A Story before Christmas

Students want to play a prank and therefore take a kitten to school. The teacher throws the cat out the window. To avenge this "animal cruelty", the students steal the teacher's eyeglasses in a night-and-fog operation and throw it into a stream. When celebrating Christmas in the woods the culprits become thoughtful. When the glasses are retrieved at nighttime, a slightly eerie encounter occurs. But the next morning the teacher reappears with his glasses and almost everything is as it always used to be.

"Now, George, come on, tell me, what have you got in your desk?" asks the teacher.

The big old man stands waiting in front of the boy. He has his hands in his trouser pockets and looks at George through his old-fashioned glasses. The two lenses look like the bottoms of bottles. His funny glasses give teacher Anderson the appearance of a hypnotist. But George does not look his teacher in the eye. He does not look up at all. He pretends not to have heard anything. He eagerly writes word after word on his worksheet. He is absorbed in his work and doesn't let anything disturb him. This is how it should look like.

George's face is turning red. Red like a ripe tomato. His blushing betrays him. The students are very quiet. And now this pitiful screaming sound again. It comes from the desk at which George seems to be working with the utmost concentration. No doubt, it is the wailing of a cat.

As a matter of fact, something awkward happened to George earlier. If only that stupid cat hadn't meowed so loudly! And of course, George has made himself suspicious by his excessive industry in filling in the worksheets.

But I rather tell you how it came about that George took a cat to school and why he is hiding it in a desk.

It happened exactly one week ago. It was when Polly Barton told George off. She held up her hand and said to teacher Anderson, "Mr. Anderson, please ask George why he always throws the wet sponge at the girls during break?"

Behind Mr. Anderson's back she could grin maliciously. She was pleased that George was given punishment tasks. A hundred times he had to write the sentence, "A decent young man behaves like a gentleman and does not throw sponges at young ladies."

At first George tried to make the punishment work a little easier for himself. He copied the sentence only five times. Then he took scissors and adhesive tape and went to the xerox machine at the post office. "What are those machines for?" he told me. I had the same opinion as George. The apparatuses were invented to make people's lives easier.

But despite his shortsightedness, Mr. Anderson recognized the trick. And as far as apparatuses and an easy life were concerned, he just thought differently from us boys and girls. So George had to write the hundred sentences each by each. Each

with the following addition: “Moreover, a decent boy doesn't try to cheat his teacher.”

Polly Barton was the only one to blame for all the trouble. George wanted to get even.

The geography teacher had drawn a volcano on the blackboard with colored chalks. A volcanic eruption in bright yellow and red and blue. After the geography lesson, George volunteered to wipe out this blackboard drawing. He cleaned the blackboard in a way that the sponge was full of colored chalk residue. He did not rinse out the sponge. And when the geography teacher disappeared direction teachers' room and Polly was standing in the right place, he threw the wet sponge into her face with force. Splash!!! Bull's eye! Polly looked like an Indian on the warpath. And howled like one, too. “There you go for your squealing me!” shouted George, and now it was his turn to grin.

But in George’s opinion, it wasn’t punishment enough. That Polly Barton should never grin maliciously again. From her cousin Benny Barton we knew Polly feared cats. Tremendously. She was afraid of cats the way normal people are afraid of wild lions.

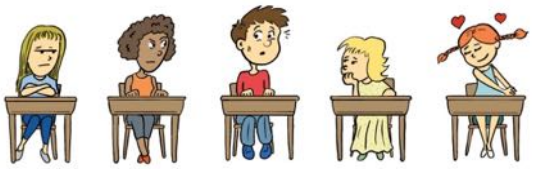
My family happened to raise three kittens at home right now. One of them is completely black and has green sparkling eyes. Normally she is very trusting and lets everything happen to her. This kitten should help us to educate Polly.

Today after lunch George came to my house. We packed the black kitten into a sports bag. And because I gave the animal a good talking to on the way to school, we brought it into the classroom without any incidents. But from then on, nothing worked out at all and our little joke turned into a tragedy.

