

The Chalk-Dust Genie



Clap! Clap! went the erasers in Roger's hands. *Clap! Clap! Clap!* He pounded the felt blocks together again. *Clap! Clap!* With each wallop, a large puff of white chalkdust spouted into the air and drifted across the playground. *Clap! Clap! Clap!*

Cleaning erasers was the perfect classroom chore for Roger. What other job gave him a chance to smash things together? Where else

could he make such a mess and not get in trouble? When else could he be so remarkably noisy without a teacher complaining? For Roger enjoyed nothing more than hitting and making messes and being noisy.

In the classroom, he relished kicking over loaded wastebaskets and grinding pencils in the sharpener for as long and as loudly as possible. It thrilled him to spit in the fish tank, scribble shocking words on his neighbor's desktop with a permanent felt pen, or Super-Glue the lunch-boxes in the coat closet together. Nothing felt better than to shout out in class, tell the sickest joke to a first-grader, or do something gross such as writing his name on the blackboard with snot.

In short, Roger was the class Pain-in-the-Neck. No wonder every student in the room at the end of the hall, not to mention the tall teacher, was glad Roger stood outside right now cleaning erasers.

Roger scratched the side of his freckled nose with an eraser, leaving a white blotch on his cheek. Five chalk-dust rectangles already decorated his jeans. He slapped his knee with the eraser and printed one more.

“Now for the final whack,” he said, spreading his arms wide. “I might as well go back in the classroom. I mean, math must be over by now.”

Then swiftly, fiercely, he swung the two erasers together.

Clap! Out billowed a large, powdery chalk cloud. Instead of sailing through the climbing structure and over the swings and slide, however, this white dust hovered in front of the boy like a plump ghost.

Roger blinked twice to make sure he saw what he thought he saw. Yes, smack in the middle of the chalk cloud, gently bobbing up



and down, sat a genie. It had to be a genie. Not only did he wear a golden turban, a large gold ring in his ear, and baggy pajama bottoms, but the first thing he said was, “Your wish is my command, Rog.”

A grin stretched across Roger’s face. He had read books about genies and knew what they were good for.

“You mean I get three wishes?” he asked. “You mean I can ask for anything I want?”

The genie folded his beefy arms across his bare chest. Raising his smooth chin, he replied in a baritone voice, “You got it, Rog. Care to try one out?”

What better news could a boy like Roger hope for? His brain waves were spinning. Three wishes! Think of the possibilities!

Roger scratched his head with his eraser, streaking his black hair. “Now what could my first wish be?” he said. “I mean, I don’t want to waste a good wish, right? I mean, a kid doesn’t get a chance like this every day. This wish must be perfect. This wish must do something spectacular ...”

While he thought, Roger’s eyes fell upon the kindergartners, who were out for recess. Instantly his face lit up. Picking on kindergartners was one of his favorite pastimes. He never tired of seeing the surprised looks on the faces

of these W. T. Melon newcomers when he did something particularly nasty to them.

Turning toward the genie still bobbing in front of him, Roger said, “Genie, here is my wish. I know just what you can grant me. I wonder what would happen ... I mean, I don’t want anyone to get hurt or anything. But I just wonder what would happen if the playground turned into something slick and slippery. I mean, I wish the playground would turn to ice!”

The genie’s nostrils flared as he sucked in a lungful of air. “Are you sure, Rog?” he said gravely.

“Yes, yes, that is my wish and you must grant it,” said Roger. “I want to make the playground as slick as you can make it for as long as I say. Won’t those little guys be surprised? What will they do? I mean, it will be unbelievable!”

In slow motion, without a word, the genie bobbed inside his white cloud. His inky-black eyes glared down at Roger.

“Well? Well?” said Roger. “Where’s the magic? Where’s the hocus-pocus? I mean, aren’t you supposed to say some magic words or something?”

The genie said nothing. But in the next instant the entire playground turned white, smooth, and as shiny as a new dime. At once the kinder-



gartners began to slip and slide. Some flapped their arms like penguins to keep from falling. Most were on their fannies in seconds. Jump-ropers crashed to the asphalt, entangled in their ropes, and tag players

went skidding into the swings. A girl who was playing hopscotch did the splits, while a chubby boy zipped down the slide so fast that he shot across the baseball diamond clear out to left field.



