



Once upon a time there was—and still is—a school called Northwest Southeast Central School.

Northwest Southeast Central School is located to the southeast of a town called Northwest, which is located to the northwest of a big city called Central City.

You don't need to know where Central City is, because it's not important. What *is* important is the school. In this school there is a classroom. And in that classroom there is a fifth-grade class. Most important of all, in that fifth-grade class there is a student named Henry McThrottle who likes to tell stories.

That's where I come in.

I'm Henry McThrottle . . . and this is my latest story.



It all began one morning when I walked through the front gate of Northwest Southeast Central School, across the yard, up the steps and through the door of the 5B classroom.

I was slightly late, and class had already started. Not that you would have known it.

Mr Brainfright, our teacher, was hanging by his toes from one of the ceiling rafters.

His arms were crossed and his face was bright red.

Now, normally, if you walked into a classroom and your teacher was hanging by their toes from the roof, you might be a little alarmed.

You might ask them if they're all right, or try to help them down, or at the very least report the situation to another teacher.

But I didn't do any of these things. You see, Mr Brainfright wasn't a normal teacher. You

only had to look at the way he was dressed to tell that. With his purple jacket, orange shirt and green pants, he looked—and acted—like no other teacher at Northwest Southeast Central School, for which we were *very* grateful. School had been a lot more interesting since he'd taken over from our old teacher, Mrs Chalkboard.

Mr Brainfright greeted me with a big smile.

'Good morning, Henry!' he said. 'I'm just demonstrating how bats sleep.'

I nodded. 'I've always wondered about that,' I said.

'Well, now you know,' said Mr Brainfright, dismounting with a somersault and landing on his feet. 'Any questions, class?'

Fiona McBrain put up her hand.

'Yes, Fiona?' said Mr Brainfright.

'Will we be tested on this?' she asked.

'Certainly not!' said Mr Brainfright. 'Any other questions?'

'Don't bats sleep in coffins?' Clive Durkin asked.

'That's vampires, Clive!' shouted my friend Jack Japes, laughing. 'Don't you know *anything*?'

Clive narrowed his eyes. 'I'm going to tell my brother you said that.'

'What?' said Jack. 'That bats don't sleep in coffins? He doesn't know either?'

‘No,’ said Clive. ‘That you said I don’t know anything.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ said Jack. ‘I just said that vampires, not bats, sleep in coffins.’

‘Can you stop talking about bats and vampires?’ said my friend Jenny Friendly. ‘Newton’s getting scared.’

Jenny was right. Our friend Newton Hooton’s eyes were wide as he clutched his lucky rabbit’s foot and shook visibly.

‘You don’t have to be scared of bats, Newton,’ said Mr Brainfright. ‘Or vampires, for that matter.’

‘Yes, he does,’ said Jenny. ‘Newton’s scared of everything.’

This was true. Newton *was* scared of everything. He was even scared of being scared. That’s how scared he was.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Brainfright. ‘Sorry, I forgot.’

‘Can we do maths now?’ said Fiona.

The rest of the class groaned.

‘Certainly not!’ said Mr Brainfright.

Everybody cheered. Everybody, that is, except Fiona.

‘But it’s Monday morning!’ said Fiona. ‘We always study maths on Monday morning!’

‘Correction,’ said Mr Brainfright. ‘You always *used* to study maths on Monday morning. But

today I've got something *much* more important to teach you than maths.'

'What could be more important than maths?' said Fiona.

'Magic tricks!' said Mr Brainfright.

The class cheered again.

'I *love* magic tricks!' said Jack.

'Me too!' boomed Gretel Armstrong. She had a very powerful voice. She also had very strong arms. In fact, she was the strongest girl in the school.

'Me three!' I said.

'Excellent!' said Mr Brainfright, beaming as he produced a long black magic wand from inside his purple jacket. 'I thought we'd start with the vanishing pencil trick. Knowing how to make a pencil vanish is a very important life skill.'

I didn't know how true his words were then. But I do now.



Knowing how to make a pencil vanish is a very important life skill.



We all leaned forward to watch Mr Brainfright make a pencil vanish.

‘The most important thing to know about making a pencil vanish,’ said Mr Brainfright, frowning and patting his coat pockets, ‘is to make sure you have a pencil *to* vanish. I seem to have vanished all of mine. Does anybody have a pencil that I could borrow?’

‘Will we get it back?’ asked David Worthy, our class captain.

‘I hope so,’ said Mr Brainfright. ‘But I can’t absolutely guarantee it, of course. I’m going to be using a very powerful spell.’

‘You can have mine!’ I said, opening my pencil case and pulling out the pencil that Mr Greenbeard, our school principal, had given me as a reward for finding his buried treasure. It was green with black stripes and had a little white eraser in the

shape of a skull. The truth was, I didn't like it very much, but I couldn't say why. Maybe it had something to do with the way the eyes of the skull eraser seemed to stare at me.

