

The Homework Gnome

The tall teacher sat at his desk, reading from his assignment book. “For homework this weekend, class, do math pages fifty and fifty-one. Also complete the worksheet on contractions I handed out, write ten sentences using words from our spelling list, and look up the five vocabulary words on the board. And don’t forget that your book reports are due. Oh, yes, also work on your social studies projects, cut out news articles for Current Events, and collect some fall leaves for an art project. Did everyone get that? Good. Have a fun weekend. You are excused.”

The third-graders rose from their seats. They retrieved their backpacks from the coat closet and began stuffing them with math books, spelling books, reading books, dictionaries, and binders. They also packed their lunchboxes, library books, water bottles, notices for parents, baseball mitts, and recorders to practice for music. No wonder most of them grunted when they hoisted the backpacks onto their shoulders.

Hari stood by his desk in the fourth row. After

loading his leather pack, he heaved it onto his back, tottering under the weight.

“This thing must weigh more than I do,” he said. “My spine will be curved like an S. My shoulders will be stooped forever. I’ll have back trouble before I’m ten, all because of *homework!*”

The tall teacher looked up from his desk. “Hari, may I have a word with you?” he said.

Pulling the backpack straps with his thumbs, Hari lumbered to the teacher’s desk.

“Hari, according to my records you didn’t turn in Tuesday’s homework,” the teacher said solemnly.

Hari shifted the load on his shoulders. “Well, you see, that night I put my homework papers in my pants pocket,” he explained. “My mom washed my pants and my homework ended up looking like Cream of Wheat.”

The teacher frowned. “But you didn’t turn your homework in on Thursday either.”

“Well, you see, I did my homework on the computer that night,” said Hari. “Our computer crashed and my homework vanished into cyberspace.”

The tall teacher’s ears glowed red. “You also didn’t turn in your homework this morning,” he said.

“Well, you see ...,” Hari began.

“Hari, no more excuses,” said the teacher. “From now on you’ll get your homework done on time. Monday morning all the homework I just assigned will be on my desk. Done, finished, completed. Understand?”

Hari resisted the urge to make an excuse about the weekend and nodded. Bowed forward, head tilted down, he trudged out of the classroom, muttering to himself, “Homework makes no sense to me. Why must we do schoolwork at home after spending seven hours doing schoolwork in school? Teachers don’t even expect kids to like homework. That’s why they call it home ... *work!*”

By this time the hall was empty. Halfway down, a drinking fountain stuck out of the wall. Hari stopped for a drink. The weight of his backpack tipped him to one side as he bent toward the faucet.

He had taken only one gulp, however, when a low voice by his feet startled him. “Hey, buddy, take that load off your shoulders. Want to make a homework deal?”

Hari looked down. On the wall underneath the fountain was a vent covered by a wire screen.

“Come down here, buddy,” the voice said. “I have an offer you can’t refuse.” Yes, it came from the vent. “How would you like it if you never had to do homework again?”

How could Hari resist? He plopped his backpack on the floor and dropped to his knees. A warm breeze blew back his hair as he leaned toward the vent.

“Who are you?” he whispered. “What did you mean by a homework deal?”

As Hari spoke the screen swung open. Sitting inside the square hole, his back against the side with

his legs crossed, was a chubby man the size of a math book. He was bald with pointed ears and, judging by his wrinkled face, very old. Dust covered the gray trousers and long gray apron that he wore.

Small, raisin eyes shifted from side to side as the



little man talked. “Yes, buddy, I have a homework deal for you. That’s why they call me the Homework Gnome.”

“The Homework Gnome?” Hari exclaimed. “But I’ve never heard of you. What do you do?”

The man linked his hands behind his head. The tips of his ears wiggled. “You see, buddy, I live down in the warm, humid boiler rooms of this school,” he replied. “I do homework for any student who’s willing to pay the price.”

“The price? Why, I’d give anything to have someone do my homework for me!” said Hari.

A grin crossed the gnome’s round face. “The price, my boy, depends on the homework you need done. Workbook sheets are the cheapest. Social studies and science projects are a bit more. But if you want me to write an essay or book report, expect to pay a premium.”

Hari unzipped his backpack and pulled out some books. “See, I have tons of homework to do this weekend, including a book report,” he said. “But all I have is sixty-five cents.”

Again the gnome’s eyes shifted. “Oh, but I never accept money in my homework deals, buddy,” he said. “I’ll do all your homework if you’ll lend me another type of sense, one of your five.”

Hari blinked, gulped, and rubbed his ears. Had he heard right? “You mean like my seeing, tasting, feeling, hearing, and smelling?” he asked. “We learned about the five senses in science.”

The gnome nodded. “Here’s the deal. You lend me one of your five senses on Monday for one hour—you choose the sense and you choose the hour—and I’ll have your homework, done, finished, completed, inside your desk that morning. You say your homework makes no sense, buddy? That’s why I need one sense from you to make your homework.”

Hari thought a moment, but only a moment, before he answered. “Well, I *was* running out of homework excuses. And since my teacher says I don’t

listen to him during math anyway, why don't you take my hearing that hour. The teacher won't suspect that anything is different."