Polly is not in the school yet. We put the cat in Polly's desk. The cat wants to leave. We close the desk lid. The cat meows loudly and pushes the lid up. George pushes it down.

The lesson is about to begin. Polly is still not here. All the other girls are. They sit at their desks around George. They look at him stunned. All except Hazel. She gives him a glance too, but somehow differently. I think Hazel has her eye on George.

Now the bell rings. George has to sit down on Polly's chair. Anyone who is not at his seat after the bell rings must write the sentence fifty times as a punishment: “After the bell rings, all students sit down at their seats and have their books, notebooks and pencils ready.”



Teacher Anderson would certainly dictate another sentence to him today. For example, “A decent boy doesn't take live cats to school and lock them in other pupils's desks.”

There sits George in the middle of the girls. With his upper body lying on the desk cover.

The door opens. It’s dead quiet in the classroom. Even the cat doesn't meow now. Teacher Anderson enters, stops as usual next to the teacher's desk and looks into the class with a hypnotist's gaze. Normally, it is only at this moment that the class becomes completely silent. As if Anderson could really hypnotize. In such

moments you would hear a pin drop to the floor.

Suddenly, a long, loud wail sounds from Polly Barton's desk, where George is sitting today. Teacher Anderson doesn't bat an eyelash. Is he not just nearsighted, but also hard of hearing? George hopes so. His aunt is about the same age as Anderson. She has a hearing aid. It cost much money, his aunt once complained. Teacher Anderson is known to be thrifty. He doesn't like to spend money. He always wears the same old clothes. As well as the same old-fashioned glasses with the strong lenses. Maybe he really doesn't hear well, and a hearing aid has been too expensive for him.

George thinks this while teacher Anderson hands out worksheets. *Main Clause and Subordinate Clause* is the title. George has no idea what a main clause or a subordinate clause is. But he immediately starts writing like a madman.

So teacher Anderson is standing now in front of George. He wants to know what George hides in his desk, which is actually not his desk at all. The cat meows. The class is silent. George blushes. The teacher waits. The cat meows again.

George has an idea. Without looking up, he says: "Sorry, Mr. Anderson, my new cell phone. I forgot to switch it off. You know, I have an interesting ringtone... perhaps a little unusual..."

"Well, my dear George, be so kind and lift the lid of the desk!" says Mr. Anderson in a soft voice, almost whispering. "Please, I'd like to have a look at one of those smart phones." He says it kindly. Very friendly. Over-friendly, it seems to me.

George now looks up hesitantly. Because of Anderson's strong glasses, George can't tell if this friendliness is honest.

The friendliness is probably not genuine, because teacher Anderson usually gives his short commands loud and clear. He doesn't want to waste time on blah-blah like explanations and kindnesses. He is a teacher of the old days. He often says, "Back when I was a schoolboy, the teacher had a cane. He would hit me on the fingers or on the butt. Then everything was clear. It always helped. And it certainly didn't do any harm to anyone."

Even today, teacher Anderson doesn't want to waste his time. He is a man who likes to get things done. With one hand, he grabs George's ear and pulls him away from the desk cover. With the other hand, he opens the desk cover. "Oh, I see, these new phones have fur," he says. Now his voice sounds less friendly. Then teacher Anderson grabs the astonished and frightened cat, goes with her to the window, opens it and throws the poor animal out of the window into the snow.

My poor kitten! That brutal human!

Fortunately, our classroom is on the ground floor. And fortunately, cats have a wonderful sense of direction. It is said that there have been cats who have found their way from a vacation home by the sea back to their house in the middle of a big city.

Nevertheless, Anderson is an animal abuser. Hazel, our animal lover, who even saves the snails from the cars on the way to school, says loud enough for everyone to hear, including Anderson: "That's mean!" Normally, Hazel is a cheerful girl who is a bit like Pippi Longstocking. But now she is angry and scolds loud and clear. Anderson too, when he closes the window again, is no longer quiet and friendly.