'Thank you, Henry,' said Mr Brainfright, taking the pencil from my hand. 'Everybody ready?'

We all nodded.

Fiona was scribbling notes.

Newton was looking scared.

Mr Brainfright tapped the pencil with his wand. 'Abracadabra,' he said, 'make this pencil disappear!' Then he tapped the pencil again and, I swear, it completely disappeared. 'Voila!' said Mr Brainfright, looking as surprised as everybody else.

We all burst into applause.

'That's how you make a pencil vanish!' he said proudly.

'Can you make it come back again?' said Clive.

'But of course!' said Mr Brainfright. 'Well, I think I can. Stand back everyone.' He raised his wand. 'Abracadabra, make the pencil reappear!'

He tapped the wand on the table. Once, twice, a third time, and then . . . *KAPOW!* Pencil shavings exploded out of the end of Mr Brainfright's wand directly into his face!

Pencil dust filled the air.

Some of the students who sat in the front



row were coughing and gasping for breath, but no one was coughing or gasping more than Mr Brainfright. His face was turning bright red again, only this time it was brighter and redder than when he'd been hanging upside down. He clutched his throat with both hands, staggered backwards across the classroom, and then . . . fell out the window.

We all stared at each other in shock.

Then, thinking that it was all part of the show, the class burst into applause again.

But I didn't. I knew something was wrong.

I rushed to the window and looked down.

Mr Brainfright was lying on his back. Still clutching his throat. Still choking.

I didn't hesitate.

I jumped out the window and landed next to him in the flowerbed.

Fortunately, the flowerbed was nice and soft, as it had recently been dug up.

For once I didn't have to worry about Mr Spade, the gardener, getting mad. Mr Spade was on stress leave after having to fill in all the holes that had been created a few weeks ago when the whole school had been looking for buried treasure.

But even if I didn't have to worry about Mr Spade, I *did* have to worry about Mr Brainfright.

He was choking to death!

He staggered to his feet and stared at me, his eyes pleading for help.

Luckily, just the week before in class, he'd taught us the 'Heimlich' manoeuvre, guaranteed to dislodge foreign material from throats. Don't ask me why he was teaching us that, but I was suddenly very glad that he had.

Without thinking I jumped up, grabbed Mr Brainfright from behind and gave him a violent hug.

He coughed loudly, and then, incredibly, my pencil—now whole again—flew out of his mouth!

There was another round of applause.

I looked up to see the whole of 5B hanging out the window, giving Mr Brainfright's amazing trick a standing ovation.

Mr Brainfright was frowning. 'I think they think I did it on purpose,' he said, 'but I didn't. That wasn't supposed to happen.'



At lunchtime, Jack, Jenny, Gretel, Newton and I were sitting out in the yard underneath the trees next to the basketball court.

Jack was picking gherkins out of his sandwich and flicking them onto the grass.

Newton's face was white. He was trembling.

'Jack,' said Jenny, 'can you not do that? You're scaring Newton.'

'Huh?' said Jack. 'How?'

'He's scared of gherkins,' Jenny reminded him. Newton nodded.

'Sorry, Newton,' said Jack, closing his sandwich. 'I forgot. I'm not too keen on them either.'

My sandwich was sitting beside me, but I didn't feel much like eating. I was still a bit shaken by the incident with Mr Brainfright.

I took the pencil out of my pocket and examined it carefully.

‘I’ll tell you what I don’t like,’ I said. ‘I don’t like this pencil. There’s something strange about it. Something . . . I don’t know . . . *wrong*. It scares me.’

Jack laughed. ‘What a brave pair you are. Newton’s scared of gherkins and you’re scared of a pencil!’

‘You’re not so brave yourself, Jack,’ Gretel pointed out.

‘Yes I am,’ said Jack. ‘I’m not scared of *anything*.’

Gretel laughed. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘Name one thing!’ said Jack.

‘Fred Durkin,’ Gretel replied, referring to Clive’s big bully of a brother.

‘Fred Durkin?’ snorted Jack. ‘Fred Durkin’s about as scary as a gherkin. Or a pencil, for that matter. I’m not scared of him.’

‘Oh, really?’ said Gretel.

‘Really,’ said Jack.

‘Well, you’re about to get your chance to prove it.’ Gretel pointed to the other side of the basketball courts. ‘Because here he comes!’



Gretel was right. Fred Durkin was heading straight for us, followed by Clive, who was running to keep up with him.

The blood drained from Jack's face.

'You want me to handle them?' said Gretel, rolling up her sleeves.

'No,' said Jack, chewing his lip. 'I'll be fine.'

Fred crossed the basketball court.

As he did so, a ball hit him in the head.

