

And there, Thomas saw something that  
made his eyes bulge and his jaw drop,  
and sent chills of terror shooting through his body.

But before he could move,  
a giant claw clamped onto the back of his neck  
while another covered his mouth,  
keeping his screams from being heard.

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# Under My Teacher's Desk

Arnold Ytreeide

Jericho Quill Press

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**Dedicated to Mrs. Ytreeide's Fourth Grade Class  
and especially to Max,  
who believes that being a custodian  
means more than just taking care of a building.  
Centennial Elementary School  
Nampa, Idaho  
1998**





## CHAPTER ONE

Jeremy Watson pushed his nose against the school bus window and watched as each breath he took made little clouds. On the other side of the glass he saw the sign for Rachel Steerman Elementary School go by, and as always he wondered who Rachel Steerman was, and why she had a school named after her.

The bus jerked to a stop in front of the school and Jeremy shoved his friend Thomas off the seat and out into the aisle. "Hey, you'd better watch it," Thomas said, laughing, "or I won't help you with your math homework tonight!"

"So what?" Jeremy laughed back as they pushed their way up the aisle. "If you don't help me with math then I won't help you with English!"

Just then they caught up with their friend Adam who cut in front of Jeremy and said, "And you'd better both help *me* or I won't let you sit in my brother's car anymore!" Adam's brother was much older than he, and drove a black Mustang convertible. Sometimes when he was home from college he'd let Adam and his friends sit in the car, and even took them for a ride once. It made Adam feel good, because sometimes he didn't feel as smart as his two friends.

"Okay, okay, you win," Jeremy laughed.

The three friends jumped off the bus and gathered near the Main Entrance with all the other fourth graders in Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class.

Rachel Steerman was a very ordinary and average elementary school. Every ordinary and average school day, all the students would climb off the busses, or out of their parents' cars, or would walk to school on foot, and line up in straight lines keeping their hands to themselves. When the bell rang, each teacher would fetch their own class, starting with the kindergartners and going on up through the sixth graders. Then they'd silently march into the school and down the hall, past Principal Sherman and into their classrooms to begin their work for the day. And it was usually about then, Jeremy knew, that Alison first got into trouble.

Alison was another student in Mrs. Winfred's class, and didn't much like having to stand in a line so straight, and march in a line so silent. So sometimes she just couldn't help whispering to her neighbor Alonzo when she thought of something really important to say. Like how many tacos she'd eaten the night before. Then Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Alison and Alonzo, and remind them that fourth graders don't talk in line.

Or sometimes it was Amanda who would get all fidgety, and wiggle and squirm and twist and worm her way down the hallway. Then Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Amanda, and remind her that fourth graders don't fidget. Then Amanda would say, "It wasn't me! It was Andrea!" and Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Amanda for lying, then quietly scold Andrea because maybe it *was* her after all.

Once in a while it was Andrew who would forget to walk with his hands at his sides and then Principal Sherman would call him out of line and, right there in front of Jeremy and Thomas and Adam and everyone else, remind him that fourth graders don't punch other people, even if it's just in fun, because hitting someone will get you kicked out of school.

Or sometimes Jeremy would hear other kids talking in line. "Personally," he might hear Brandon whisper to his neighbor Bree, "I don't see why we have to walk in lines so straight and silent. What's the big deal?"

"I don't know," Bree would answer. "It seems kind of stupid to me." Then Chris-with-a-C would add, "I think it should be against the law!" at which point Mrs. Winfred would scold all three of them, and remind them that fourth graders should respect authority.

Once inside their classrooms, the fourth graders of Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class would hang their coats and bookbags in their cubbyholes, then find their seats before the bell rang. Except that, just about every day, Corey would forget his pencil or library book or homework or spelling list and have to run back to his bookbag and then run back to his desk before the bell rang except that he never, ever, did make it in time. Then Mrs. Winfred would scold Corey, and remind him that fourth graders should be responsible and get everything out of their bookbag the first time, and no matter what, they never, ever run in the classroom.

Just about every day Darla would forget which city she was in. All the desks in Mrs. Winfred's class were arranged in groups of five, and each group of five was a different city because they were studying all the capitals of the United States. So Darla would go from Casper, Wyoming to Bismarck, North Dakota to Orlando, Florida to Olympia, Washington looking for her desk, and Mrs. Winfred would scold her because fourth graders should be able to remember that their desk is in Rockport, Maine.

Then Principal Sherman would come on the PA system. First he'd announce that Mr. Herdman's sixth grade class had won the canned food drive, or that there would be an assembly today to watch Mrs. Welch's fifth graders perform a play, or remind them that no one is allowed in the hallways without a pass. Then he'd announce that lunch today would be beans and weenies

or pepperoni pizza or Chef's Surprise, and then lead the whole school in the Pledge of Allegiance. And everyone in the whole school would stand at their desks with their hands on their hearts and look at the flag and recite the pledge with him. Except that, sometimes, Heidi would get distracted by a bug outside the window or an ant marching across the floor or a spider hanging from the ceiling and forget to say the pledge. Then Mrs. Winfred would scold Heidi, and remind her that fourth graders are old enough to pay attention.