He has sheets of paper distributed. Blank sheets. "Names at the top right!" yells teacher Anderson, so that the window panes rattle. And then he dictates a grammar test. It contains everything you can torture us poor students with. From *infinitive* to *past participle*, from *noun* to *adverb*, from *subordinate clause* to *main clause*.

A horrible test. And my grade point average in language skill is already dangerously close to the critical point.

Finally, the bell rings for the big break. We are informed that Polly Barton is at the dentist this afternoon. She's getting braces. Because she has crooked teeth. She won't be able to come to school. Our cat isn't near anyway. The tracks in the snow show that the cat went away in the right direction.

Nevertheless, this act of animal cruelty must be punished. George agrees with me: "The business with Polly can wait a little longer. She'll get her turn later. Anderson's turn is first."

All the friends around us on the playground agree: Anderson's brutal act must be punished. We solemnly swear revenge for the cat. Hazel suggests that we tell him once again what we think. By text message. All students should send him a text message with the text: "You are a mean animal abuser". The only problem is that Anderson doesn't have any cell phone.

Robin wants to avenge the cat with a bomb: "We fill a candle with gunpowder. We'll give it to Anderson as a present. When he then lights the candle on Christmas Eve, it goes bang! and Anderson then suddenly wears very short pants, has a new hairstyle and altered glasses, hahaha."

Everyone joins in Robin's laughter. An awesome idea, indeed. "Such a black skull like the teacher Lampel in Max and Moritz after he lit the pipe with the gunpowder!" exclaims George enthusiastically.

As for me, I'm not so enthusiastic. Somehow explosives don't fit in with Christmas Eve, when we celebrate the feast of love and I might finally get a new bicycle. And if Anderson lights the candle beforehand and something comes out, then there's a lot of trouble for us and for me there's certainly no new bike for Christmas.

"Listen, buddies," I say to my friends, "Anderson is against everything modern like computers and stuff like that. He still writes everything by hand. And he writes the important things in his black book, which he keeps in the top drawer of the teacher's desk: grades, assignments, appointments, the behavior of the students, addresses, etc. If we now steal this book from him, he will look pretty stupid. Especially when he has to write the report cards at the end of the term. When talking to the parents, will he still remember our sins, which he carefully wrote down in this black book? When he intends to send out the New Year's cards, he doesn't know the addresses."

There is no special enthusiasm for my suggestion. Finch suggests a stink bomb, Manuel wants to stretch trip wires in front of Anderson's front door. Why not dig pitfalls? Henry knows how to connect the socket to the door trap. A soon as Anderson enters the classroom, there would be a howl and we would have something to grin about. Fortunately, the break is over by now. Otherwise, someone would have suggested stuffing Anderson into a cannon to shoot him to the moon.

After lessons, we're standing around in the street for a while to continue discussing. We soon agree on my suggestion to steal the black book. Probably some of my friends thought a little bit during the math lesson, not because of the math problems, but because of bombs, electric shocks and the like. Hazel assists me. She too, is against brutalities. And she talks sense to the mates. With some guys, their opinion counts quite a lot. I think it's because she's not just a pretty girl but also a sensible girl. A few of my classmates secretly have an eye on her, I guess. Especially George. But George must go to his handball club now, Robin to piano lesson, Manuel, as always, complains about all the house chores. Henry has cold feet.

We decide to sneak into the schoolhouse on Wednesday late afternoon. We want to

kidnap the mysterious black book. The loss of it may cause embarrassments to that Anderson. Moreover, as for me, I'm interested in what he's written down there about me.

The next Wednesday we meet at half past four at the parking lot in front of the school building. It had snowed all afternoon. Now it is foggy and almost dark. We do our best not to leave any revealing traces. We are four boys from our class and Hazel, who of course also joins in. She is already there when I arrive at the school building. She is wearing colorful woolen stockings. Two funny ponytails of hair peek out from under her woolen cap. She really looks like Pippi Longstocking now, I think, while we we're waiting without speaking.

Finch considers the whole thing too dangerous. He does not join in.

