The Wrong Lunch Line
By Nicholasa Mohr

The morning dragged on for Yvette and Mildred. They were anxiously waiting for the bell to ring. Last Thursday the school had announced that free Passover lunches would be provided for the Jewish children during this week. Yvette ate the free lunch provided by the school and Mildred brought her lunch from home in a brown paper bag. Because of school rules, free-lunch children and bag-lunch children could not sit in the same section, and the two girls always ate separately. This week, however, they had planned to eat together.

Finally the bell sounded and all the children left the classroom for lunch. As they had already planned, Yvette and Mildred went right up to the line where the Jewish children were filing up for lunch-trays. I hope no one asks me nothing, Yvette said to herself. They stood close to each other and held hands. Every once in awhile one would squeeze the other’s hand in a gesture of reassurance, and they would giggle softly.

The two girls lived just a few houses away from one another. Yvette lived on the top floor of the tenement, in a four-room apartment which she shared with her parents, grandmother, three older sisters, two younger brothers, and a baby sister. Mildred was an only child. She lived with her parents in the three small rooms in the back of the candy store they owned.

During this school year, the two girls had become good friends. Every day after public school, Mildred went to a Hebrew school. Yvette went to catechism twice a week, preparing for her First Communion and Confirmation. Most evenings after supper, they played together in front of the candy store. Yvette was a frequent visitor in Mildred’s apartment. They listened to their favorite radio programs together. Yvette looked forward to the Hershey’s chocolate bar that Mr. Fox, Mildred’s father, would give her.

The two girls waited patiently on the lunch line as they slowly moved along toward the food counter. Yvette was delighted when she saw what was placed on the trays: a hard-boiled egg, a bowl of soup that looked like vegetable, a large piece of cracker, milk, and an apple. She stretched over to see what the regular free lunch was, and it was the usual: a bowl of watery stew, two slices of dark bread, milk, and cooked prunes in a thick syrup. She was really glad to be standing with Mildred.

“Hey Yvette!” She heard someone call her name. It was Elba Cruz, one of her classmates. “What’s happening? Why are you standing there?”
“I’m having lunch with Mildred today,” she answered, and looked at Mildred, who nodded.

“Oh yeah?” Elba said. “Why are they getting a different lunch from us?”

“It’s their special holiday and they gotta eat that special food, that’s all,” Yvette said.

“But why?” persisted Elba.

“Else it’s a sin, that’s why. Just like we can’t have no meat on Friday,” Yvette said.

“A sin…Why—why is it a sin?” This time, she looked at Mildred.

“It’s a special lunch for Passover,” Mildred said.

“Passover? What is that?” asked Elba.

“It’s a Jewish holiday. Like you got Easter, so we have Passover, We can’t eat no bread.”

“Oh…”

“You better get in your line before the teacher comes,” Yvette said quickly.

“You’re here!” said Elba.

“I’m only here because Mildred invited me,” Yvette answered. Elba shrugged her shoulders and walked away.

“They gonna kick you outta here…I bet you are not supposed to be on that line,” she called back to Yvette.

“Dumbbell!” Yvette answered. She turned to Mildred and asked, “Why can’t you eat bread, Mildred?”

“We just can’t. We are only supposed to eat matzo. What you see there.” Mildred pointed to the large cracker on the tray.

“Oh,” said Yvette. “Do you have to eat an egg too?”

“No…but you can’t have no meat, because you can’t have meat and milk together…like at the same time.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s against our religion. Besides, it’s very bad. It’s not supposed to be good for you.”

“It’s not?” asked Yvette.

“No,” Mildred said. “You might get sick. You see, you are better off waiting like a few hours until you digest your food, and then you can have meat or milk. But not together.”

“Wow,” said Yvette. “You know, I have meat and milk together all the time. I wonder if my mother knows it’s not good for you.”

By this time the girls were at the counter. Mildred took one tray and Yvette quickly took another.

“I hope no one notices me,” Yvette whispered to Mildred. As the two girls walked toward a long lunch table, they heard giggling, and Yvette saw Elba and some of the kids she usually ate lunch with pointing and laughing at her. Stupids, thought Yvette,
ignoring them and following Mildred. The two girls sat down with the special lunch group.

Yvette whispered to Mildred, “This looks good!” and started to crack the eggshell.

