

## The Pledge

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Trying hard to keep from crying as I put one foot in front of the other on my way to my ninth-grade homeroom, I glanced at the hallway wall just outside the door. I froze. I shivered with a burst of gut-wrenching fear. I saw in my mind's eye all of us kneeling on the floor. Yesterday we had a 'civil-defense drill' against that same wall. We were kneeling with our heads down touching the floor and against the wall, tushies in the air behind us, hands trying to protect our heads from some imagined debris. As if they could stop the toppling ceiling from killing us. It was all so matter of fact, yet the bizarre enormity of the situation struck deeply. I had imagined nuclear bombs going off just outside the school and couldn't picture how we would survive. Living just 10 miles from ground zero at the White House in mid-October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, we had no hope of survival if the war began. From the news last night, it seemed like that was a real possibility. The US and Russia were toe to toe, eye to eye, waiting for some excuse to kill us all. It was all so surreal.

I somewhat recovered from the memory that was almost a vision, and walked into the room, chilled as the cool air hit the sweat from my fear. My face was grim and unbelieving as I saw and heard the typical chaos of my classmates in their relaxed mode at the beginning of school. "Morning, Miriam!", Gail called out to me as I walked towards my desk. Eric calmly chatted with Julie about math homework. Emma waved her hands in the general direction of Esther telling a story about her latest adventure with Derek. Did I just enter the Twilight Zone? Did everyone suffer from amnesia? They all seemed so normal. I sat down and Ginger tapped me on the shoulder. "Miriam, did you watch TV last night?" Finally, someone who was connecting with reality. I turned around and scanned her face. She was bright and cheery as usual. "Wasn't Andy Griffith hilarious?" I stared blankly. "Miriam, you okay?" I pictured screaming and even took a breath and opened my mouth in preparation, converting it to a sad sigh at the last moment. Ginger squinted in concern. Then Mrs. Footen came in and everyone quieted down, face front, awaiting attendance and our recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

During roll call I visualized again what would happen if the bombs fell. I had seen movies of the effects of nuclear explosions, and they were not pretty. I shivered again. After the drill yesterday, most of us were really shaken. Some talked about how terrible the commies were, and how we had to get them out of Cuba. However, they then seemed to drift back into the normalcy of Junior High. Lessons. Assignments. Boys. I could not. My work suffered. I spent most of my time thinking about the stupidity of war.

"Miriam Goldberg?", Mrs. Footen called out, bringing me out of my reverie. "Here", I replied. I knew that after the roll call we would be standing, putting hand on heart, and reciting the Pledge before the end of homeroom and we went to our first class.

Then, all of a sudden, I had a revelation. The room changed. A red flag with hammer and sickle replaced the stars and stripes. The map of the U.S. of A. on the wall became a map of the Soviet Union. I was a Russian girl. My skirt was longer. The sky outside darker. The teacher even more severe than my own, if that could be possible. I was a normal Russian ninth-grader, with a family, thinking about boys, fearing the

coming war and dutifully ready to say my own Pledge to my own Soviet Flag and country. How bizarre that a random twist of fate landed her there and me here. We were just normal girls doing normal things and wishing for a normal life. Now we were almost at war. Why should I have allegiance to the random home of my birth? I thought my home was special, but the Russian girl of my mind assuredly thought her home was special also.

I was back in my classroom. The teacher was finishing roll call: ‘Roger Zuckerman?’ Roger responded. I heard faint steps fade down the hall outside the classroom. A bird flew by outside the window—a crow, wings flapping impossibly slow. I looked down at my hands. They looked back at me. . . . The pledge was next. I made a decision. Everyone stood in preparation. Hands on heart.

Except me.

I stayed in my seat, thoroughly conspicuous. I just continued to look at my hands. They continued to look back at me. Have to trim my fingernails. Ginger nudged me from behind, whispering my name. I didn’t budge. I felt, more than saw, Mrs. Footen’s glare. I finally looked up. I saw a mixture of concern and scorn, but she must have started leading the pledge before she noticed my lack of cooperation, so couldn’t say anything. I was shaking a bit—my fear of what would come next overcoming my fear of the war. Everyone but I recited: “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” I always thought about how there was not liberty and justice for all. I knew about the civil rights movement and how Negroes were treated in the South. We all saw it on the news. How could we say a pledge to what was not true? And now, how could we say a pledge that is meant to confirm our allegiance to a country set on a path to war that would kill us all.