Now we hear the sound of Henry's motorcycle. We can see him riding up to us with difficulty over the snow-covered road. His brother from the second class is sitting on the luggage rack. He never squeals, Henry assures us.

Henrys puts his motorcycle down. We hide between the now white bushes and whisper. Henry's little brother should now go to the janitor and explain to him, crying, that he has forgotten his arithmetic book. He can't do his homework without it and the teacher is so strict.

Henry practices crying with his brother. Then the little boy is sent to fetch the key.

The plan works. The little brother brings a whole bunch of keys. We enter the building and tiptoe through the dark corridors.

There's something strange about an empty school building. It is cold and smells of cleaning products. Where there was noise and fuss this morning, there is now a solemn silence. Almost like in a church. And almost a little ghostly.

And suddenly it gets really spooky.

We stand in front of the door of our classroom and freeze with fright. Because there is a scratching and creaking sound coming from inside. And in between, we hear gurgling and groaning. George, who is already holding the door latch, freezes. Even in the half-light, I can see that his face is very pale.

"A... a ghost?", Henry stammers. For a while, we stand frozen.

"Oh nonsense, ghosts don't exist," George whispers now, his revenge being more important than fear. I would have loved to run away, but I lack the courage to do so. Even Hazel looks worried. George opens the door very slowly. He looks carefully into the classroom. For five seconds he remains motionless. The rest of us are waiting uneasily.

"What's wrong with you?" Hazel asks in a whisper. Now George closes the door again quietly. Then he turns away, by pressing both hands to his mouth. Does he have to vomit? Has he seen such terrible things?

We stand around George, silent and worried. Hazel puts her arm around George's shoulders. She wants to help him.

Only now do I realize that George is merely holding back laughter. "An… An... Anderson!" he whispers. "Anderson is inside. He's... he's asleep and ... he ... he snores. That's your monster: a sleeping and snoring Anderson!"

Then all of us want to see him. George opens the door again. Anderson is sitting at the teacher's desk, asleep. That is, he is lying with his upper body on the teacher's desk, with stacks of student notebooks to his left and right. His head is resting on an open booklet. Without glasses. The eyes are closed, the mouth is open. Next to it a red ballpoint pen.

The glasses are on the edge of the desk facing us and almost fall down. The pair of lenses look at us as sternly as teacher Anderson himself usually does when he stands in front of the class. Without his glasses, teacher Anderson now looks rather harmless: grey, old, and helpless.

That man Anderson, who always stands like a rock in front of the class and acts like a wild devil if anyone makes a wrong sound. He is just a poor, lonely old man with a worried face.

We stare at the sleeping teacher from the doorway.

Then George takes two courageous steps forward. What is this idiot up to?

I can’t believe my eyes. George grabs Anderson’s glasses, turns around and hurries back through the corridors to the exit, where Henry's little brother is waiting to bring back the keys.

The matter is now turning scary for the little boy, too. He really wants to start crying. I am not comfortable with the situation either. Hazel doesn't quite know what to say. Robin and Henry think it's great. George is their hero.

Later we meet at the edge of the forest. Robin says he'd love to see Anderson leave the school without his glasses, not finding the keyhole, stumbling down the stairs, and then grope through the fog to his old rusty bicycle.

Hazel says, “If this half-blind blockhead really tries to ride his bike through the slush without his glasses, it's sure to be the clown act of the year."

But for George it is too risky to be caught with the stolen glasses. He says, "I'll have to write a thousand times: “Only very bad boys steal their beloved teacher's sophisticated spectacles."

The glasses are admired closely. Yes, they look like a set of two bottle bottoms in thick black rims. The frame looks very worn, and one of the two temples has been patched with adhesive tape. Everyone roars as George is the first to put these strange pair of spectacles on his nose. And then George stands there the way Anderson usually does, holds up his index finger in an admonishing manner and yells, “Review test! You miserable lazybones, write the date and name in the top left-hand corner!” But it seems to me that George now looks more like the teacher Lampel from Max and Moritz.

