

# Burp, the School Alarm

It was the day of Open House and the classroom at the end of the hall was silent. The third-graders were writing letters of welcome to their parents, who would be in the classroom at 6:30 that evening. Handwriting had to be perfect. No spelling mistakes were allowed, and not one punctuation mark could be out of place.

“Tonight you can show your parents all the things you’ve done in class during the school year,” the tall teacher said.

Paul raised his hand. “Why’s it called Open House when it should be called Open School?” he asked.



“Well, I . . . well, I really don’t know,” said the teacher.

A hand went up in the third row. It belonged to Tanya, a short girl with short black hair

who wore khaki shorts and was short of breath.

“Do you have a question about Open House, Tanya?” the teacher asked.

“Alex is chewing gum,” Tanya said.

Alex, sitting next to her, immediately swallowed something.

The tall teacher frowned at both of them. “Keep your mind on your writing, Tanya,” he said. “Other people’s business is not your concern.”

Tanya wrote a few more words of her letter before her hand flew up again. “Loren’s using pen instead of pencil,” she reported.

“Mind your own business, Tanya,” the teacher said. “Now, class, if you’ve finished your letters, clean out your desks. Scrub your desktops, too.”

While the third-graders tidied their desks, Tanya’s hand shot skyward once more. “Kimberly has fish crackers in her desk,” she announced.

The teacher’s ears turned red. “Tanya, stop being a busybody!”

Tanya scowled. Busybody was a name she’d heard before. Her classmates had also tagged her with other nicknames—Snitch, Stool Pigeon, Squealer, Rat Fink, and most often Tattletale Tanya.

“Hmph. What’s wrong with telling on kids?” Tanya said under her breath. “I just want my classroom to be a safe, problem-free place. No harm in sounding the alarm.”

Tanya glanced toward Myra’s desk. Myra was tearing out every page in her Writer’s Workshop journal that didn’t have an A at the top.

Tanya checked the tall teacher's ears. Still red. "I'll just leave a note on his desk about this problem," she said.

Shortly afterward, with permission to use the girls' room, Tanya left the classroom. Out in the hallway she stopped to inspect the Open House artwork the third-graders had tacked to the walls.

"Louis's drawing is a little crooked," she noted. "Loren used permanent ink colors when she wasn't supposed to, and I can tell Zachary traced his picture out of a comic book."

Tanya was about to head for the girls' room when she noticed something new by her classroom door. Beside the red fire-alarm box, a second alarm, this one yellow, hung on the wall. It had the same small glass window, the same handle to pull, and the same words on it:



**PULL ONLY IN  
EMERGENCIES**

But four extra words  
were on the yellow box:

**FOR TANYA'S  
USE ONLY**

"My own alarm box!"  
Tanya exclaimed. "How  
handy! Maybe this school  
is beginning to appreciate my  
efforts to keep my classroom a safe,  
problem-free place."

Just then Paul charged out of the room. He ran down the hall and into the library.

“I must report this immediately!” Tanya said. She studied the yellow alarm box on the wall and reread the words. “Well, this *is* an emergency! And it says this alarm is for me to use. Time to sound my alarm!”

With both hands Tanya yanked the handle on the yellow box. To her disappointment, nothing happened. No alarm went off; no horn sounded; no bell rang.

“Hmph. My alarm is a dud.”

As she spoke, a screeching voice called from the far end of the hall.

“*Burp! Burred!* Here I come, Tanya. *Burp!* I’m on my way! *Burred!*”

Tanya peered down the corridor. Crawling toward her, advancing along the wall sideways as a gecko might, was a creature about the size of the drinking fountain. The creature looked like a dragon with yellow scales and short yellow wings. *Click, click, click* went its claws on the plaster wall.



“*Burp!* Don’t be alarmed, Tanya!” the creature called. “I do kids no harm. *Burrrrp!* My job is to keep kids *from* harm. *Burp! Burrrrp!*”

The yellow creature stopped an arm’s length from Tanya. Its spiked tail swished back and forth.

Tanya leaned sideways to study the thing more closely. It looked harmless enough. In fact, its droopy eyes and sagging snout looked so homely that Tanya almost laughed.