After it was done, people sat down. Mrs. Footen came over to me. She stood nearby and glared. She asked with more than a hint of anger in her voice, “Miriam, why didn’t you stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance?”

I paused. What could I say? She wouldn’t understand. I looked again at my hands. They continued to look back at me. I finally raised my eyes and stared into her’s.

“I decided not to.”

She didn’t bother to ask why. I could see that she couldn’t imagine any good reason for such horrible behavior. Her face turned red, her eyes bulged—I could have laughed, except that I was frozen, tensing for what must be coming next. It was clearly a strain for her to keep her voice civil and low, but there was fire in her restraint, asking, demanding, “What do you mean? You decided not to?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “You can’t do that!”, raising her voice as she raised her arm, pointing down the hall: “Miriam Goldberg, go to the Vice Principal’s office this minute.” I blushed as I felt everyone’s eyes on me. Then I suddenly let go of my tension. I had made my choice. I now must take the consequences. I gathered my things and followed instructions.

It was a very long walk down that hallway. I did not go quickly. Left foot. Right foot. The hall was empty so my steps echoed and my shoes let out a faint squeak. I had heard that Mr. Veitt was an okay guy, in contrast to my homeroom teacher, who everyone thought was a witch. I kept saying to myself with disbelief, “I am going to the Vice Principal’s office. I am going to the Vice Principal’s office.” The VP was the one all the troublemakers were sent to see. How odd that I was now one of ‘them’. I had never been

to his office, being a good girl, generally. Well, I never got caught before. I didn't know what to expect. Certainly detention. Suspension? Expulsion from school, kicked out in shame as a threat to national security? I slowed my slow walk even further.

Finally I arrived and sat in the office area outside his door. The secretary was bustling about shifting papers from one place to another. The phone rang and she answered cheerily. Again, good cheer as the world goes down the toilet. Teachers came in occasionally to check their mail. My history teacher Mr. Craig came in, and glanced at me in surprise.

"Miriam? What are you doing here? You never get in trouble."

"Until now", I replied, mumbling to my hands in my lap. Constant friends. Never complaining.

"Hmmm. Talk with me later if you wish." I nodded in his general direction. He got his mail and left.

Mrs. Footen stomped in and went into Mr. Veitt's office. She stomped out a few minutes later, pointedly not looking at me. Then Mr. Veitt came out of his office, and waved me in. I sat down in front of his desk. He sat behind it. I looked down at his desk, counting the pencils and pens, refusing to look up at him.

"Mrs. Footen just told me what happened." I looked up. He shook his head. I tensed for the tirade. "We can't do anything about what you did. And, Mrs. Footen cannot punish you for such things. You have free speech here, and no one can force you to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Why you refused is your own problem, not ours. Go on to your first class."

I didn't move right away. What did he say? He cannot punish me? I am free to go? Did I hear correctly? I finally got up, opened the door and closed it behind me, somehow ending up in the hallway on my way to math class. Wow! That was so easy. This is so cool. I felt a wave of unfamiliar, genuine confidence. I was a hero. I was a spokesman for calm. I beamed with pride.

A moment later, of course, my pride was tempered by the enormity of the still real possibility of war. It followed me everywhere like a dark cloud.

We had another drill during the next class. Again, it freaked me out.

My friends gave me strange stares. It seemed that everyone was giving me strange stares. They didn't understand, but they didn't talk about it. I didn't either. Later, I met some of my friends at lunch, as always.

Bobby stared at me. "I heard what you did. Are you crazy? Are you a commie? How could you not take the pledge?" I stared back. Didn't he understand? He continued, without waiting for a response, "The commies are bad people. They have missiles only 90 miles off Florida. We have to kick them out of Cuba."

"But that's the thing, Bobby." I perked up, provoked by the disagreement. I enjoyed discussions with disagreements, as long as no one got really angry. I looked him squarely in the eyes. "They are not bad people. They are just people." I explained the vision of my Russian counterpart. "The girl I imagined was just a normal kid. They don't grow horns just because they were born in Russia."