When I put on those glasses, the lights shining through the fog blur into a shapeless moon. I feel dizzy and I am glad I can pass to pass the glasses to Hazel. But Hazel does not put on the glasses.

Everyone agrees: Teacher Anderson hardly owns a spare pair of spectacles. And you can't buy such an optical dinosaur, in a department store. “An optician would have to grind for days to make something like

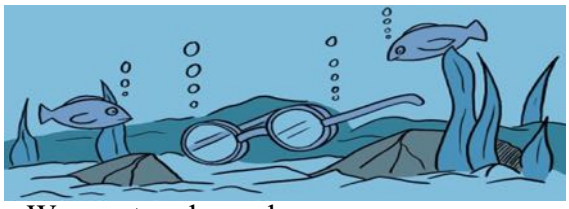
that," says Henry, whose cousin has been a trainee at an optician for three weeks.

George is pleased with himself and what he has done. "The glasses are far better than the black book," he announces. "With this, the thing with the cat is avenged."

He wants to bury the glasses ceremoniously. For this purpose, he wipes the fresh snow aside with his foot. Then he kneels down to dig a hole with the pocket knife. But the ground is frozen.

We walk down to the stream. George pushes his motorcycle. His little brother has already gone home.

We stop on a small wooden bridge. George holds Anderson's glasses over the water. It is black and calm. Then he drops the glasses. They immediately disappear into the water and George calls after the glasses, "Hasta la vista, baby!" I think it means "Goodbye, my darling." George got the phrase from an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.



We must go home because we are celebrating Forest Christmas with the Scouts tonight. Silently, we walk along the edge of the forest.

The houses in front of us have white roofs. Many windows are decorated for Christmas. The fairy lights on the trees shine softly through the snow. A strange mood. A beautiful mood. A Christmas mood that is gripping me now.

I'm looking forward to dinner, to seeing my parents and my sister. I am glad not to be as alone as Mr. Anderson.

My mother looks at me in reproach because I'm home so late. The family has sat down at the dining table and started eating. Four candles are burning on the Advent wreath. Mother has placed fir tree branches with Christmas decorations on the window sills. I can hear music by Bing Crosby.

We are having steamed dumplings with vanilla cream. My favorite meal. If I had time, I would be a little ashamed because of the incident with Anderson's glasses. But I must leave soon.

At eight o'clock, the scouts meet at the valley station of the cable car.

On foot, I hurry through the alleys. The town has become very quiet. Only a few cars are still moving. Not many people are in the streets anymore. A man with presents under his arm wants to open a front door. A woman in a fur coat stands at the roadside and lets her Chi Chi pee. Streetcar number 9 squeaks by. The snow glistens. The man on the monument now has a hat and the fountain tube has a beard. The scratching of a snowplow can be heard. In some garden, children are building a snowman by the light of torches. I would have loved to roll around in the snow now.

When I arrive at the bottom station of the funicular, there are only a few scouts left. Most of them have already gone up to the middle station, where they receive a lit candle. They are lined up on the little road.

The troops are arranged according to size. First come the little ones. They have scarves wrapped around them and pointed caps on their heads. They hold a big homemade candle in their hands. At the end there are the senior scouts, the squad leaders, and the platoon leaders. They're almost grown up. They have their coat collars turned up. They wear hats that are now slowly turning white. Many hold their candle so that the flame warms their hands.

Now the column starts to move in silence. Not a single cell phone is ringing. From time to time you can hear a muffled call.

Henry marches in front of me. Further ahead I see George and Hazel. They step on in silence. Otherwise, the two of them are always chatting. At school, they are not allowed to sit next to each other because they are so chatty. But now they don't say a word. I see their long shadows on the white snow. Each time the path makes a bend, I can see Hazel's candlelight sparkling in her eyes. She does not look at me.

This afternoon Hazel was standing on my side. Why is she usually near George? Because he likes to flirt with her? But now George is busy with his own thoughts. I guess all of us are.