“What are you?” she asked.

“*Burp!* I’m the school alarm. *Burrrrp!* Burp, the school alarm, at your service. *Burp! Burp!*”

Tanya wrinkled her nose. “You’re called Burp? You’re named after the sound kids make after drinking milk too fast?”

“No, that delightful sound was named after me,” the thing explained. “*Burp! Burrrrrrrrrrrrp!*”

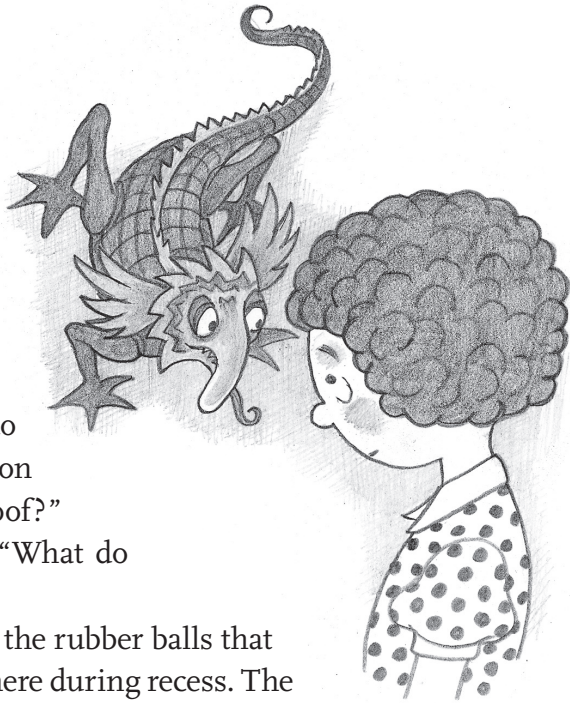
“But what do you do, Burp?” asked Tanya. “Why are you crawling around this school?”

“I live on the roof of this school. I sound off whenever someone pulls the alarm. *Burp! Burp!*”

Tanya glanced toward the red alarm next to her yellow one. “So you make the sound we hear during fire drills?” she asked.

“That’s me. I make all the alarm sounds,” Burp said. “This being California, I make the sound you hear during earthquake drills as well. Every school has an alarm like me living on its roof. Tornado alarms! Flood alarms!

Nighttime  
burglary  
alarms!  
We call out  
any alarm a  
school might  
need.”



“But how do  
you stay alive on  
our school roof?”  
Tanya asked. “What do  
you eat?”

“I snack on the rubber balls that  
kids kick up there during recess. The  
red ones are the tastiest. The yellow  
ones are a bit sour. *Burp! Burrrp!*”

Tanya pointed to her yellow alarm box. “Did you stick  
my alarm on the wall, Burp?”

The creature nodded its yellow head. A long, slender  
tongue slid out from between its pointed teeth and shot  
back in again. “From my rooftop perch I often hear you  
try to tell your teacher about class problems.”

Tanya frowned. “Some kids call that tattling,” she  
said. “But I’m just trying to keep my classroom safe and  
problem-free.”

“*Burrrp!*” went Burp. “Early warnings are important.”

“But my teacher never listens,” said Tanya. “He just  
tells me to mind my own business.”

“That’s why I want to make you an honorary third-grade alarm,” said Burp. “*Burp! Burp!* From now on, if you see any problem in your classroom, just pull your yellow alarm and I’ll sound off. No one ignores a school alarm.”

“An honorary alarm!” said Tanya. “What an honor.”

“*Burrrp!* Care to give me a try? How about a trial tattle drill?”

“Not a drill. I have a real emergency,” said Tanya. “I just spotted Paul running in the hall.”

“Just give me half a minute to return to the roof,” said the creature. “*Burp! Burrrp!*”

On its four clawed feet, Burp scurried down the hallway wall sideways and out a window.

After counting to thirty, Tanya pulled the handle of her yellow alarm again. Out of the hallway intercom came a sound, not the regular *beep! beep! beep!* of the fire alarm or the *toot! toot!* of the earthquake alarm, but the sound of a wolf howling.

