

# The Messy-Desk Pest



The desk in the fourth row by the bulletin board belonged to Emily. And although Emily was the tidiest girl at W. T. Melon Elementary School, who washed her short blond hair each morning and scrubbed her hands before every meal and polished her teeth each evening, and although Emily wore the cleanest clothes to school—spotless T-shirts, immaculate blue jeans, and the whitest tennis shoes—and although Emily used

the neatest handwriting in all her schoolwork and turned in the most orderly math papers, her desk was the messiest desk in the room at the end of the hall.

Not once since the beginning of September had Emily cleaned out her desk. So much junk was collected inside that weeks ago the lid refused to come within six inches of closing.

One morning in early October, the tall teacher leaned against his large metal desk with a mug of coffee in his hand, as he did every morning of every school day. He checked the clock above the bulletin board and yawned. He took a long slug of coffee and studied his class. He checked the clock one more time before saying, “Good morning, people. Happy Friday. Time for our spelling test. Please take out your pencils.”

Low noises—one-third groans, one-third grumbles, and one-third gripes—rose from the class.

Emily heaved a long sigh. Whenever she sighed she had a habit of blowing upward with her lower lip in a way that steamed up the round lenses of her eyeglasses. As her glasses cleared, she lifted the lid of her messy desk. Somewhere in that incredible clutter was a sharp pencil.

“Well, here goes,” she said. And with both hands she plowed through the rubbish—the wads of paper, busted crayons, unfinished math

sheets, a brown apple core, an empty milk carton fuzzy with mold, four overdue library books, three dirty socks, her bug collection, one hundred twenty-six pennies, three troll dolls, two bloody Band-aids, two hard Twinkies, a brown glob that used to be a Hershey bar, a tennis ball, a golf ball, a moth ball, five mittens, the head of a Barbie doll, six hairbands, a dozen seashells, a four-foot-long gum-wrapper necklace, fifty-three pieces of gum without wrappers, chicken bones, two rubber rats, a squirt gun, and goodness knows what else.

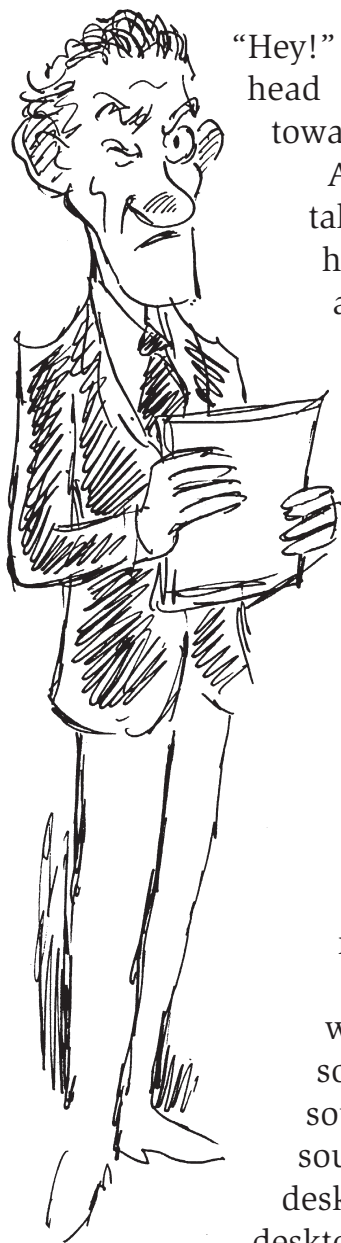
Beside her glue-covered scissors she found the pencil. But its tip was broken.

Emily rushed to the pencil sharpener. “How odd,” she said, turning the crank. “I just sharpened my pencils this morning.”

By the time Emily had returned to her desk and numbered her spelling paper from one to twenty, the tall teacher was calling out the first spelling word, “There. There are twenty words on this test. There.”

Emily blew some eraser crumbs off her spelling sheet and fixed her glasses more firmly on her nose. “There,” she told herself. “Cinch to spell.”

But the instant her pencil touched the paper, her desktop popped open an inch and cracked down again.



“Hey!” Emily shouted, and every head in the classroom turned toward her.

At the front of the room the tall teacher looked up from his spelling list. He glared at Emily with his famous stare—one eyebrow raised, one eye slightly squinted. He knew how to look at a student to get his message across without saying a word.

“But my ... But there ...”

