



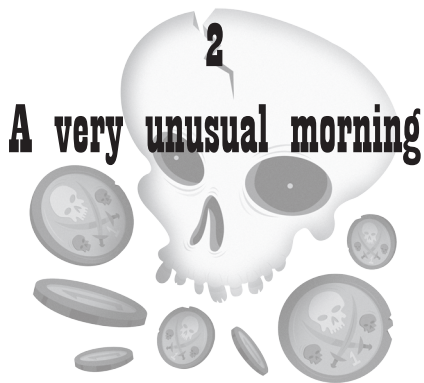
Once upon a time there was—and still is—a school called Northwest Southeast Central School.

Northwest Southeast Central School is located in 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 class of fifth-grade students there is a student named Henry McThrottle who likes telling stories.

That's where I come in.

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



It all started one morning when our teacher, Mrs Chalkboard, was late for class.

Now you might not think that's so remarkable, but believe me, it was for Mrs Chalkboard. Because Mrs Chalkboard was *never* late. She was usually there on the dot at 8.36 am, but that particular morning 8.36 am came and went and there was still no Mrs Chalkboard.

Not that anybody seemed to mind very much.

Clive Durkin was amusing himself by chewing up little bits of paper and flicking them at people.

Jack Japes was bent over his desk drawing cartoons. Jack was always drawing cartoons. He's the best drawer in the class.

Gretel Armstrong, the strongest girl in the school, was arm wrestling with herself. She had to do this because nobody else would arm wrestle with her. Jenny Friendly was cheering her on. It

seemed like Gretel's left arm was winning.

Grant Gadget was madly pushing buttons on some sort of electronic device. Grant Gadget was *always* pushing buttons on some sort of electronic device.

Gina and Penny Palomino were grooming the long rainbow-coloured manes of their toy horses. Gina and Penny were *always* grooming their toy horses. And if they weren't doing that they were riding imaginary horses around the school. Gina and Penny *loved* horses.

The rest of the class was engaged in activities of more or less importance. Mostly less.

The only people who seemed at all worried by Mrs Chalkboard's non-arrival were the class captains, Fiona McBrain and David Worthy. David kept looking anxiously at his watch and checking it against the clock on the wall. Fiona was standing at the door of the classroom and peering down the corridor. 'Still not here!' she said. 'I can't believe Mrs Chalkboard is *still* not here!'

Suddenly, Jenny grabbed my arm. 'Henry!' she said. 'Something's wrong with Newton!'

I looked across at Newton Hooton. He was clutching his desk as if it was going to float away if he didn't hold it to the ground. His face was white. His eyes were shut tight. I could see that he was on the verge of a panic attack.

Now the thing you've got to understand about Newton Hooton is that this wasn't particularly unusual. Newton was pretty much *always* on the verge of a panic attack.

Newton, you see, was scared of, well, everything! Spiders, busy roads, heights, lightning, cotton buds, butterflies . . . you name it, he was scared of it. I wasn't sure what had made him so scared this time. All I knew was that he was more scared than I'd ever seen him.

Jenny and I got up and went over to him.

'Newton!' I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. 'What's the matter?'

Newton gulped. He blinked and stared at me with big round eyes as if he'd never seen me before.

'M-Mrs Chalkboard!' said Newton. 'Sh-she's late!'

'It's okay!' said Jenny, putting her hand on Newton's other shoulder and patting it lightly. 'She's just a little bit late, that's all.'

'B-b-but she's never late!' stammered Newton. 'Wh-what if she doesn't come? What then?'

'Then they'll send a substitute,' said Jenny. 'Everything will be fine. Her car has probably just broken down.'

'She's probably just been held up in traffic,' I offered.

‘Impossible,’ said Fiona, returning from her vigil at the door. ‘Mrs Chalkboard doesn’t have a car. She catches the bus.’

‘Ah, yes,’ I said. ‘Good point. Thanks for your help, Fiona.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Fiona, completely missing my sarcasm.

