

MISS O'BRIAN FELL DOWN

Noreen Channels

Miss O'Brian fell down. She slid on an eraser in the aisle and before we knew it, she had hit the floor.

We were being pretty bad that day; no one could settle down. A boy in the back had thrown something and all the guys died laughing. Then Beth went to sharpen her pencil – strictly forbidden without permission – and Harry jumped up and did a swishy little dance imitating her. Up front, someone “accidentally, on purpose” dropped a book on the floor and had to circle around the whole row to get it back, poking at people and bumping into chairs like he was drunk.

So it's no wonder that Miss O'Brian was furious, even more than usual. No one was listening and she had lost control. She stormed to the back of the room, screaming at everyone. “I'll call the principal! I'll call your parents!”

After the yelling was over, everyone was quiet and all eyes were on her as she headed back to her desk. That's when it happened. Suddenly, she was down -- boom -- just like that!

And, I was right there, on the aisle. Her dress came way up and I saw her lacy slip, the tops of her nylons. Her hairdo was ruined and one shoe came off.

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For years, I only remembered how Mrs. O'Brian looked down there, and how nervous we were as she struggled to her feet – the aisle too narrow and her all clumsy.

But, eventually, I saw that Miss O'Brian had become a person in that moment. My fourth-grade teacher was a woman, like my mom, other moms, ladies at church. And, I realized, she was vulnerable, afraid of us, embarrassed.

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I wish I could see her now. I would say that I hope things got better for her, that she came to like teaching and children, and that she had a good career.

I'd tell her that she shouldn't think anyone dropped the eraser on purpose, to make her fall, and that I hoped she wasn't hurt that day. And I might tell her that my mom had a lacy slip just like hers.