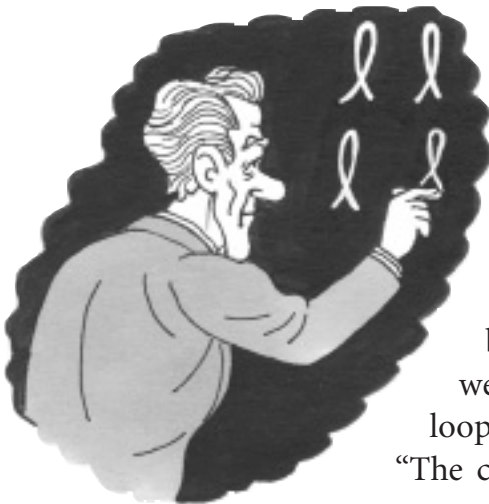


The Pencil Loser

“Please take out a pencil and paper, class,” the tall teacher called out. “Time to practice our cursive handwriting.”

In the back row by the window, Mimi opened her desk. She took out a yellow pencil pitted with nibble marks. She cocked the paper on her desktop to the correct handwriting angle. She planted her feet flat on the floor and placed her left arm in the correct handwriting position. Finally she stuck



the pencil in her kneesock where it would be easy to reach when she needed to write.

The teacher leaned against the blackboard. “Today we will write tall loops, class,” he said. “The cursive letters *f* and



k have tall loops, and a tall loop by itself is an *l*.” His hand swooped up, down, up, down, writing a row of tall loops across the blackboard. “Now you try. Write three lines of tall loops. Remember to use the correct handwriting posture and correct pencil grip.”

“This looks like fun,” said Mimi. “Cursive writing is a lot like doodling.”

She bent her back slightly. Her shoulders faced the desk squarely. She was now ready to write, except for one thing.

“Where’s my pencil?” she said. “What happened to that thing?”

She checked the groove at the top of her desktop. Empty. She checked her shirt pocket and the pockets of her skirt. Not there either. She looked under her desk and under her neighbors’ desks.

“It just disappeared,” she said. “It vanished into thin air.”

Her arm shot up as stiff and straight as a flagpole. “I can’t find my pencil,” she called out. “Could I borrow one?”

The teacher leaned on the blackboard again, smearing the tall loops he had just written. His ears were red. “Mimi, that is the umpteenth pencil you lost today,” he said. “This is the umpteenth pencil I must lend you. You lost a pencil during math. You lost a pencil before spelling and when you went to the girls’ room. You lost a pencil when you went to sharpen it at the sharpener. What’s happening to all your pencils?”



Mimi shrugged. She had learned that it's hard for a teacher to argue against a shrug.

The tall teacher drew a new yellow pencil from his desk drawer. "This is the last one, Mimi," he said. "You must stop losing your pencils. Understand?"

Wearing the most innocent look she had, Mimi took the pencil. She trudged to the sharpener screwed to the windowsill by her desk. She crammed it into the hole marked STANDARD and turned the crank.

"It's not my fault," she said. "My pencils just disappear." *Krrrrr! Krrrrr! Krrrrr!* went the sharpener. "They vanish into thin air."

Mimi pulled out the pencil and blew on the tip. Having had so much practice, she put on a perfect point every time. She set the pencil on the windowsill and watched Mr.

Leeks mow the soccer field before taking her seat.

Again she placed her feet flat on the floor. Again she



bent her back and laid her left arm across the top of the paper. And again she said, “Where’s my pencil?”

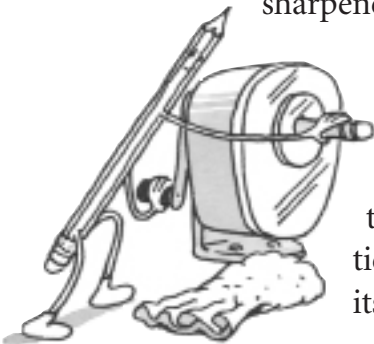
The groove on her desktop was empty. Her pocket held nothing, and the only thing under her desk was a mealworm beetle crawling toward a cookie crumb.

“Now what?” she said. “I can’t ask the teacher for another pencil until he cools down a bit. My tall loops will never get done.”

Mimi had her head buried in her desk, searching for another pencil, when—*Krrrrr! Krrrrr! Krrrrr!*—the sharpener began to grind.

“How could that be?” she asked herself. “No one passed my desk.”

