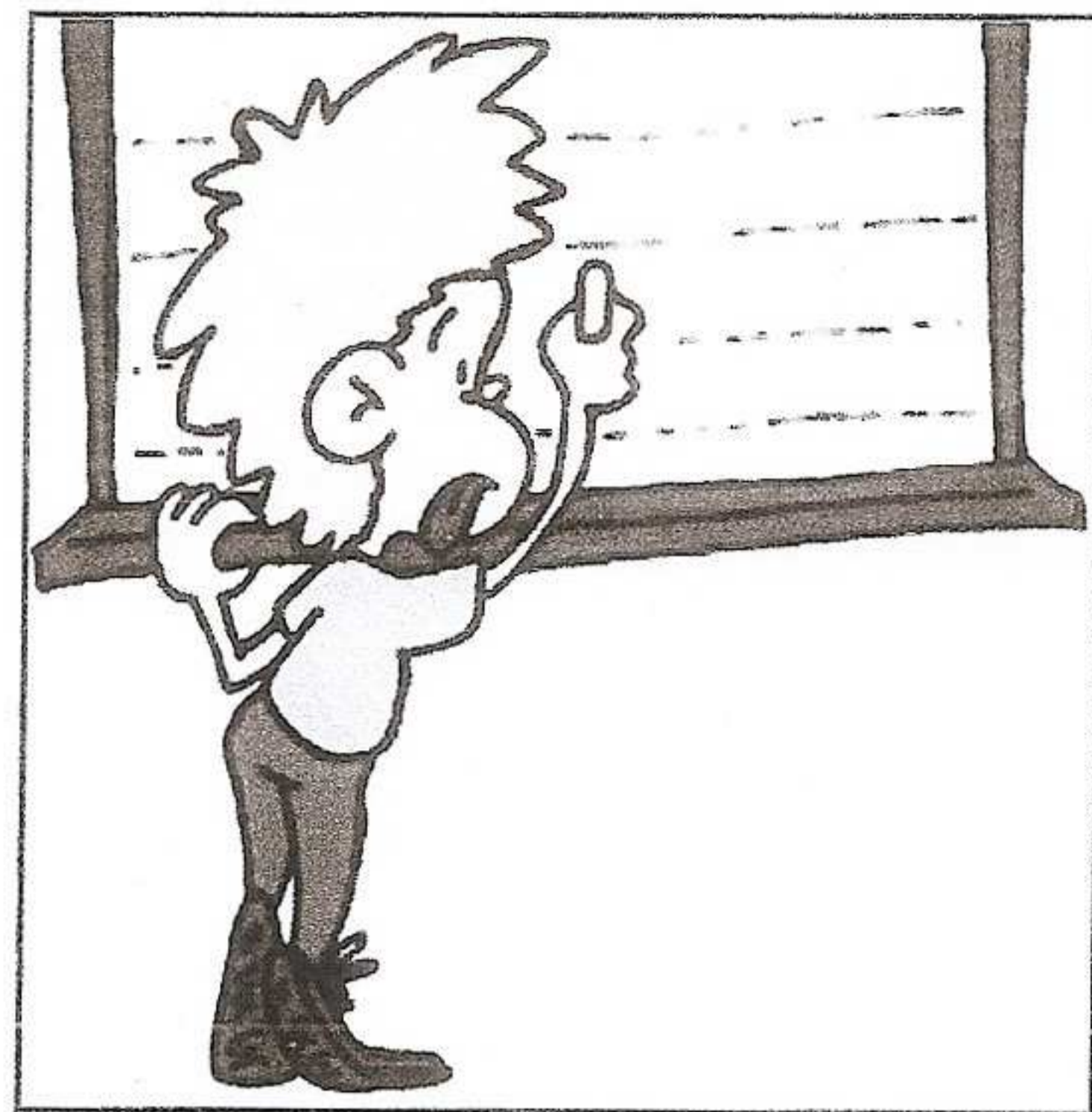


I was still shy and half paralysed when in the presence of a crowd; so my first day at the new school made me the laughing stock of the classroom. I was sent to the blackboard to write my name and address; I knew my name and address, knew how to write it, knew how to spell it; but standing at the blackboard with the eyes of the many girls and boys looking at my back made me freeze inside and I was unable to write a single letter.



"Write your name", the teacher called to me.

I lifted the white chalk to the blackboard and, as I was about to write, my mind went blank, empty; I could not remember my name, not even the first letter! Somebody giggled and I stiffened.

"Just forget us and write your name and address", the teacher coaxed.

An impulse to write would flash through me, but my hand would refuse to move. The children began to titter and I flushed hotly.

"Don't you know your name?", the teacher asked.

I looked at her and could not answer. The teacher rose and walked to my side, smiling at me to give me confidence. She placed her hand tenderly upon my shoulder.

"What's your name?", she asked.

"Richard", I whispered.

"Richard what?" [she said soothingly.]

"Richard Wright."

"Spell it."

I spelled my name in a wild rush of letters, trying desperately to redeem my paralysing shyness.

"Spell it slowly so I can hear it", she directed me.

I did.

"Now can you write?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then write it."

Again I turned to the blackboard and lifted my hand to write, then I was blank and void within. I tried frantically to collect my senses but I could remember nothing. A sense of the girls and boys behind me filled me to the exclusion of everything. I realised how utterly I was failing and I grew weak and leaned my hot forehead against the cold blackboard. The room burst into a loud and prolonged laughter and my muscles froze.

"You may go to your seat", the teacher said.

I sat and cursed myself. Why did I always appear so dumb when I was called to perform something in a crowd? I knew how to write as well as any pupil in the classroom, and no doubt I could read better than any of them, and I could talk fluently and expressively when I was sure of myself. Then why did strange faces make me freeze?

I sat with my ears and neck burning, hearing the pupils whisper about me, hating myself, hating them.