Roger slapped his thighs with his erasers, plastering his jeans with more white rectangles. “Unbelievable!” he howled.



“Did you see that kid go? I mean, did you ever see such a goofy look on a girl’s face? OK, genie, that’s enough. Let’s not overdo it! Unbelievable! Did you see that little kid spin off the merry-go-round?”

Once the playground returned to asphalt, the genie folded his arms and repeated, “Your wish is my command, Rog.”

“Well, now, let me see,” said Roger. “I still have two wishes, don’t I? I can’t waste either one of them. I must wish for just the right

thing. I mean, how could I top that last one?"

For at least a minute Roger stood tapping his chin with an eraser. "What if ... ?" he said. "No, no, that's not good enough." Then he thought some more and said, "I've always wondered what would happen if ...". But he shook his head and did some more thinking.

Finally Roger tossed the erasers in the air and announced, "Genie, I have it! I know just the thing! I mean, it's perfect! Just wait until you hear it! You see, I want to be head of my class. I want to be in control, call all the shots. I mean, I wish I were the teacher!"

The instant Roger finished this sentence, he found himself sitting behind the teacher's desk in the room at the end of the hall. The green blackboard loomed behind him. Still and silent, his two dozen classmates sat at their desks facing him.

"Well, how about this," said Roger, pivoting back and forth in his swivel chair. "There you go. I'm the teacher and those are my students. I mean, they're just sitting there waiting for my orders."

Roger spun around in his teacher's chair. He opened the desk drawer and blew the teacher's whistle. He rang the teacher's bell and drummed on the desktop with the teacher's ruler.

He cleared his throat importantly and called



out, “Attention, class. Give me your attention, please. All eyes forward now. Sit up straight in your seats.”

Here Roger paused to stare severely up and down the five rows of desks. “Is that a voice I hear?” he said. “I want no more chitchat! Emily in the fourth row, stop combing your hair. This is not a beauty parlor. Mary, take that chewing gum out of your mouth and stick it on your nose! Now, class, follow my instructions. Listen and do what I say. I want you to take out your reading books and turn to page thirty.”

To Roger's delight the rows of desktops opened in unison. When a reading text lay in front of each student, he commanded, "Now, class, I want you to read pages thirty to thirty-nine. Got that? Then read pages forty to forty-nine. Next, let me see, read fifty to fifty-nine and sixty to sixty-nine. And why not throw in page seventy just for fun."

Roger enjoyed the shocked expressions on the faces of his classmates. "And there will be no talking and no squirming in your seats and no trip to the toilet," he went on. "And, oh, please, please, no questions. Understand? Good. Now enjoy your reading. There will be a big test on it when you have finished. You may begin."

Soon the only sound in the room at the end of the hall was the occasional swish of turning pages. Roger nodded in approval. He leaned back in the teacher's swivel chair and studied the holes in the acoustic-tiled ceiling.

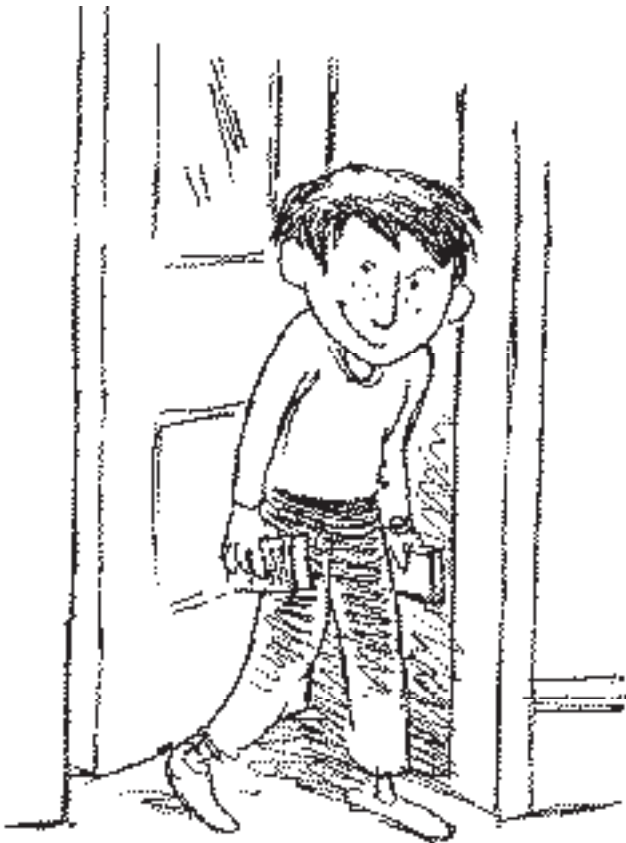
"That should keep this class busy until lunchtime," he said, swinging his feet up on the teacher's desk. "I mean, this teacher business is a breeze. Unbelievable! What a life! I mean, to sit in a classroom all day dishing out orders. How easy can you get?"