Now the path winds like a snake up a snow-covered meadow. In the middle of this large clearing stands a young fir tree. The scouts now attach their candles to the branches. Some place their candle on the ground in front of the fir tree. Everything happens silently. The atmosphere is solemn. Sixty silent young people are watching the glow of the sixty candles. Above is the black of the sky, below the cold white of the snow. There is a warm yellow light around the fir tree. Otherwise, there is shouting and fussing, especially when the first snow has fallen. Snowballs are thrown, people roll around fighting in the snow. But now everyone is very quiet and there is a festive mood.

A blond girl from the 2nd troop plays "Silent Night, Holy Night" on the trumpet.

But I have only told you half of what I thought on the way to the Christmas tree. On the long way, when no one spoke, I suddenly saw Mr. Anderson before my mind'eye, as he was all alone in the unadorned schoolroom this afternoon. With so much sadness on his face. A lonesome old man.

What had Anderson been thinking before he had overcome by sleep? Was he angry at the students? Had he thought they were making so many mistakes on purpose to annoy the teacher. Or had he been tormented by other worries? Do teachers have worries at all? Probably they do, otherwise his face would not have had such a pitiful expression. And what had Anderson thought when he couldn't find his glasses when waking up? Had he wandered around even more helpless and even sadder. Or had he raged and cursed? I think single people miss having a family especially at Christmas time. I'm glad I have a father, a mother, and a sister.

We sing the usual Christmas carols, from Jingle Bells to O Christmas Tree. Then the scout leader reads the Christmas story. I've known it by heart for a long time from listening to it so many times.

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

Although I know this story, it now seems to me in a different light. And somehow, I feel that Christmas is the feast of love and forgiveness. The time of peace on earth. When the scout leader pauses briefly in his speech to catch his breath, I say to myself, yet loud enough for the bystanders to hear, "That was really mean of us."

Some comrades look at me in amazement. George and Hazel, who are standing very close and have heard my sentence, say and ask nothing.

The scout leader goes on reading aloud while sixty young people listen silently:

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. The shepherds were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" the angel said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! You will find there a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Angels were praising God and singing, "Glory to God in heaven, and peace on earth among men."

At this point I decide to make peace with Anderson. And even want to help him. But how?

Later, we sing something in Latin: "Dona nobis pacem". Pacem, that means peace.

Surely, I can also get my friends to make peace with Anderson. After all, my cat has been home safe and sound for a long time, and if you look at it the right way, George and I brought the cat to school and tortured her by this.

At the end we all sing "Silent Night". From sixty throats, it doesn't sound quiet at all through the night. Everyone knows the song, everyone sings along. I sing especially loud. You can certainly hear our "Silent Night" all the way into the city.

We march back to town in single file. Still some snowflakes are falling from the sky. Then I want to talk briefly with my comrades about teacher Anderson. But George and Hazel have already disappeared. Their cell phones remain switched off.

And when I suggest to Henry that we should straighten things out with Anderson, he says: "Now you're crazy. That's an awesome joke. If he doesn't have a spare pair of glasses, we'll have a lot to laugh about tomorrow. And if you're scared, go to your mommy, she'll give you a pacifier to suckle, it'll calm you down."

So, I decide to act myself.

First, I have to get a garden rake. I must do it secretly. How should I explain to my parents that I'm not going to bed yet, but first take a walk to the stream? With a garden rake.

I sneak through our garden to the shed. Fortunately, it is not locked, and I can help myself. Unfortunately, I leave tracks in the snow. With the rake I try to cover these traces. But it makes the whole thing worse. The track now stretches through the garden almost like a ski slope. I really hope that my parents won't notice.

Actually, I would have needed a torch, but it is in the apartment. I can see that my parents are not yet in bed. They must be waiting for me. And if Henry has already passed through our street on his motorbike, they will soon get nervous and want to call me on my cell phone.

I have a strange feeling as I walk along the edge of the forest down to the stream at midnight, with the rake on my shoulder.

There are no more streetlights here. It is completely quiet. I hear only the crunching of my feet in the snow.