The gnome stuck out his tiny hand. Hari shook it with his thumb and forefinger. The deal was struck.

All the way home Hari swung his empty backpack in his hand. He thought about all the extra TV he would watch that weekend. "Homework traded for a sense, now *that's* a deal," he told himself.

On Monday morning Hari walked straight to his desk. He threw open the lid. Yes, there sat his books in neat piles. His completed homework papers lay on top, including a two-page book report and five fall leaves for the art project.

Hari brought his homework up to the teacher's desk. "The Homework Gnome does excellent work," he told himself, laying the papers in the IN basket. "I couldn't have done better myself."

By nine o'clock, math period, Hari had almost forgotten his deal with the Homework Gnome. While the tall teacher talked about numerators and denominators, Hari played with eraser crumbs on his desktop. Not until the hour was almost over did he realize his ears weren't working. He couldn't hear a thing, even if he wanted to.

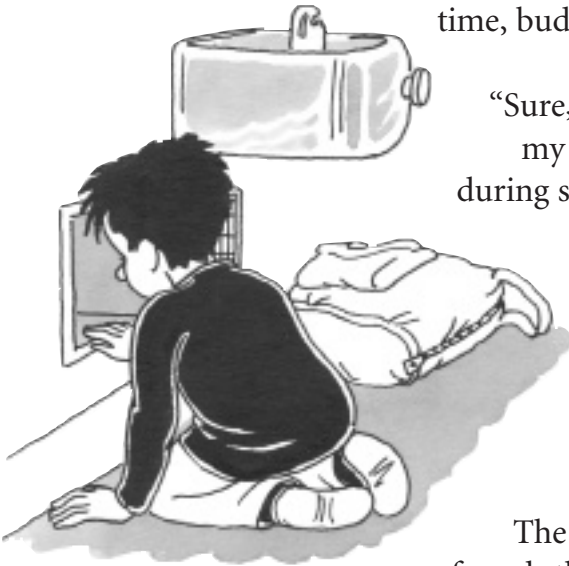
But at ten o'clock the teacher's voice rang out, loud and clear. "Recess time, class!"

"What a great deal I made with the Homework Gnome," Hari said under his breath. "I'd be lucky to meet him again."

Sure enough, as Hari lugged his backpack down the hall that afternoon, the Homework Gnome called from the vent, “Care to make another homework deal, buddy?”

Hari sank to the floor. “Spelling work, an essay, and math pages. What’ll it cost me?” he asked.

“Just one more of your senses for an hour,” said the gnome, his pointed ears twitching. “You could pay through your nose this time, buddy.”



Hari nodded. “Sure, you can have my sense of smell during spelling time. I never need to smell while I spell.”

Again the pair shook hands, sealing the deal.

The next day Hari found the completed homework in his desk once more. Spelling period came, and while Hari rifled through his desk for his spelling book, Kate, who sat nearby, threw up on the floor.

“Ewwwww!” went the third-graders. They held their noses and gagged as Kate rushed from the room.

Hari took a deep breath. “Can’t smell a thing,” he boasted. How pleased he was with his second homework deal.

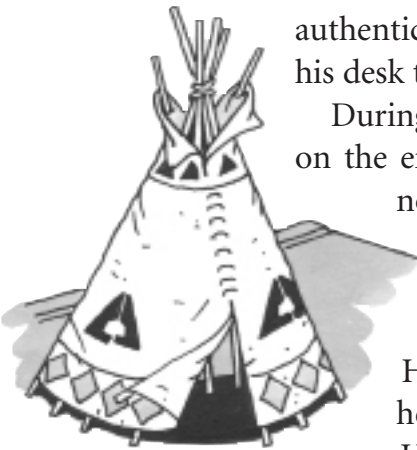
After school the gnome called to Hari a third time. “Another deal, buddy? Another one of your senses for completed homework?”

“I have a social studies project due tomorrow,” Hari explained. “I need to make a model of a Sioux teepee. Are you any good at making models?”

“Social studies projects are my specialty,” the Homework Gnome replied. “State maps made with papier-mâché, forts from toothpicks, or log cabins constructed with sugar cubes, I can do them all. Each of my projects comes with a guaranteed A grade.”

Hari was already thinking about the TV programs he could watch after school. “Then you can have my sense of taste during handwriting tomorrow,” he said.

To Hari’s delight, a teepee made with real sticks and animal hide and painted with authentic Sioux symbols sat on his desk the next morning.



During handwriting, he sucked on the end of his pencil, tasting nothing.

“Yes, life after school has never been better, thanks to the Home-work Gnome,” he told himself.

Hari’s next deal was to



exchange his homework for his sense of touch during lunch. As he sat in the cafeteria, his legs and arms fell asleep. Milk dribbled down his chin when he drank and bread crumbs dropped from his lips when he ate.

“Maybe this time the homework trade wasn’t such a good idea,” he mumbled.

But no sooner had Hari said this than Richard slugged him on the shoulder.

“Didn’t even hurt, Richard,” Hari said, smirking. “Do it again. Go ahead. Hit my other shoulder.” And that made the entire deal worth it.