She sat up straight and looked toward the window. What she saw at the sharpener was so curious she didn’t know whether to laugh or to shout. The thing—one could hardly call it a creature—was as tall as a pencil and as thin as a pencil. It had a six-sided, banana-yellow body like a pencil. Its pointed head and pink boots resembled the top and bottom of a pencil as well. Mimi would have sworn it *was* a pencil if it didn’t stand on two wiry legs and turn the sharpener crank with two wiry arms.



The pencil in the sharpener grew shorter and shorter. When it disappeared altogether, the thing unsnapped the shavings holder and emptied the contents into a sack by its side.



Finally Mimi found her voice. “Hey you, that was *my* pencil you just ground up,” she called out. “I needed it to write tall loops.”

The short, thin, pointy yellow thing turned toward her. A smile spread across its face, almost doubling its narrow width. “Too bad, little girl,” it said. “I find, I grind.”

Mimi scowled. “Who are you? What are you? And I’m not a little girl.”

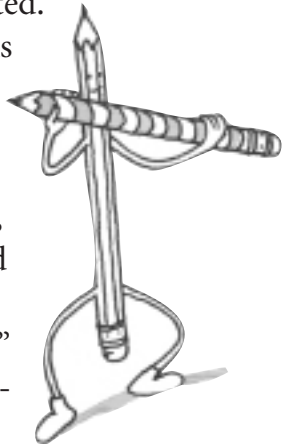
The thing stood up straight. “Surely you’ve heard of me. My name is written on the side of many pencils. I’m Ticonderoga 2, the Pencil Grinder. But you can call me Ti-2, little girl.”

“Well, Ti-2,” Mimi said. “Just what are you doing in my classroom? And why did you grind up my pencil? And I’m *not* a little girl.”

The thing pulled a candy-cane-striped pencil from behind the globe. It inserted it into the sharpener and resumed grinding. “What the Pencil Grinder finds, it grinds,” it repeated.

“And thanks to you, little girl, this classroom is a bonanza for lost pencils. I find them all over this place—inside books, behind the aquarium, in the wastebasket, under chairs, up in the lights, and stuck in chalk erasers.”

“But why grind them up?” Mimi asked. “What good are pencil shavings?”



“Once I sort them, shavings are worth their weight in gold,” the thing replied. “The lower-grade shavings I sell to playground makers who press them flat with giant steamrollers. That’s how the surfaces of school playgrounds are made. But the choicest shavings I sell to the great chefs of Pennsylvania.”

“The chefs of Pennsylvania!” Mimi exclaimed. “Whatever for?”

Ti-2 kissed the ends of his fingers. “The chefs of Pennsylvania use my Grade-A shavings in their exquisite cuisine, little girl. Mmmm-mm. Ever have pencil-shaving stew? Deeeeelicious. Pencil shavings and pasta? Deeeelectable. Or have you tried the favorite drink of Pennsylvanians, pencil-shaving tea? Deeeeelightful.”

Mimi wrinkled her nose and said, “Whatever.”

Having ground up the candy-cane-striped pencil, Ti-2 again unloaded the shavings into his sack. Next, the thing stuck a yellow pencil pocked with nibble marks in the sharpener.

“And look at this beauty I found inside a kneesock,” it said. “The chefs of Pennsylvania can make pencil-shaving cupcakes, enough birthday treats for an entire class, after I grind this baby up.”

Mimi stood and snatched the pencil out of the hole. “That’s another of *my* pencils, thank you very much,” she said. “Now go away, Pencil Grinder. I have rows of loopy *l*’s to write.”

“Don’t get cranky, little girl,” Ti-2 said. “I’m just doing my job. Kids grow taller and pencils grow

shorter. That's a fact of life. But now that I'm fresh out of pencils I think I'll take a nap. Tomorrow I'll get back to the old grind. By then there'll be lots more lost pencils around the classroom for me to find and grind. Nighty-night." With that, the short, thin, pointy yellow thing lay on the windowsill. If Mimi hadn't known better, she would have mistaken it for an ordinary pencil.

First thing the next morning Mimi stood at the pencil sharpener. She put three perfect points on three special pencils. Each one had her name engraved on the side in golden letters.

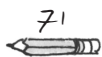
"Time for cursive handwriting, class," called the tall teacher. "Today we will practice short poles. One short pole makes an *i*, two a *u*, and three a *w*." Up, down, up, down went his hand across the blackboard. "Now it's your turn. Please write three rows of short poles."

Feet flat, back bent, shoulders squared, left hand in position, Mimi reached for her pencil. She was sure she had put it in the desktop groove. But it was gone.