In the next moment, however, in the very moment when the room at the end of the hall

was most calm and peaceful, when the students were so quiet you could hear the clicking of the clock above the bulletin board, a voice blared from the back of the room.

“What’s going on? I mean, what’s everyone doing?”

Roger sat bolt upright in his teacher’s chair. In the doorway stood a boy holding two erasers. And this boy had the same freckled face, the same chalky jeans, the same dusty black hair—Roger blinked twice—yes, this boy was a copy of Roger himself.



Whistling a rock-and-roll tune, the boy strolled into the classroom. *Squeak! Squeak!* went his tennis shoes as he shuffled to the front of the classroom. He passed the green blackboard, scraping his fingernails along its entire length. The erasers ended up on the floor.

“Quiet, Creepo!” someone called from the second row.

“Shh! Shh! Shh!” hissed several others.

Leaning forward, Roger followed the boy’s progress from the blackboard to a desk in the third row.

“Hold on! Hold the phone! Hold your horses! I mean, hold everything!” he muttered in one breath. “That kid is heading toward my desk.”

And that is precisely where the boy sat down. At once he threw open the lid. Crack! Down it came.

“Shh! Shh! Shh! Shh!” circled the room again.

The boy grinned. Without bothering to raise his hand, he called out, “Unbelievable! Hey, teacher! Teacher! I lost my reading book! I have nothing to read! I mean, what am I supposed to do?”

For the first time in his life, Roger, now Roger the teacher, was speechless. Deep down in his gut he knew what would happen next. His eyes

fell upon Rosalie, who sat in front of the loud-mouthed boy. Rosalie had a long brown ponytail that hung far down her back. Roger knew this ponytail well, and it came as no surprise to him when Rosalie wheeled in her seat and shook a fist at the boy. She growled, “You put glue on my hair one more time, Creepo, and I’ll flatten you.”

The boy merely grinned again—a wide, toothy grin that Roger also knew well.

Roger slumped in his teacher’s chair and blew out his cheeks. “Someone must do something about that kid,” he said. “I mean, what happened to the peace in the room? What happened to the quiet? I mean, how is anyone supposed to get any reading done with that kid disrupting everything?”