‘What if she’s been in an accident?’ said Newton.

‘I don’t think that’s likely,’ said Jenny. ‘You know how careful Mrs Chalkboard is.’

‘Yes, but careful people can still be involved in accidents,’ said Fiona. ‘That’s why they are called *accidents*. Something may have happened to the bus.’

Newton’s face was getting whiter and whiter, if that was even possible.

‘Yeah,’ said Jack, taking up where Fiona left off. ‘There might have been an oil spill on the road and the bus skidded and went over a cliff . . . into shark-infested water . . . and the sharks got into the bus and all the passengers got eaten alive . . . and all that was left was their skeletons. Then imagine if Mrs Chalkboard’s skeleton climbed back up the cliff and hitched a ride to school and then came in the classroom and—’

‘JACK!’ said Jenny, ‘for goodness’ sake, STOP IT! You’re scaring Newton to death! I’m sure Mrs Chalkboard is fine!’

‘Then where is she?’ said Fiona, getting up and checking the corridor again. ‘She should be here by now. We’re supposed to be doing maths.’

‘So what’s the problem?’ said Clive. ‘We’re supposed to be doing maths and we’re *not* doing maths! That’s *good*, isn’t it?’

‘But I *like* maths!’ said Fiona.

‘Me too!’ said David.

‘I hate maths!’ said Clive. ‘You two should get your brains examined.’

‘You should *get* a brain, Clive,’ said David. ‘Maybe you’d enjoy maths more.’

‘You’d better watch your mouth, Worthy,’ said Clive, ‘or else.’

‘Or else what?’ said David.

‘Or else,’ said Clive, ‘I’ll tell my brother what you said. And I can tell you now, he’s not going to like it.’

‘Tell your brother whatever you want,’ said David. ‘He doesn’t scare me.’

‘I’m going to tell him that you said that, too,’ said Clive. ‘You’re going to be sorry. You’re going to be *really* sorry! You’re going to be *really, really*—’

Newton’s eyes were almost popping out of his head.

‘Everyone,’ pleaded Jenny, ‘could you please PLEASE PLEASE stop talking about scary things. You’re upsetting Newton!’

'He's a cry-baby,' said Clive.

'And you've got a big mouth!' I said.

'I'm going to tell my brother you said that,' said Clive. 'And I can tell you now, he's not going to like it.'

'Is there a single thing in the world your brother *does* like?' I asked.

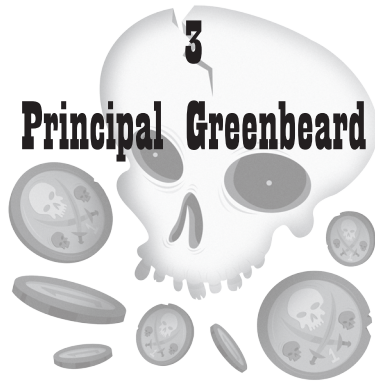
'Yeah,' said Clive. 'Beating people up. He *really* likes that. My brother's really tough. He could beat up this whole class, all at the same time, if he wanted.'

Newton yelped. The thought of Clive's brother, Fred Durkin, beating up the whole class was clearly too much for him.

Poor Newton.

If he'd only known what *he* was going to end up doing to Fred Durkin!

But, then, it's probably just as well that he didn't know. That *definitely* would have been too much for him.



Suddenly Fiona ran from the door back to her desk. ‘Shush, everyone,’ she said. ‘Here comes Principal Greenbeard . . . and he’s got somebody with him!’

Something was obviously up. Maybe Mrs Chalkboard really *had* had an accident.

At the mention of Principal Greenbeard’s name, Newton gasped.

‘It’s going to be okay, Newton,’ I said.

Newton just stared at me, too scared to speak.

Jenny and I each gave him one last pat and then went back to our seats.

We had just sat down when Principal Greenbeard and another man walked into the room.

Principal Greenbeard, dressed in a white naval uniform like the captain of a ship, saluted the class.