom asked me if I had a hanky and I said no and she said wait a minute you've got to take a hanky and she ran upstairs to get one and I sort of had to go to the bathroom and the big hand kept on moving and I had never been home this late before and I stood there holding my lunch pail waiting by the door and finally she came down and helped me put the hanky in my jeans pocket underneath my leggings and then she kissed me good-bye and I ran out the door and kept running down our long street that ended at Mrs. Richards' house and my boots were heavy and I couldn't keep running like that so I walked awhile and then I ran some more and I was running past Charles Johnson's house and I got to the tracks and looked both ways and ran across them even though I was never supposed to run across the tracks because I might fall down and get hit by a zephyr because somebody else had done that once and I was still trying to run but I could hardly even walk and on my Mickey Mouse watch that Grandpa Green had bought me one time at the drug store the hand was down to 5 and I was only as far as the Ford garage and then I heard the first bell ringing at school and I never before realized you could hear the first bell at school from that far away and I started to kind of cry and I was puffing and running and my boots were too heavy and I was kicking snow as I ran and walked and ran again and I started down the last street that led to the school but it was the longest one and I couldn't run any more but I had to so I ran some more and the hand was almost down to 6 when I finally got to the big playground and it was empty and I had never seen it empty before and I stumbled up the steps and when I was in the cloakroom tearing off my coat and boots and hat and mittens and leggings the second bell started ringing and everyone was supposed to be in his seat facing forward with his hands folded on his desk and not talking when the second bell rang and I walked into the room just as the bell stopped ringing saying hopefully to Miss Larson that I was almost late wasn't I and I collapsed into my seat and was sick all morning.