She stopped. The look on her teacher’s face suggested that she should let him continue with the test.

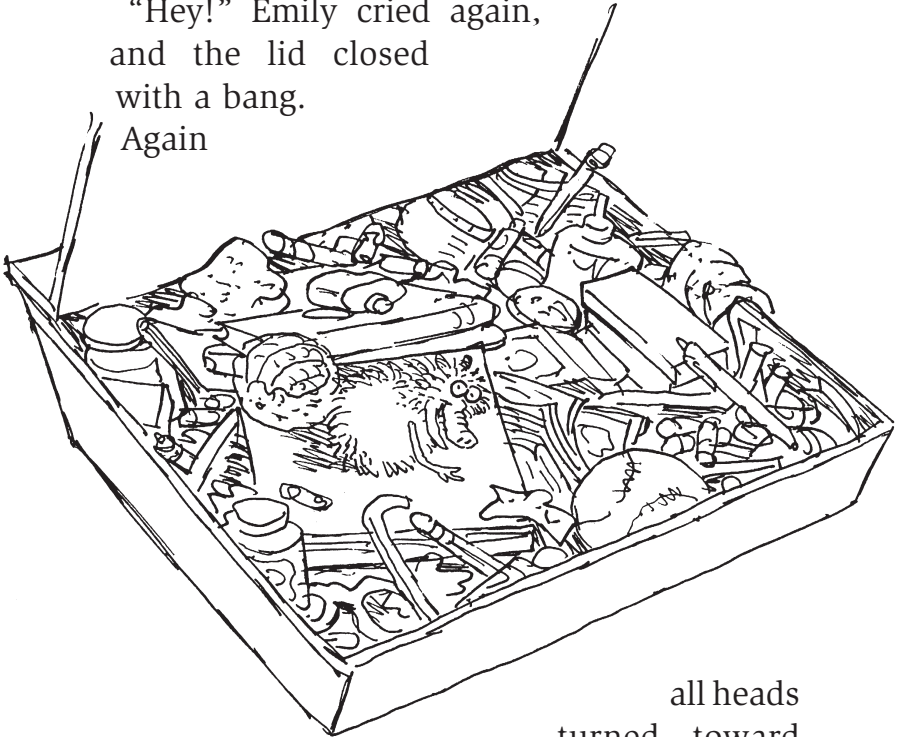
“Next word,” said the tall teacher. “Their. They sat at their desks without making a sound. Their.”

Emily was unable to write. Scuffling and scraping sounds, gnawing and chewing sounds, snapping and ripping sounds rose from inside her desk. She put her ear on her desktop.

“Something is in there,” she murmured, scarcely able to breathe. “Something is moving around. Something is eating the things in my desk!” And with both hands she flung the lid open.

Inside the desk, next to a half-eaten tangerine, sat a squat, hairy white creature about the size of a potato.

“Hey!” Emily cried again, and the lid closed with a bang. Again



all heads turned toward Emily. Again the tall teacher's eyes fell on the desk in the fourth row by the bulletin board. But this time his ears were red, and everyone in the class was

familiar with the saying (often repeated as a jump-roping chant of the playground):

*When the tall teacher's ears turn red,  
Big trouble lies ahead.*

*When the tall teacher's ears turn white,  
Things will be all right.*

Emily stared at their teacher's ears. "There's ... there's something inside my desk," she stuttered.

The tall teacher placed his spelling list on his desk and calmly strolled back to the fourth row. In slow, measured words, he said, "I agree, Emily. I know there is something in your desk. There are many, many things in there. That desk is a mess—a dumpster. It is a disgrace. How many times have I asked you to clean out that desk? How many times has the entire class had to wait while you searched for something in that trash pile? So, Emily, next recess you will remain in this room, cleaning out that desk. Understand?"

Emily nodded. She let out a long sigh, and through foggy glasses she watched the tall teacher return to the front of the room. She thought, "For a teacher who is usually very understanding, why couldn't he be understanding right now?"

"Third word," the tall teacher called out.

“They’re. They’re trying to take a spelling test. They’re.”

Although the scratching, tearing, munching, and crackling sounds continued to come from her desk, Emily caused no more interruptions. When the bell rang for recess and the rest of the class stampeded out the door, Emily watched the tall teacher pick up the wastebasket.