A dark forest is always something eerie. Especially when you are alone. An oppressive feeling. Bushes look like big wild animals, signposts like scrawny people, roots like snakes' nests. Errant skeletons everywhere. Is there a predator lurking? Am I encountering a maniac here? Henry once lent me some of his video films. Then I could only sleep badly. Now,

of course, the images from these videos come to my mind. Werewolves, half man, half animal. Horror figures with chainsaws threatening and Samurai swords beating around. I suddenly feel cold and yet I have a hot head. But it gets really scary when I discover fresh tracks in the snow in front of me on the path. At least two people have passed through here a short time ago. A pair of lovers? No, they marched through the forest with a meter distance.

It seems to me now that I see a glimmer of light shining through the trees in front of me from time to time. I tremble with fear. I stop but can no longer see any light. What to do? Turn back? Go home? If I'm not home in the next half hour, I'm in real trouble. I already want to use my parents as an excuse to turn back. Then I imagine Henry, laughing at me, teasing me with the pacifier and the baby. He himself would probably be scared to death right now. Yes, I think Henry would run home now. But I'm not a baby anymore! That's what I tell myself.

What sort of people are lurking around in the woods at night? Criminals? Lunatics? It doesn't occur to me that they, too, might be afraid. Afraid of me. Afraid of someone chasing them in the dark forest at midnight, armed with a rake.

I venture as far as the bridge. I dip the rake into the water. Again and again, I look to the left, to the right and behind. I try to reach the bottom of the stream with the rake. Fortunately, the stream is quite calm here and only flows a little. The glasses should still be there. I pull the rake through the water.

Suddenly I hear something behind me. Yes, it is voices. I turn around and see two dark figures standing a few meters behind me. Terrified, I drop the rake and run away in panic. When I stop once briefly and look around, I see a torch light up. I hear shouts. I can't understand what they are calling. My heart is beating too loudly for that. I run on. Almost without coming to my senses, I reach our street.

In front of our home, I have to calm down first. I see my father going up and down in the living room. He is talking on the phone.

I still have a short time to think of excuses. Should I pretend having lost my speech? Have I caught a cold? Shall I cough incessantly and go straight to bed? Or was Henry's motorcycle broken and I had to help him fix it? Or was I in Hazel's craft room, making a Christmas surprise for my parents?

Actually, it doesn't matter which lie I've told my parents, because they didn't believe me anyway. I'm such a bad liar.

Either my parents are also in a pre-Christmas mood or they are just very happy that I am back home in good health. I'm in bed soon. But I can't sleep after all these excitements. And I rack my brains for a long time about how I could get Anderson glasses. Nothing comes to my mind.

In the meantime, I have come to regard Mr. Anderson almost as a kind of friend. I would have liked to help him.

I get up, go to my desk, take a white sheet and a black felt-tip pen. Because he is shortsighted, I have to write in very large letters. I write:

Dear Mr. Anderson,
I was unfortunately there when they stole your glasses. I am sorry. You will find your glasses in the Beaver Creek just above the wooden bridge. The thing with the cat was not that evil, of course.
I wish you a Merry Christmas.
A friend

I hide the letter in my textbook. When no one sees it, I will put it on Mr. Anderson's desk.

In the morning I am late for school. Probably because I haven't slept enough. The bell rings as I enter the classroom. And now Anderson also appears.

But what is going on? He has his glasses on his nose. The glasses with the bottoms patched with tape. And he greets very friendly. Then he says he's sorry that he threw a cat out the window the day before yesterday. And now he takes off his glasses and winks at George. Then he nods with a smile in Hazel's direction.

I think that not only for me, but for three others, yesterday already became a bit of Christmas.

When I come home from school at noon, I see the rake standing next to the shed. Attached to it is a very nicely wrapped bar of chocolate. On it is my name and, "Merry Christmas!" Nothing else.

I feel good. Only Hazel knows that nut chocolate is my favorite. Only Hazel writes so beautifully. Only Hazel can wrap gifts so beautifully.

