

The Mystery

Narrator:

It was a typical but stormy school day in western Nebraska when Mr. Heinz, the principal of Central Private, received what all the school's teachers agreed was a much-needed and well-deserved wedgie. Here's the story:

It was about 9am when the sky started to turn dark and the rain began to fall. By 10 the rain had become a deluge and the thunder from the clouds was shaking the chalk from the blackboards. The usual holes in the roof had performed well this storm, and there was not a dry spot of floor in the entire school. Nobody was surprised when the big oak tree blew down in the playground behind the school. And nobody was surprised when the lights went out at Central Private. But some eyebrows were definitely raised when about a hundred medium-sized white lab rats came running down the main hallway toward the teachers' lounge. Everyone figured they were heading toward the teachers' lounge. That part was not surprising. Nor was the fact that they were lab rats and over a hundred in number. The school had kept them for years to accommodate the brilliant but peculiar chemistry teacher with her chromomorphism theories. But white? That surprised everyone. Had she finally succeeded in her chromodepletion experiments? It was probably because of the several dozen stray cats that came next that nobody immediately realized how interesting it was to be able to see lab rats, even white ones, in the pitch black. That should have been surprising.

But our story does not concern cats, rats or wet floors. What we're here to talk about is the piercing scream that came from room 299 precisely 20 seconds before the lights came back on. No fingerprints were found. No witnesses were there. Someone, it seemed, had pulled the perfect crime.

(In what follows, "Everyone" means "all characters in the play except for Mr. Hero.")

Everyone: Who are you?

Hero: My name is Poicule. Hero Poicule. I am here to uncover the identity of the perpetrator of this foul crime. After lengthy discussions with the bulk of the staff I have determined that the perpetrator is to be found among the seven of you. Although there does not seem to be a person in this school who feels the crime was undeserved, you seven were mentioned as people particularly interested in seeing this happen. So I have assembled you here and soon I shall know the identity of our cheeky criminal. Everyone has denied being in the principal's office during the blackout, but clearly somebody was in there. I will therefore assume that if I can find the person who was in the principal's office, I will have found the guilty party. Let us begin with you, Ms. Acorn. Where were you when the crime was committed?

Ms. Acorn: I was at the desk in my classroom, thank you very much.

Hero: And how far is that from the principal's office, room 299?

Ms. Acorn: It is clear at the other end of the school. About five minutes before the lights went out I was in Mr. Heinz' office discussing a problem student. That took only a minute or two, and then I went straight to my room. Well, as straight as possible. The whole school was covered in water you know, and I was trying not to get my feet wet. Well, that was just impossible since I was wearing penny loafers, so I had to trudge through the puddles and try not to think about the damage.

Hero: I don't mean to imply anything. But Ms. Acorn, your socks are dry.

Ms. Acorn: Well aren't you just a regular Sherlock Holmes. Maybe you've noticed that the seven of us *all* have dry socks.

Hero: In fact, I have noticed that, and I was hoping you'd tell me how you managed this little feet?

Mr. Brass: It was in 1988 that our fair school first sprang a leak in its roof and dripped water down onto the floor. The administration always placed a higher priority on education than maintenance, proudly told anyone who asked, and so the leak was simply dealt with instead of repaired until the end of the school year. Well, administration was so happy with the money they had saved that they made it official building policy not to make repairs as long as there was some book that needed to be bought or some teacher needing a manipulative. Except for the principal's office, which got carpet two years ago. Did you know his office was the only carpeted room in the entire building? But that's off topic, what was I talking about? Repairs! Right. That's why our school floods every time it rains now. Well, there was a time back in '97 when some teachers got together and...

Hero: (ahem) thank you Mr. Brass for the, uh, history. But about your socks...

Mr. Brass: What? Oh, yes. That. We all keep spares in a big locker in the faculty lounge.

Hero: Thank you. And may I assume that you all put on spare socks from the faculty lounge before I got here?

Ms. Acorn: Certainly not. Take little Miss Totty here (*points to the Secretary*). She wears high shoes so her feet won't get wet.

Hero: So if I have this right, I can assume that everyone either changed their socks or never got their feet wet.

Everyone: Right!

Hero: And I may assume that the flooding was complete enough that everybody either had high shoes on or got wet feet?

Everyone: Yes!

Hero: Mr. Brass.

Mr. Brass: Yes, Mr. Hero?

Hero: Mr. Brass. Where else do faculty keep their spare socks?

Mr. Brass: Oh. Now that is a very interesting question. We had a meeting about this back when I started working here. It seems that at first, faculty were keeping their spare socks all over this school. A few in this desk, a few in that locker. Some in the principal's office, some in his secretary's office...

Secretary: Oh, thank goodness those days are gone!

Mr. Brass: ...some in the bathrooms. It was very disorganized. It was suggested by some of the gym teachers that...