She had barely begun to look for it when—*Krrrrr! Krrrrr!*—the grinding began.

"Good morning, little girl," Ti-2 called from the windowsill. "I found this splendid pencil on the floor. So I thought I'd get the lead out and crank up the sharpener."

Mimi's heart sank. She watched her personalized pencil disappear. "I know, I know," she said through her teeth. "You find, you grind."



She took out a second pencil and started writing short poles. When she finished, she oh-so-carefully placed the pencil in her shirt pocket. Afterward, when she went to P.E., she made sure to put it in the pencil box inside her desk. Unfortunately, during reading she took the pencil to the reading table with her and left it there. In no time—*Krrrrr! Krrrrr!*—Ti-2 was grinding it to shavings.

“They’ll be feasting on pencil-shaving pizza tonight in Pennsylvania, little girl,” it called out.

Mimi slapped her forehead. “How could I have been so stupid?” she said. “What I need is something to remind me not to leave my pencil around the room.”

She found a rubber band in her desk and put it on her wrist. Whenever she saw the rubber band she’d think of the pencil. Just to make sure, she stuck a Band-Aid on the back of her hand to remind her what the rubber band was for and wrapped masking tape around her finger to remind her why she wore the Band-Aid.



“I will *not* lose my last pencil,” she vowed.

Meanwhile, after emptying the shavings into the sack, Ti-2 hopped off the shelf in search of more pencils. It checked behind the computer, under the butterfly cage, and inside the coat closet.



No one except Mimi seemed to notice the yellow thing. While she watched it scurry around the room, a plan entered her head. She told herself, “Yesterday when the Pencil Grinder ran out of pencils to grind, it took a nap. Maybe if I can keep it from finding more pencils today, it will do the same thing.”

At that moment Ti-2 shot toward a pencil by the sink. Mimi lurched from her seat. She pounced on it seconds before the thing got there.

“One less pencil for you, Mr. Ticonderoga,” she said. “Perhaps you might be getting a little sleepy with no work to do.”

Minutes later, Ti-2 stood on Richard’s shoulder. As nimbly as a pickpocket, it was attempting to pinch a pencil from behind his ear.

“Hey, Richard,” Mimi called out. “That pencil behind your ear sure looks stupid.”

In a flash Richard pulled the pencil out and shook it at Mimi.

She pretended to yawn, irritating both Richard and the thing on his shoulder. “My, wouldn’t a nap be nice right now,” she said.

Finally, after Mimi had recovered four more pencils, including one left by the tall teacher in the chalk tray, Ti-2 returned to the windowsill. “Poor pencil hunting today, little girl,” it called out. “The chefs in Pennsylvania will be disappointed. I guess if I can’t grind pencils, I’ll saw some logs. Time for a snooze.”

Mimi nodded. So far her plan was working.

Patiently she watched Ti-2 lie down and close its eyes. She counted to twenty before making her move. In one swift motion she stood, grabbed the yellow thing in her fist, and jammed it into the STANDARD hole on the pencil sharpener. It fit perfectly.

Ti-2 woke up grinning. “What do you think you’re doing, little girl?” it said. “I’m sharp enough already.”

Her jaw set, Mimi turned the crank. *Krrrrr! Krrrrr! Krrrrr!*

The yellow thing giggled. “OK, OK, I think you made your point, little girl. Now get me out of this hole. That grinding tickles.”

Krrrrr! Krrrrr! Mimi, with a fierce look in her eye, continued to crank.

“Really, little girl,” said Ti-2. “Now I’m only two inches tall. How embarrassing. My friends will call me Stubby. And I have lots of friends, little girl—Ticonderoga 2½, 3, and 4 to name a few. So don’t assume that by turning me into shavings you can start being careless with your pencils again. Oh, no, little girl, my friends love looking for lost pencils as much as I do.”

At this point only Ti-2’s pink boots stuck out of the sharpener. Muttering, Mimi made one last slow turn of the crank. “So long, Leadhead. And ... I’m ... *not* ... a ... little ... girl.”

She emptied the shavings not into the wastebasket but into a Baggie in her backpack. After sit-

ting down, she picked up her last engraved pencil. She tapped it on her desktop.

“OK, all you Pencil Grinders, wherever you are,” she said. “Just *try* getting this pencil away from me.

And as for you, Ticonderoga 2, I’m taking you outside and sprinkling you on the playground. By the end of recess you’ll be mashed into the playground surface along with the other low-grade pencil shavings. No, Ti-2, I don’t think you’re good enough for the chefs of Pennsylvania.”