Comprehension questions. Story before Christmas. (The questions are in the order of the narrative sequence.)

1. Does George turn white or red in the face?
2. Does one clean the blackboard with the sponge or with the teeth?
3. Who has to do punishment work, George or Polly?
4. Was the trick with the photocopier any help to George or did it give him extra work?
5. Did the geography teacher draw a volcano or a cat on the blackboard?
6. Does George volunteer to clean the blackboard or is it his punitive work?
7. Is Polly afraid of teachers or of cats?
8. Is Hazel also afraid of cats or does she rather like George?
9. Is the little cat black or white?
10. Do the students have to sit in their places before or after the bell rings?
11. Is the teacher a hypnotist or does he just look like one?
12. Is the geography lesson beginning or do they have a language lesson?
13. Is the cat in a student's desk or in the teacher's desk?
14. Do they hear a cell phone ringing or a cat meowing?
15. Does Hazel resemble Pippi Longstocking or Red Zora?
16. Do the students write a language test or a mathematic test?
17. Is Polly seeing a career counselor or a dentist?
18) Does Polly or Hazel have crooked teeth?
19) Is the teacher's name Barton or Anderson?
20) Did the teacher Lampel in Max and Moritz smoke a pipe or cigarettes?
21. Does Robin want to give the teacher a candle or a new bicycle?
22. Does teacher Anderson always have the latest cell phone or none at all?

23. Does teacher Anderson write the report cards with the computer or by hand?
24. Do they stretch trip wires for the teacher or is that just Manuel's plan?
25. Did it snow or rain in the afternoon?
26. Does Henry have a car or a motorcycle?
27. Did Henry's brother forget the arithmetic book or was it just an excuse?
28. Do the friends enter the schoolhouse through the front door or do they climb through a window?
29. Is the snoring ghost in reality a black cat or a sleeping teacher?
30. Do the friends steal the glasses or the red pen?
31. Before he fell asleep, did the teacher correct tests or did he have breakfast?
32. Are the teacher's glasses old-fashioned or modern?
33. Do the friends go to the edge of the forest or to the city?
34. Do the friends wait until teacher Anderson wakes up, or is it too dangerous for them?
35. Are two of the friends in the story named Max and Moritz or Henry and Robin?
36. Did the friends steal the black book or the glasses?
37. Does George bury the glasses or throw them into the water?
38. Is there much or little traffic in the city?
39. Are there two or four candles on the advent wreath?
40. Does Christmas in the Woods take place in the morning or at night?
41. Do the scouts celebrate Christmas on the stream below or on the hill?
42. Do the scouts hold a candle or a cell phone?
43. Do the scouts march quietly or do they make a lot of noise?
44. Is Hazel there, too, or are there only boys?
45. Does the blond girl play the violin or the trumpet?
46. Is the narrator thinking of Mr. Anderson or of his parents?
47. Is the text the scout leader is reading from the newspaper or from the Bible?
48. Is the text about Mary and Joseph or about Arnold Schwarzenegger?
49. Are the Scouts singing or use they an iPod with an amplifier and with speakers?
50. Does “Dona nobis pacem” mean “Give us peace” or “Thou shalt not torment animals”?
51. Is the kitten dead or is it alive and well at home?
52. Do the scouts sing “Silent Night” silently or loudly?
53. Does the narrator want to rake leaves in the garden or look for the glasses in the stream?
54. Does the forest have streetlights or is it completely dark?
55. Is the narrator alone in the forest or are there other people there?
56. Are the tracks in the snow made by people or by animals?
57. Does the narrator talk to the people in the forest or is he afraid of them?
58. Does the narrator find the glasses or not?
59. Does the narrator go to Hazel in the craft room, or does he think of it as an excuse?
60. Does the narrator hate the teacher, or does he now consider him almost as a kind of friend?
61) Does the narrator write a letter to Hazel or to Mr. Anderson?
62) Are the eyeglasses still in the water or are they now on teacher Anderson's nose?
63) Has someone brought back the rake, or must the narrator still go looking for it at the stream?