And so it went every ordinary and average day at Rachel Steerman Elementary School (whoever Rachel Steerman was). First they'd do math, then they'd do science, next it was reading, and then came lunch. Writing followed that, and usually social studies, and PE and computers and music all fit in there somewhere.

At morning recess, Jordan would play jump rope with Katee and Kimberly, except that sometimes Jordan would mess up when it was her turn to twirl the rope and then Katee would get mad and Kimberly would be on Katee's side and Jordan would try to explain that it wasn't on purpose but nobody believed anybody and they'd all start yelling until Mrs. Blanchard the Duty Person would come over and scold them all because fourth graders should surely be old enough to play together without getting into fights. Then Mrs. Winfred would make them miss the next recess because fourth graders should be able to play together without getting into fights and Jordan and Katee and Kimberly would all think to themselves, "Didn't we already hear this?"

Every day Jeremy and Thomas and everyone else in Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class would turn in their math homework, and every day Kris-with-a-K would say to Mara-with-an-M that he really didn't much like doing math homework every day. "After all," he'd say, "we do it in class. And why do we have to know this anyhow? I'm just going to use a calculator when I grow up!" Then Mara would nod her head in agreement and say, "I think it's dumb! Who cares that six times six is fifty-two?"

"It's thirty-six," Kris-with-a-K would correct, and Mara would say, "Whatever!"

Then Lauren would write a note and pass it to Jeremy to pass it to Melissa and ask, "Did you get number four?" Melissa would write back, "No, did you?" and Lauren would write back, "No," at which point Jeremy would get very tired of passing notes and wouldn't pass any more. So Lauren and Melissa would go to Mrs. Winfred and try to explain that math was simply too much work, and perhaps they should learn something more useful instead, like snowboarding or radio-listening or movie-watching and Mrs. Winfred would scold them for writing notes in class and they'd both wonder how she knew.

But no matter what, Mrs. Winfred seemed perfectly convinced that her fourth grade class needed to learn math. So every day they'd sit on the floor and follow on the board as she pointed to one math problem after another. "Twelve divided by four is three," they'd all recite. "Seven times eleven is seventy-seven," all of which was easy for Thomas but difficult for Jeremy, even though he tried hard. But then sometimes Patrick would forget to recite with the rest of the class,

and would get interested in something terribly interesting like his shoelaces, or shirt buttons, or the stray string on his socks, or the stain on his pants. Then Mrs. Winfred would have to stop the whole class and scold Patrick, reminding him that fourth graders are old enough to work when it's time to work, and save their play for recess.

After science – during which Mrs. Winfred had to scold Quade for putting their test subject in the pencil sharpener because their test subject was a live frog and fourth graders aren't mean to animals – everyone went to lunch. Usually Shantell didn't like whatever was on the menu so she'd always get chicken nuggets instead. Sometimes she'd just be putting the first nugget in her mouth when Timothy and Travis both would flick Tater Tots at her. Then Mrs. Sanchez the Lunch Room Lady would scold the two boys and make them stay in to help Max the Head Custodian wash off all the tables because fourth graders are old enough to know that you don't throw food in the lunch room, and Max would scold them because he'd rather be out playing baseball with them than having to punish them. Then Mrs. Cho the Vice Principal would walk through the lunch room and ask Mrs. Sanchez why Timothy and Travis were washing tables, so she'd scold them and make them apologize to Shantell in front of the whole class. When Mrs. Cho left, Mrs. Winfred would scold them again because they had embarrassed the whole class and made Mrs. Sanchez and Mrs. Cho and Max the Head Custodian go to all that work of scolding them.

Next it was time for spelling, which Adam hated and Jeremy always aced. But Vanessa could never remember how to spell "house" or "horse" or "hiccup" because she always watched TV the night before a test instead of studying, so Mrs. Winfred would scold her and remind her that fourth graders are old enough to make good choices between work and play.

And when the day was almost over, and every fourth grader in Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class had been scolded for all the things that fourth graders need to be scolded for, it was time to feed the classroom cats, Nicodemus and Kitten, who lounged all day in baskets on the back counter. Nicodemus liked it when it was Whitney's turn to do the feeding, because Whitney always slipped him a piece of beef jerky or a fruit rollup – which he loved -- except that Mrs. Winfred would usually catch her and scold her, reminding her that fourth graders should know better than to feed human snacks to a pet.

Then the bell would ring and everyone would walk quietly to their cubby holes and quietly get their coats and backpacks and line up to walk out to the busses that took them home where, every night in every home parents would ask, "What did you learn today?" and every student in every home would answer, "Oh, nothing."