He stared at me as if I were from Mars. "You are crazy. You are a goddamn commie or commie sympathizer. Jesus, Miriam. They *are* evil. They are trying to take over the free world, and we have to stand up and be strong against them."

I stiffened at first. I was no communist. It was just, just... I couldn't summon the words. I stared at him staring at me. I looked at my hands—always there to look back. I stood up and walked away, leaving half my lunch behind.

I was confused. How could I be so misunderstood? Of course, Bobby was sometimes such a jerk. I dismissed what he said, and reasserted my own pride in my own actions. I went home after school, excited again to tell my parents and older brother about my adventure. I knew they would understand. We always talked about what we saw on the news, and they encouraged me to think for myself. My brother was studying political science at University and he knew tons about stuff like that. My parents were very liberal. My mother always talked about how her father was a socialist union organizer during the depression. They would realize how important my actions were. They would be proud of me.

No one was home when I arrived, as expected, so I hit the playground for some fun. My gang and I played our own kind of ballgame that we called 'mortal-cucumber', or 'mortal-q' for short. It was good to use my body, and I temporarily put the day, the threat of war, Mrs. Footen, Bobby and the confusion behind me.

Home for dinner, we sat quietly and ate while my Father talked about his day at work. This was our pattern—he talked while I pretended to listen while I ate. That was fine with me, since I was pretty hungry. He was an engineer with a consulting firm selling electronics to the Army. My brother—five years my senior—had a part time job, also with a consulting firm. Washington, D.C. was a company town, and the company was the government. Next, Dave told about his day. I didn't really follow what he said, thinking about how I would tell them about what I had done.

Then it was my turn.

I proudly recited the morning's activities. My family was quiet while I spoke. My father put his fork and knife down on the table. He stared at me in disbelief. I figured he was surprised at how great I was. Once I finished I awaited the praise. I smiled, looked at my Mom—she was frowning. And my Dad also. Even Dave was not happy. I had been so engrossed in telling my story that I missed all the cues. Finally, after trying unsuccessfully to control his anger, my father hit the roof. "What were you thinking? Are you trying to get me fired? I have a security clearance". My brother loudly interrupted "So do I. We could both get fired." My father continued, "Don't you ever do anything like that again."

"But, I expressed my freedom of speech, like the vice principal said. I chose to take a stand." I pleaded for some praise, choking back the tears starting down my cheeks. My thoughts jumped back and forth to my choice, Mrs. Footen's anger, Mr. Veitt's nonchalance, Bobby's attack, and back to the tirade that was aimed my way here. "Wasn't it the right thing to do?" I ended with a whine.

"No, No, No. No, it was not. Not at all", Dad was still yelling. "You have to be practical. You have to face facts." Mom interrupted, "Calm down, Al. She doesn't understand." He took a breath. With slightly more quiet, he tried to explain, "This is the world we live in, and we have to do what is expected of us. I bust my butt every day to put food on the table, and you come along and threaten all that. If anyone thought we had a communist in our family I would get fired. David would get fired. We would be out on the breadlines." He forgot to be calm. I whined back, 'But, I'm not a communist! I just can't understand the reason for hating each other!' Dad replied, 'That doesn't matter.

You refused to pledge allegiance to our country. That is enough to brand you a communist.'

It went on that way for some time, but I started to tune it out. I finally excused myself and slinked sullenly to my room. Teddy consoled me only slightly. What went wrong? Was I wrong? Was my family wrong? What happened?

I thought about it. I knew something important had happened this morning. I had seen through another's eyes. I felt as she felt. I touched her own humanity, even though our governments were about to go to war. I felt awake beyond anything I had known. Yet, I didn't get the praise I expected. My friends didn't understand. My own family did not appreciate me. I had done something wrong. Something that threatened them. Something dangerous. Instead of praise, I got yelled at. They insisted that I do the right thing—which was nothing! Inaction in the face of what I thought was wrong? How could that be the right response? My mind raced.

Finally, I sighed and hugged Teddy. My tears dried up. My pride dried up. My resolve dried up. I took a mental step backwards. When we stand up, we sometimes get slapped down.

I learned my lesson. I was just not sure I learned the right lesson.