Yvette felt Mildred’s elbow digging in her side. “Watch out!” Mildred said.

“What is going on here?” It was the voice of one of the teachers who monitored them during lunch. Yvette looked up and saw the teacher coming toward her.

“You! You there!” the teacher said, pointing to Yvette. “What are you doing over there?” Yvette looked at the woman and was unable to speak.

“What are you doing over there?” she repeated.

“I went to get some lunch,” Yvette said softly.

“What? Speak up! I can’t hear you.”

“I said...I went to get some lunch,” she said a little louder.

“Are you entitled to a free lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Well...and are you Jewish?”

Yvette stared at her and she could feel her face getting hot and flushed.

“I asked you a question. Are you Jewish?” Another teacher Yvette knew came over and the lunchroom became quiet. Everyone was looking at Yvette, waiting to hear what was said. She turned to look at Mildred, who looked just as frightened as she felt. Please don’t let me cry, thought Yvette.

“What’s the trouble?” asked the other teacher.

“This child,” the woman pointed to Yvette, “is eating lunch here with the Jewish children, and I don’t think she’s Jewish. She doesn’t—I’ve seen her before; she gets free lunch all right. But she looks like one of the—”

Hesitating, the woman went on, “She looks Spanish.”

“I’m sure she’s not Jewish,” said the other teacher.

“All right now,” said the first teacher, “what are you doing here? Are you Spanish?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you come over here to get in that line? You went on the wrong lunch line!”

Yvette looked down at the tray in front of her.

“Get up and come with me. Right now!” Getting up, she dared not look around her. She felt her face was going to burn up. Some of the children were laughing; she could hear the suppressed giggles and an occasional “Ooooh.” As she started to walk behind the teacher, she heard her say, “Go back and bring that tray.”

Yvette felt slightly weak at the knees but managed to turn around, and going back to the table, she returned the tray to the counter.
A kitchen worker smiled nonchalantly and removed the tray full of food.

“Come over to Mrs. Ralston’s office,” the teacher said, and gestured to Yvette that she walk in front of her this time.

Inside the vice-principal’s office, Yvette stood, not daring to look at Mrs. Rachel Ralston while she spoke.

“You have no right to take someone else’s place.” Mrs. Ralston continued to speak in an even-tempered, almost pleasant voice. “This time we’ll let it go, but next time we will notify your parents and you won’t get off so easily. You have to learn, Yvette, right from wrong. Don’t go where you don’t belong...”

Yvette left the office and heard the bell. Lunchtime was over.

Yvette and Mildred met after school in the street. It was late in the afternoon. Yvette was returning from the corner grocery with a food package, and Mildred was coming home from Hebrew school.

“How was Hebrew school?” asked Yvette.

“Okay.” Mildred smiled and nodded. “Are you coming over tonight to listen to the radio? ‘Mr. Keene, Tracer of Lost Persons’ is on.”

“Okay,” said Yvette. “I gotta bring this up and eat. Then I’ll come by.”

Yvette finished supper and was given permission to visit her friend.

“Boy, that was a good program, wasn’t it, Mildred?” Yvette ate her candy with delight.

Mildred nodded and looked at Yvette, not speaking. There was a long moment of silence. They wanted to talk about it, but it was as if this afternoon’s incident could not be mentioned. Somehow each girl was afraid of disturbing that feeling of closeness they felt for one another. And yet when their eyes met they looked away with an embarrassed smile.

“I wonder what’s on the radio next,” Yvette said, breaking the silence.

“Nothing good for another half hour,” Mildred answered. Impulsively, she asked quickly, “Yvette, you wanna have some matzo? We got some for the holidays.”

“Is that the cracker they gave you this afternoon?”

“Yeah. We can have some.”

“All right.” Yvette smiled.

Mildred left the room and returned holding a large square cracker. Breaking off a piece, she handed it to Yvette.

“It doesn’t taste like much, does it?” said Yvette.
“Only if you put something good on it,” Mildred agreed, smiling.

“Boy, that Mrs. Ralston sure is dumb,” Yvette said, giggling. They looked at each other and began to laugh loudly.

“Old dumb Mrs. Ralston,” said Mildred, laughing convulsively. “She’s scre…screwy.”

“Yeah,” Yvette said, laughing so hard tears began to roll down her cheeks. “Dop…dopey…M…Mi…Mrs. Ra…Ral…Ston…”