Yes, Rachel Steerman was a very ordinary and average elementary school where nothing strange ever happened and everyone had to learn math and reading and science and social studies, and Jeremy and Thomas and Adam were friends with the two girls in their city, Jasmine and Tracy.

Ordinary.

Average.

Until, that is, one certain day, late in January, when they came to school and everything, but *everything*, was different.





## CHAPTER TWO

It was on a Monday, the last one in January, that everything, but *everything*, was different. Jeremy and Thomas and Adam all arrived on the bus as always, and Tracy got there on hers and Jasmine walked, just as she did every day. And all the students in Mrs. Winfred's fourth-grade class gathered by the Main Entrance, like always. But when the bell rang for school to start, and all the students from all the classes lined up in straight lines, nothing happened. They stood there, silent, every breath making a little white cloud in front of their faces because it was so cold, waiting for their teachers to come and get them.

And they waited.

But no one ever came. Soon there were whispers going up and down the lines. "Where *are* they," Jeremy would hear them say, or "It's *freezing* out here!" Then the whispers turned into talking, and the talking turned into laughing and joking and shouting, and the lines started to blur as if some giant had wiped his hand across the playground. Finally, Terrible Ted The Sixth-Grader got up enough courage to open the door and peek in.

Everyone was instantly silent.

Terrible Ted looked to his left, then to his right, and Adam stretched his neck and opened his eyes wide to see what he might see. A moment later, Terrible Ted disappeared inside the building, and the door closed behind him with a "clang." A moment later, he opened the door again and waved his arm for everyone to come in. Jeremy and Thomas and Adam pushed toward the doors just like everyone else, forgetting all about straight and silent lines. Mrs. Winfred's class fought their way inside the building, but Alison, Alonzo, Amanda and Andrea couldn't figure out what was going on. They were talking loudly when suddenly they turned a corner and ran right into Principal Sherman. They stopped dead in their tracks, waiting for their scolding, but Principal Sherman just stood there smiling, and clapping his hands together lightly as if he were applauding some very tiny and very quiet opera.

"Good morning girls," was all he said. "I hope you have a *magnificent* day!"

The girls looked at each other in surprise, then looked at Principal Sherman suspiciously as they continued on down the hallway.

Right behind them, Andrew was busy putting his hands everywhere but at his sides. He jumped to hit a sign hanging from the ceiling – a sign that said "Keep Your Hands To Yourself" – and hit it so hard that one corner of the sign came loose and folded across itself so that now it just said "Keep Your Hands." Then he saw Principal Sherman watching him, and froze in his tracks, waiting for his scolding. But Principal Sherman just laughed and clapped his hands together as if he were applauding some very tiny and very quiet opera, and said, "Be sure to keep your hands, Andrew!" Then he laughed and clapped some more, as Andrew passed him by, wondering how he had gotten away with such a thing.

Meanwhile, Brandon and Bree and Chris-with-a-C were wondering outloud why they didn't have to walk in straight and silent lines. Brandon was just saying, "This is so *weird!* It's like no one . . ." when Mr. Herdman the sixth-grade teacher stepped out of his room, and Brandon clamped his mouth closed and started walking with his eyes straight ahead. But Mr. Herdman just smiled, and clapped his hands together lightly as if he were applauding some very tiny and very quiet opera. Brandon and Bree and Chris-with-a-C all looked at each other and shrugged.

Finally all the fourth graders in Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class had hung up their coats and backpacks and sat down quietly at their desks. Except that, just before the bell rang, Corey remembered he'd left his math homework in his bag. So he ran over to his cubbyhole, ripped through his bag, found his homework, closed his bag, and was just running back to his desk when the bell rang. He skidded to a stop and looked at Mrs. Winfred with one eye, waiting for his scolding.

But Mrs. Winfred just laughed and clapped her hands together lightly as if she were applauding some very tiny and very quiet opera. "That was very good running!" she laughed to Corey. "You should be on the track team!" Then Corey sat back down at his desk, and wondered why he had gotten a compliment instead of a scolding.

Darla was still looking for her desk because she could never remember which city she was in, so Mrs. Winfred laughed and clapped her hands and pointed it out to her saying, "Don't despair, Darla! Sometimes I think I'd lose my head if it weren't attached to my neck!" Then all the fourth graders laughed and so did Darla and Jeremy thought how strange this all was.

Then Principal Sherman came on the PA and announced that he thought the lunch menu sounded pretty gross, so instead he would buy everyone hamburgers and chicken nuggets from McDonalds, and maybe milkshakes too. Heidi couldn't believe her ears, and was so excited about it that she didn't even realize Principal Sherman forgot to do the Pledge of Allegiance.

When everyone had finally settled down, Mrs. Winfred stood at the front of the room smiling and clapping her hands lightly. "I think we've been working far too hard," she said, "and could all use a little vacation. So this morning, instead of doing math, I thought you might like to just draw a picture."

Fourth grade faces lit up all over the room. Everyone grinned at everyone else, not