He walked back to her desk and plopped the metal can at her feet. “Here you go, Emily. Start bulldozing,” he said. “By the end of recess I want to see that desk tidy. Not a scrap. Not an item that doesn’t belong in there. Understand?” And with that he grabbed his coffee mug off his desk and left the room.

Left alone, Emily gripped her desktop with both hands. She opened it an inch. Scooting her chair far back, she peered through the dark crack.

“All right, you,” she whispered. “What’s going on in there?”

“Hardy-har-har. Hardy-har,” came a reply from behind a lump of clay.

Tense, Emily raised the lid some more. She leaned forward for a closer look. Her head propped up the desktop. “Who’s in here?” she said. “Who’s in my desk?”

Some papers rustled. The clay rolled to one side, and the hairy white creature reappeared.

Its piggy snout sniffed the air. Its short hamster ears twitched. When the thing grinned, Emily inspected its full set of ratlike teeth champing down upon the stub of her brown crayon.



Spellbound, Emily watched as the creature climbed onto the math book. With a long, wiry arm it reached up and squeezed her nose.

Emily jerked back her head. “Hey!” she shouted.

“Hardy-har-har! Hardy-har!” repeated the creature as the desktop slammed shut.

Emily rubbed her nose. She was steamed.



She yanked open the desk again and snarled, “Hey, you! Just what are you doing inside my desk?”

The creature grinned again. In a deep, gravely voice it sang:

*I am the Messy-Desk Pest.  
And I make myself a guest,  
In any desk that is messed.*



“Well, Pest,” said Emily, “you can’t stay in here. I’ll be in big trouble if this desk isn’t cleaned out by the end of recess.”

“Hardy-har-har. Hardy-har,” said the Messy-Desk Pest. “Too bad for you. This is my home

now.” And it grabbed Emily’s glue bottle, stuck it under one long arm, and squeezed.

“Uh-oh,” Emily muttered as the glue splurged out. Before she could slam down the desktop, one round lens of her eyeglasses became splattered with white gook.

“Now what?” Emily groaned, wiping off her glasses on her sweatpants.

The recess bell rang again, and soon afterward the class straggled back into the classroom. You can imagine how cross the tall teacher was when he walked up to Emily’s desk and found the wastebasket still empty.

Looking straight down at Emily, his ears bright red, he said through his teeth, “Emily, you will not see that playground again until your desk is clean, tidy, spick-and-span, spotless. Understand? That messy desk of yours will not delay our class again.”

Emily sighed. She slouched in her chair and waited for the steam to clear from her glasses.

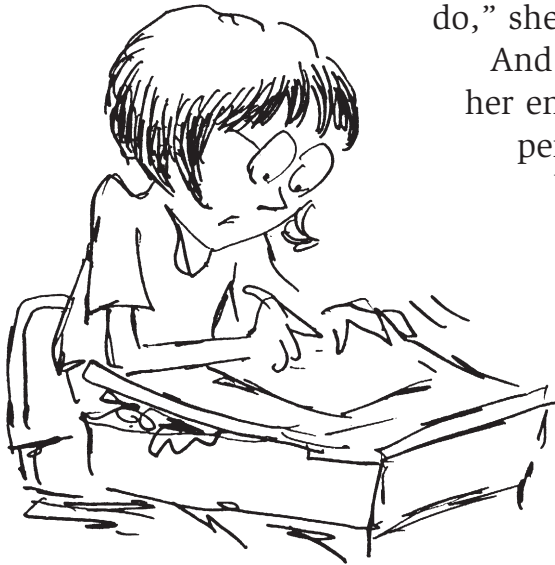
Math period came after recess, and the day did not improve for Emily. Each time she tried to take her math book out of her desk, the Messy-Desk Pest pinched her hand. When she tried to write the answer to  $6 \times 7$ , the pest popped up the desktop and her 42 ended up as a scribble.

During the entire hour, the pest’s nibbling and

gnawing prevented Emily from concentrating on her work, and when she finally managed to open her desk, there lay her favorite monster erasers chewed to crumbs. Even worse, the pest had worn out her new felt pens by scribbling throughout her writing journal.