The next trade was even trickier. How could Hari give up his fifth sense, his eyesight, for an hour at school? But as he walked down the hall that afternoon, he remembered tomorrow was Friday, and on Friday the class had health.

“Last week during health the teacher showed a video called *Brushing Your Teeth*,” he told the gnome. “I slept through the whole thing. Maybe tomorrow I won’t need to see that hour either.”

For the fifth morning in a row, Hari turned his homework in on time. This week’s health video was called *The Five Food Groups*, and while it played, Hari took a refreshing nap. He never even knew his eyesight was gone.

But when school was out, Hari was worried. After dropping



his extra-heavy backpack by the vent, he said, “Homework Gnome, this weekend I have a ton of homework. But I’m out of senses for a trade.”

The gnome’s black eyes flashed, and the tips of his ears wiggled. “I know, buddy, and weekend homework is costly. But you do have another sense, one you never learn about in science.”

Hari unzipped his backpack. “Take whatever sense you want as long as I don’t have to do this homework,” he said. “You can have it during Current Event time on Monday.”

Monday morning came. By now Hari was so used to having his homework done for him, he dropped it into the IN basket without a glance.

“Time for Current Events,” the tall teacher announced. “Who has some news to report?”

As his classmates talked about what was happening in the world, Hari sat wondering what would happen to him. What sense would the Homework Gnome borrow this time? So far his vision, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling worked fine.

At the moment, Kate was reading about hailstones the size of softballs that fell in Iowa. Hari was half listening when he did something he had no idea why he did. He stood on his chair and announced, “Ladies and jellyfish! I’m Hari, the Third-Grade Daredevil. I flirt with danger! I laugh at injury! I’ll now cross the classroom without once touching the floor!”

The class went dead quiet. All heads turned

toward Hari, who had climbed onto his desktop.

“Get down from there before you topple over, Hari,” the tall teacher said.

“Nonsense!” Hari declared. And he jumped onto Morgan’s desktop, twirled, and leaped onto Kate’s.

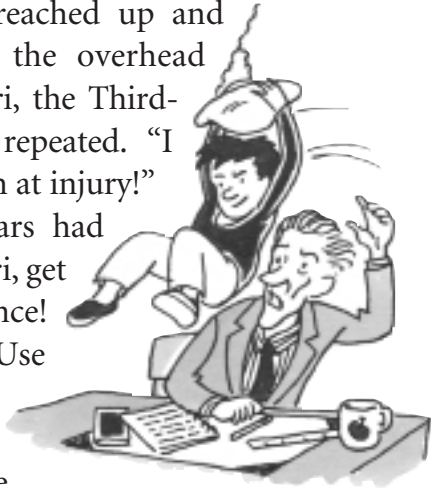
“Hari, what’s gotten into you?” said the teacher. “Have you lost your senses?”

“The cow jumped over the moon! And the dish ran away with the spoon!” Hari shouted.

From Kate’s desk he leaped onto George’s, twirled again, and sprang onto Joey’s desk in the front row. Finally he jumped onto the tall teacher’s large metal desk. From there he reached up and began swinging from the overhead light fixtures. “I’m Hari, the Third-Grade Daredevil!” he repeated. “I flirt with danger! I laugh at injury!”

The tall teacher’s ears had never been redder. “Hari, get down from there at once! You’re going to fall! Use your common sense!”

The words struck Hari like a dodgeball. He dropped onto the teacher’s desktop and checked the clock. Now he understood. Now he knew why he was saying and doing such senseless things. The Homework Gnome had indeed borrowed another of his senses, one that Hari had forgotten all about—his common sense.



Crouching, he pulled his homework from the IN basket and waved it in the air. “I *can’t* use my common sense, teacher,” he said. “I traded it to a gnome who does my homework for me! I haven’t done my own homework all week!”

The tall teacher reached up and hauled Hari off the desktop by the waist. “We’ll talk about homework later,” he said. “Right now I’m taking you straight to the principal’s office.”

With Hari tucked under his arm, the teacher stormed from the room.

“Hurrah!” Hari called out. “I can’t wait to get to the office! I can’t wait to hear what Mr. Principle will say to me!”

Not until the end-of-school bell rang did Hari return to the room at the end of the hall. He sat at his desk, waiting for the lecture he knew he would get.

“Hari, homework might not make sense to you, but teachers assign it for good reason,” the tall teacher began. “Students benefit from the structure, organization, and self-discipline that homework requires.”

Hari hadn’t a clue what this meant, but he nodded anyway.

“From now on, you will do your own homework without excuses,” the teacher went on. “I expect your parents to sign each homework paper you turn in. Understand?”

Hari nodded again and stood. Shouldering his backpack, he shuffled out the door.



The Homework Gnome was waiting under the drinking fountain. “Care to make another homework deal, buddy?” he called out. “Want to trade your sense of humor or sense of timing? How about your sense of direction, sixth sense, or horse sense?”

Hari yanked on his backpack straps with his thumbs. “Sorry, Homework Gnome, I think I’ll have the good sense to go home and get my homework done, finished, completed, all by myself, no matter how torturous it is.”

With that, Hari shifted the load on his back. Then, bowed forward, head lowered, he continued down the hall.