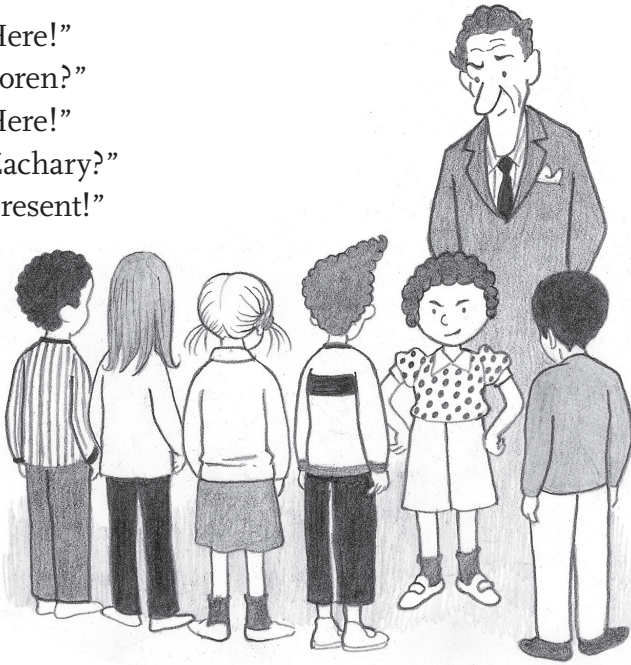
“*Ow-ooooooooooooo! Ow-ooooooooooooo!*”

To Tanya’s delight, her classroom door swung open. The third-graders filed from the room and marched solemnly and silently down the hall and out the door to the playground.

Tanya followed them. She watched her class line up at the regular third-grade drill spot, a white line on the basketball court. The tall teacher began calling roll.

“Matthew?”

“Here!”  
“Loren?”  
“Here!”  
“Zachary?”  
“Present!”



Tanya looked up at the school roof. Burp clung to the gutter, jutting out like a stone gargoyle on a cathedral.

When the tall teacher finished roll call, he looked down at Tanya with an eyebrow raised.

“Tanya, the office sent us word about your new tattle alarm. So what’s the emergency?”

Tanya grinned with satisfaction. She faced her class and announced, “Attention, everyone! Paul just ran in the hall. Also, we ran out of paper towels by the sink. This morning Matthew ran over Myra’s backpack on his bike, and at lunchtime Trish ran away with a spoon. That is all. You may return to our classroom.”



In single file, the third-graders marched into the school. Tanya joined the end of the line. No harm in sounding the alarm, she thought as she passed under Burp.



Back in the classroom at the end of the hall, the tall teacher continued with instructions for Open House. “Class, arrange your clay work on the art table and place your shoebox book dioramas in the reading corner,” he said. “Some of you also need to finish your PowerPoint presentations on the computer.”

But Tanya didn’t hear him. She was busy looking for more problems to report. Before long, she raced out to the hall and pulled her alarm handle.

“Ow-ooooooooooooo! Ow-ooooooooooooo!” went Burp.

At once the third-graders rose from their desks and filed out of the room. Out on the playground the tall teacher called the roll again.

“Matthew?”

“Here!”

“Loren?”

“Here!”

“Zachary?”

“Present!”

When roll call was finished, Tanya stood in front of her class again. “Attention, everyone! Someone left the top off the blue paint. There’s no drawing paper left on the art shelf, and everyone on the left side of the room was too noisy. Oh, and I spot a jump rope left on the playground. That is all.”

This time the third-graders filed off the playground more slowly.

“What a waste of time!” Kimberly grumbled.

“Who cares about that stuff?” Alex complained.

“Tattletale Tanya,” muttered Matthew.

Tanya looked toward the gutter where Burp remained in the gargoyle profile. “Hmph,” she said. “Who’s going to look after class business if I don’t?”

The third-graders spent the last hour of the day getting the room ready for Open House. They straightened books on shelves, cleared out the coat closet, and pinned their best stories up on the bulletin board.

“Don’t forget to lay your world maps on the social studies table and hang your space mobiles in the science corner,” said the tall teacher. “Leave your Writer’s Workshop journals and your portfolio folders on your desktops.”