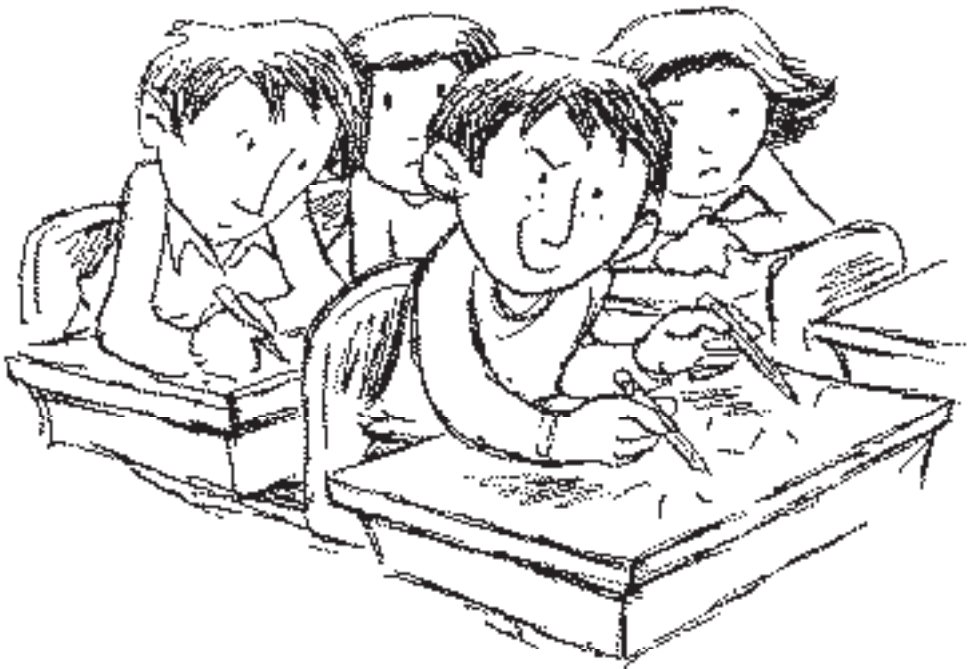
Here is what the boy sitting at Roger’s desk did next: First he leaped out of his seat. On the way to the back of the room, he snapped Kenneth’s reading book shut, knocked on Emily’s desktop, and kicked over the wastebasket. At the drinking fountain he took a long, slurpy drink, then burped. Returning to his desk, he made the computer go beep, beep, beep, bumped Howard’s chair, snapped Kenneth’s book shut a second time, then burped again.

By now no one was reading. The entire class was staring at Roger the teacher, with scowls on their faces.

Roger's shoulders rose to his ears. "So why look at me?" he said. "What do you want me to do?"

But, of course, in his long experience with teachers, Roger knew what the class expected of him. It was his job to stop that Pain-in-the-Neck.

Rattled, he slowly rose from his seat. Pointing a finger at the boy who was now drumming on his desktop with two pencils, he snarled, "All right, you! You will stay in from the next recess with your head down on your desk! Got that? Wait a minute. I mean, you shouldn't be going outside for the rest of the day! I mean, for the rest of the year! Understand? No, I mean ...



YOU WON'T HAVE RECESS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!"

As soon as Roger had said these words, he knew he had wasted his breath. How many times had his tall teacher said similar things to him? And what would Roger always do when he did? He would give the tall teacher his wide, goofy smile. And now, there sat the boy wearing the same grin.

Roger's skin grew hot and prickly. He dropped into his chair. "It's hopeless," he muttered. "I mean, that one kid has made the entire classroom miserable. Things were great until he showed up."

There was only one thing left for Roger to do. He stepped to the green blackboard, picked the erasers off the floor, and trudged outside to the playground. Once, twice, three times he pounded the black felt blocks together. Each smack produced a billowy cloud of powder.

On the fourth whack the Chalk-Dust Genie reappeared, complete with golden turban, earring, and pajama bottoms. "Your wish is my command, Rog," he said, bobbing up and down inside his cloud.

"Genie, I don't want to be the teacher any longer," said Roger. "I mean, it's murder. I mean, there's a kid in the class who's driving everyone up the walls. He's unbelievable."

The genie folded his muscled arms and raised his smooth chin. “So that is your last wish, eh, Rog?”



“Sure is. I don’t want to be in charge anymore. I want to be my good old self again.”

Even as Roger spoke, the cloud of chalkdust rose above the playground, drifted across the baseball diamond, and sailed over the right-field fence.

With the two erasers in his hands, Roger marched into the school. At the door he peeked into the room at the end of the hall. Phew! The tall teacher was back, sitting behind his desk. Every student was hunched over a book, reading silently.

Roger entered the classroom. He was on the verge of shouting out, when he checked himself. Instead, he walked to the blackboard and placed the erasers on the chalk tray. Grinning at his classmates, he crept to his desk in the third row and took out his reader.

After that Roger did a remarkable thing. The class was shocked. The tall teacher nearly fell out of his swivel chair. Roger even surprised himself.

He started to read.