Hero: Today! Where do the faculty keep spare socks *today*?

Mr. Brass: Only in the faculty lounge. It's the rule. Never broken.

Hero: So if I have this right, I can assume that either a person didn't change his or her socks, or he or she was in the faculty lounge.

Everyone: Right!

Hero: Mr. Brass, what happened to your pants?

Mr. Brass: I was clawed by cats. Because I smelled like Limburger.

Hero: Does this happen often?

Mr. Flit: To those of us who smell like Limburger. There were these cats today...

Hero: I heard about the cats. Okay. Can I assume that anyone who smells like Limburger today was clawed by cats?

Everyone: Yes!

Hero: Thank you. (*Turning to the secretary*) And you are the secretary to the principal?

Secretary: That's correct. If you can call him that. He doesn't *have* any.

Hero: Any what?

Secretary: The man has no people skills, no sense of what makes a good teacher; he wouldn't recognize a good policy if it slapped him in the face. Or a good secretary.

Hero: Perhaps he hasn't had the chance... Mr. Dimple, I see your socks are dry. May I assume that you changed yours in the faculty lounge?

Mr. Dimple: Certainly not! I avoid that room like the principal avoids parents. Ever since Ms. Acorn let her Limburger go bad in that room I've been unable to go anywhere near it.

Ms. Acorn: One pound! One *little* pound!

Ms. Gable: You can't go into that room without smelling like Limburger the rest of the day. No. I like to wear high shoes so that I never get my socks wet, and I never have to go near that faculty lounge. See what happened today, with the cats and the rats. Look at their clothes (*gestures to those standing around her*).

Hero: Yes, I'd like to come back to that. But first, may I assume that anyone who entered the faculty lounge today smells like Limburger?

Everyone: Yes!

Hero: Mr. Eagle.

Mr. Eagle: Mr. Hero.

Hero: What are those marks on your shoes. They don't look like claw marks.

Mr. Eagle: They are bite marks.

Hero: You were not clawed by cats?

Mr. Eagle: No. I was gnawed by rats.

Hero: Were all of you "gnawed by rats?"

Acorn, Brass, Dimple, Eagle, Flit: Yes.
Gable, Secretary: No.

Hero: Ms. Gable?

Ms. Gable: I managed to avoid the cats, thank goodness. This pant suit would surely have been torn to shreds if I hadn't. I was out in the hallway near the principal's office when the cats went charging by. I was just able to get out of their way; and thank goodness I didn't smell like Limburger.

Hero: May I ask how you dodged the cats?

Ms. Gable: Strangest thing. Luckiest thing, really. Little miss Secretary's chair was out in the hallway, so I climbed onto it.

Secretary: Yeah! And the whole time this cat and rat thing was going on I was looking all over the place for my chair.

Mr. Dimple: No you weren't!

Secretary: What do you mean?

Hero: Yes. Please. What do you mean?

Mr. Dimple: Your shoes, lady! You've been driving me nuts for years with those shoes. (*Turns to Hero.*) Mr. Hero... I have the office across the hall from the principal and his secretary here, and every day my patience, (and I'm a patient guy — ask my therapist), my patience is sorely challenged with this “clip, clop, clip, clop, clip, clop, clip, clop” from Ms. Secretary here. And if she was walking around looking for her chair, I would have heard it. I would have *felt* it. I would not have this very distinct and very real memory of a minute of peace while those shoes were *not* making noise, just before the lights came back on.

Hero: Ms. Secretary. Will you please walk around a bit for us?

Secretary: *clip, clop, clip, clop, ...*

Hero: And would you mind doing the same thing in the principal's office, please?

Secretary: What a silly idea. But I'll do it just to humor you. *no clip, no clop, no clip, no clop...*

Mr. Eagle: Oh, this proves nothing! She may have taken off her shoes (they are rather expensive) so they wouldn't get wet.

Hero: Indeed! Indeed, indeed, indeed. So I can assume that during the time of the crime, Ms. Secretary was either in the Principal's office or she was walking around with no shoes on.

Everyone: Right!

Hero: Okay. Thank you very much everyone for your cooperation. It seems that the perpetrator of this crime is not among us after all. You are all free to go about your business. Good day!

Narrator: Mr. Hero thanks everyone, and they disperse. Minutes later a loud shriek is heard coming from one of their offices, followed by the emergence of a stern-faced Mr. Hero. Some workplace crimes merit suspension, a reprimand or termination, according to a well-defined code. But for those that fall through the cracks, justice must be taken into our own hands.

Mr. Flit: There's something I still don't understand. How did the rats get out, how did they turn white, and how were we able to see them in the dark? Ms. Acorn?

Ms. Acorn: Hey, if you're looking for closure, take a literature class...