

# The Question

THE FIRST DAY of school was always a get-acquainted day. Books were passed out, and there was a lot of chatter. Everyone asked, "What did *you* do over the summer?"

Periods one through six went by very smoothly for Nick.

But then came period seven. Mrs. Granger's class was all business.

The first thing they did was take a vocabulary pretest to see how many of the thirty-five words for the week the kids already knew. *Tremble, circular, orchestra*—the list went on and on. Nick knew most of them.

Then there was a handout about class procedures. After that there was a review paper about cursive writing, and then there was a sample sheet showing how the heading should

look on every assignment. No letup for thirty-seven minutes straight.

Nick was an expert at asking the delaying question—also known as the teacher-stopper, or the guaranteed-time-waster. At three minutes before the bell, in that split second between the end of today's class work and the announcement of tomorrow's homework, Nick could launch a question guaranteed to sidetrack the teacher long enough to delay or even wipe out the homework assignment.

Timing was important, but asking the right question—that was the hard part. Questions about stuff in the news, questions about the college the teacher went to, questions about the teacher's favorite book or sport or hobby—Nick knew all the tricks, and he had been very successful in the past.

Here he was in fifth grade, near the end of his very first language arts class with Mrs. Granger, and Nick could feel a homework assignment coming the way a farmer can feel a rainstorm.

Mrs. Granger paused to catch her breath, and Nick's hand shot up. She glanced down at her seating chart, and then up at him. Her sharp

gray eyes were not even turned up to half power.

“Yes, Nicholas?”

“Mrs. Granger, you have so many dictionaries in this room, and that huge one especially . . . where did all those words come from? Did they just get copied from other dictionaries? It sure is a big book.”

It was a perfect thought-grenade—KaPow!

Several kids smiled, and a few peeked at the clock. Nick was famous for this, and the whole class knew what he was doing.

Unfortunately, so did Mrs. Granger. She hesitated a moment, and gave Nick a smile that was just a little too sweet to be real. Her eyes were the color of a thundercloud.

“Why, what an interesting question, Nicholas. I could talk about that for hours, I bet.” She glanced around the classroom. “Do the rest of you want to know, too?” Everyone nodded yes. “Very well then. Nicholas, will you do some research on that subject and give a little oral report to the class? If you find out the answer yourself, it will mean so much more than if I just told you. Please have your report ready for our next class.”

Mrs. Granger smiled at him again. Very sweetly. Then it was back to business. "Now, the homework for tomorrow can be found on page twelve of your *Words Alive* book. . . ."

Nick barely heard the assignment. His heart was pounding, and he felt small, very small. He could feel the tops of his ears glowing red. A complete shutdown. An extra assignment. And probably a little black mark next to his name on the seating chart.

Everything he had heard about this teacher was true—don't mess around with The Lone Granger.

# Word Detective

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL September afternoon, bright sun, cool breeze, blue sky. But not for Nick.

Nick had to do a little report for the next day. Plus copy out all the definitions for thirty-five words. For Mrs. Granger. This was not the way school was supposed to work. Not for Nick.

There was a rule at Nick's house: Homework First. And that meant right after school. Nick had heard his older brother, James, groan and grumble about this rule for years, right up until he graduated from high school two years ago. And then James wrote home from college after his first semester and said, "My grades are looking great, because when I came here I already knew how to put first things first." That letter was the proof Nick's mom and dad had been



*Homework First*

looking for. "Homework First" was the law from September to June.

This had never bothered Nick before because he hardly ever had homework. Oh sure, he looked over his spelling words on Thursday nights, and there had been a few short book reports in fourth grade, but other than that, nothing. Up to now, schoolwork never spilled over into his free time. Thanks to Mrs. Granger, those days were gone.

First he looked up the definitions in the brand-new red dictionary that his mom had bought—because Mrs. Granger told her to. It took almost an hour. He could hear a baseball game in John's yard down the street—yelling and shouting, and every few minutes the sharp crack of a bat connecting with a pitch. But he had a report to do. For Mrs. Granger.

Nick looked at the very front of the dictionary. There was an introduction to the book called "Words and Their Origins."

*Perfect!* Nick thought. It was just what he needed to do his report. It would all be over in a few minutes. Nick could already feel the sun and the breeze on his face as he ran outside to play, homework all done.

Then he read the first sentence from the introduction:

*Without question this modern American dictionary is one of the most surprisingly complex and profound documents ever to be created, for it embodies unparalleled etymological detail, reflecting not only superb lexicographic scholarship, but also the dreams and speech and imaginative talents of millions of people over thousands of years—for every person who has ever spoken or written in English has had a hand in its making.*

What? Nick scratched his head and read it again. And then again. Not much better. It was sort of like trying to read the ingredients on a shampoo bottle.

He slammed the dictionary shut and walked downstairs.

Nick's family did a lot of reading, so bookshelves covered three of the four walls in the family room. There were two sets of encyclopedias—the black set was for grown-ups, and the red set was for kids. Nick pulled out the



D volume from the red set and looked up *dictionary*. There were three full pages, with headings like Early Dictionaries, Word Detectives, and Dictionaries Today. Not very exciting. But he had to do it, so Nick just plopped down on the couch and read all of it.

And when he was finished with the kids' book, he opened up the black encyclopedia and read most of what it said about dictionaries, too. He understood only about half of what he read.

He leaned back on the couch and covered his eyes with his arm, trying to imagine himself giving a report on all this boring stuff. He'd be lucky to have three minutes worth. But because Nick was Nick, he suddenly had an idea and it brought a grin to his face.

Nick decided that giving this report could actually be fun. He could make it into something special. After all, Mrs. Granger had asked for it.