I expected him to turn around and kill the poor kid who threw it, but he didn't. He didn't even blink. He just kept walking until he was standing right in front of Jack.

'That's him there, Fred,' said Clive, pointing at Jack.

'I see him,' said Fred.

'Is there a problem?' said Jack politely.

'Yes, there's a problem,' said Fred. 'There's

a *big* problem. You disrespected my brother, Japes.'

'No I didn't,' said Jack.

'Yes you did,' said Fred. 'He said you called him dumb.'

'I didn't!' said Jack.

'Well, he says that you said that he didn't know anything. So, as far as I'm concerned, that's as good as calling him dumb.'

'I didn't say he didn't know anything,' said Jack. 'I asked him if he didn't. That's all.'

'Same thing!' said Clive.

'No it's not,' said Jack. 'That's how dumb you are . . .' Jack suddenly realised what he'd just said. 'Oops.'

Fred stared at him for a long time without saying anything, then he smiled and shook his head. 'You know what, Japes?' he said. 'Lucky for you I'm in a good mood today. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. In fact, I'm in such a good mood, I'm going to play a little game with you. It's called Yes Means No and No Means Yes. Do you want to play?'

'No,' said Jack, 'thanks, but—'

'Great!' said Fred. 'So you want to play!'

'No,' said Jack. 'I said no!'

'But no means yes!' said Fred. 'That's how we play the game—I ask you a question, and

you have to answer yes or no. Okay? First question . . . hmm, let me see. Do you want me to punch you?’

Jack opened his eyes wide in alarm. ‘NO!’ he said.

‘So you want me to punch you?’ said Fred.

‘No!’ said Jack.

‘No means yes and yes means no,’ Fred reminded him, ‘so what I’m hearing is that you want me to punch you!’

Clive sniggered.

‘No!’ said Jack. ‘. . . I mean yes!’

‘Yes you *do* want me to punch you or yes you *don’t* want me to punch you?’ asked Fred. ‘Remember, no means yes and yes means no!’

‘Yes!’ said Jack. ‘*Yes!*’

Fred looked triumphantly at the group of kids who had formed around us. ‘Did everybody hear that?’ he said, clenching his fist and drawing it back. ‘I asked Jack if he wanted me to punch him and he said *yes!*’

‘I said *yes,*’ said Jack, ‘but yes means no!’

‘What are you talking about?’ Fred frowned for everyone to see.

‘The game!’ said Jack. ‘We’re playing the game, remember?’

‘I thought you said you didn’t want to play,’ said Fred.

'I did,' said Jack, 'but . . . I thought you were playing anyway.'

Fred smiled. 'I *was* playing, but I stopped.'

'Then my answer is *no!*' said Jack quickly.

'No, what?'

'No, I don't want you to punch me!'

'No?' said Fred.

'No!' said Jack.

Fred slammed his fist into Jack's arm.

Jack grabbed his arm and fell to the ground.

'What did you do that for?'

Fred shrugged innocently. 'No means yes and yes means no!'

'But you said you weren't playing that anymore,' said Jack.

'I started again,' said Fred.

'That's not fair!' said Jack.

'I can't help it if you can't keep up,' said Fred.

'It's not fair and you know it,' said Jack.

'Are you calling me a cheat?' said Fred.

'No.'

'You *are* calling me a cheat?'

'I said *no.*'

'Yes means no and no means yes,' said Fred.

'Then I mean *yes!*' said Jack.

By this time even more kids had gathered around to watch Fred play Yes Means No and No Means Yes with Jack.



Fred turned to them now. 'You heard that, didn't you?' he said. 'He just called me a cheat!'

Some said yes. Some said no. Others just looked confused.

Fred turned to Clive. 'I don't believe it!' he said. 'He just called me a cheat!'

'That's what I heard,' said Clive.

'No, I didn't,' said Jack. 'Yes means no and no means yes, remember?'

'I'm not playing that anymore,' said Fred. 'But would you like to play again tomorrow?'

Jack was so confused that he said no, but nodded at the same time.

The crowd laughed.

Poor Jack. I really did feel sorry for him. But, at the same time, I was glad it was him Fred was picking on and not me.

'I'll take that as a yes,' said Fred. 'See you tomorrow, Japes.'

He acted as if he was about to walk off, then turned back and punched Jack on the arm again. 'That's for calling me a cheat.'

Jack doubled over in pain, clutching his arm.

Fred looked at him scornfully. 'Gee, I hate to think how you'd carry on if I hit you *really* hard.'

The bell for the end of lunch rang and the crowd dispersed. Fred and Clive walked away laughing.

Jack stood up, still rubbing his arm. 'Those

Durkin brothers are going to be sorry they messed with me,' he said.

'What are you going to do?' said Gretel, chuckling at Jack's bravado. 'Let Fred punch you again?'

Jack scowled at her. 'You'll see,' he said.