But Tanya was still prowling the room looking for problems.

*“Ow-ooooooooooooo! Ow-ooooooooooooo!”*

Burp kept busy.

*“Ow-ooooooooooooo! Ow-ooooooooooooo!”*

Out and in, out and in marched the third-graders. They were getting very mad.

“I’m never listening to Tanya again,” Hannah snarled.

“Tanya’s worse than a tattletale,” said Matthew. “She’s an entire tattle-*book*.”

“Ow-ooooooooooooo! Ow-ooooooooooooo!”

Still Burp kept howling.

When dismissal time approached, the tall teacher got up from behind his desk. “Well, class, tonight’s the big night. Bring your parents to the room at six-thirty. Don’t forget to show them the schoolwork you have on display. Let them read your letter and go through your journal and portfolio. Show them your artwork in the hall and your PowerPoint presentation on the computer. Don’t forget your clay pots and social studies projects on the back tables. Your space mobiles and book dioramas also look great back there. And, of course, let your mom and dad inspect your clean desk.”

*Riiing!* The bell rang to end the school day.

“See you at Open House!” said the teacher.

Tanya sat at her desk dumbfounded. What had her teacher just said? Portfolio? Artwork? Projects and presentation? She had none of that ready to show her parents. Even worse, her desk had never been messier.

“Thanks for all your help today, Tanya,” the tall teacher called to her.

“But . . . but . . . ,” Tanya said.

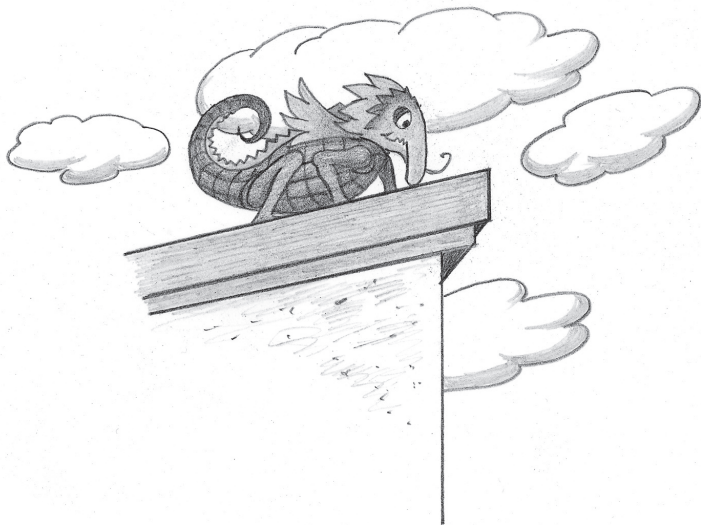
“But you’d better get going,” the teacher told her. “The school bus will be leaving any minute.”

Tanya rose from her seat. She grabbed her lunchbox from the coat closet and stepped into the hall. After the last third-grader had left the room, she pulled the handle of her yellow alarm.

Soon Burp came crawling along the wall toward her. “*Burp! Burrrrp! Burp! Burrrrp!*” it went. “School’s over, Tanya. No more alarm business for today.”

“What about *my* business?” said Tanya. “Nothing of mine is ready for Open House! My parents will be here and won’t see any of my schoolwork. They’ll wonder what I’ve been doing all third grade.”

“*Burrrrp!*” said Burp. “You did such a good job at minding other kids’ business that you forgot to mind your own. *Burp! Burrrrp!*”



“Hmph. That’s for sure,” Tanya said. “I made sure this classroom was problem-free, but I’m the one who ended up with a problem.”

She reached up and yanked the yellow alarm off the wall. “From now on, Burp, no more Tattletale Tanya. I’m through looking after other kids. Someone else will have to sound the alarm if there’s trouble in my classroom.”

“Ow-oooooooooooo!” went Burp. “I’ll miss having you as an honorary school alarm.”

Tanya patted the creature on the snout. “But I’m glad you’ll still be up on our school roof, Burp,” she said. “You’re there to warn us about *real* emergencies. Every once in a while, I’ll remember to kick a rubber ball up to you, a red one if I can. I don’t want our school alarm to go hungry.”