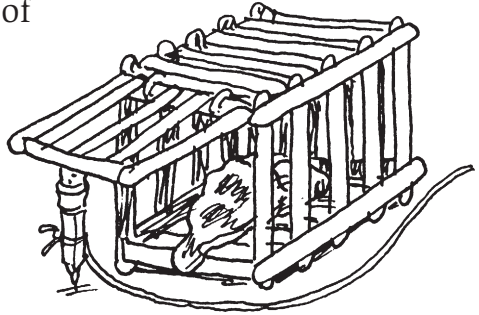
By lunchtime Emily was about to explode with anger. “I’m going to catch that pest if it’s the last thing I do,” she declared.

And she spent her entire lunch period scribbling on a piece of paper, designing a plan.



After lunch, while the rest of the class was on the playground, Emily sat at her messy desk. She scanned the room for what she needed. On the art table she spied the perfect thing—Popsicle sticks.

She sprang to the table and grabbed a fistful of the wooden sticks, along with a bottle of glue, pipe cleaners, and a ball of string. She glued Popsicle stick to Popsicle stick, twisted pipe cleaners, and cut string. When she was through she admired her craft work—a neat little cage with a door that could swing open and shut.



Emily whistled softly as she blew on the cage to harden the glue. For a final touch she stuck on bits of colored paper to give it the perfect messy appearance.

“Now I have a trap,” she said to herself. “What I need next is some bait.” Here she grabbed a pencil, hustled to the sharpener, and whirled the crank until the point was extra sharp.

Back at her desk, Emily sang out, “Oh, Messy-Desk Pest, I have a present for you. I have decided to let you stay and live in my messy desk.”

Thereupon she lifted her desktop and placed the little cage on her math book. With her

pencil she propped open the cage door. She tied a piece of string to the pencil and dangled the other end outside her desk. Finally she placed a black banana peel and two blue crayons on the floor of the cage to lure the pest inside. Now her trap was set.

Soon the Messy-Desk Pest peeked out from behind a Styrofoam cup. It eyed the trash inside the little cage. “Hardy-har-har,” it snickered. “Hardy-har.”

Emily nodded approvingly. “There you are, Pest. Welcome to my desk,” she said, and shut the lid just as the class piled back into the room.

Now for the wait. During science period Emily paid little attention to the tall teacher’s lesson about magnets. Instead she sat poised at her desk, listening for sounds, one hand gripping the end of the string. At one point, when the room was especially quiet, she heard the deep, muffled voice singing:

*I am the Messy-Desk Pest,  
And I make myself a guest,  
In any desk that is messed.*

Soon afterward, Emily felt the string jiggle, and she gave it a yank.

“Gotcha!” she cried.

This, of course, invited more stares from her classmates, but Emily merely leaned back in her chair and smiled with satisfaction.

Not until afternoon recess could Emily check her trap. As soon as the classroom was cleared, she opened her desk. Inside the Popsicle-stick cage sat the frowning Messy-Desk Pest.

Emily lifted the cage and placed it on the floor. “No more hardy-har-hars for you, Pest,” she said.

She had to work fast. At once she dug into the pile of mess in her desk. Out came stale doughnuts, rocks, leaky pens, an old sneaker; out came two hairbrushes, three batteries, an unidentifiable green thing, a Girl Scout hat, even a long-lost report card. Most things went straight into the wastebasket.

“My precious mess! My lovely rubbish! My treasured trash!” the Messy-Desk Pest wailed from his little cage. “What are you doing with my glorious garbage?”

After straightening her textbooks into tidy piles, Emily was done. “Now I’ll make sure you won’t have any place else to go, Pest,” she said.

Dashing up and down the rows of desks, Emily lifted every lid and cleaned out any bit of mess she could find. She even stopped to tidy up the clutter on the tall teacher’s desk.

When she was finished she picked up the Popsicle-stick cage and said, “Now, Pest, it is safe to let you free.”

“Hardy-hoo-hoo, hardy-hoo,” the Messy-Desk Pest cried. “But there is nowhere for me to go. Hardy-hoo! You have cleaned out every desk in the room. Where am I going to live?”

Emily carried the cage over to the window. “Don’t fret, Pest,” she said. “I’ll bet there are plenty of messy desks in other schools. All I know is that from now on I’m going to keep my desk extra clean so you won’t ever return here.”

As her class came filing back into the room, Emily triumphantly opened the window and dumped the Messy-Desk Pest outside.

Emily sighed. When her eyeglasses cleared she spotted the ugly white creature scuttling across the baseball field. Taking her seat, she said to herself, “I wonder where that pest will end up next.”

