

# **Mystery of the Suffocated Seventh Grader**

**A Read-Aloud Play**

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# Mystery of the Suffocated Seventh Grader

## Characters

Narrator #1

Narrator #2

Mr. Nolan, the assistant principal

Mrs. Martinez, the school secretary

Police Officer

Students:     Liz  
                  Scott  
                  Tina  
                  Tom  
                  Tony  
                  Carolyn  
                  Shelly  
                  Bill  
                  Perry Paulson

**NARRATOR: #1:** Liz and Scott, two ninth graders, are walking down the hall after school. They see Perry Paulson, a seventh grader, standing at his open, empty locker.

**LIZ:** Hi, Shrimp.

**PERRY:** Hi, Ugly.

**SCOTT:** Are you two always this nice to each other?

**LIZ:** No. Sometimes we don't speak at all. He's my next-door neighbor.

**PERRY:** Unfortunately.

**LIZ:** Unfortunately for me. You wouldn't believe the things he has done. It's a miracle I still have my sanity.

**PERRY:** By the way, you're going to be getting a phone call, Liz.

**LIZ:** (*Warily*) From who?

**PERRY:** Gilbert Flescher. I told him you like him and want to go to the dance with him on Friday.

**LIZ:** You what?

**PERRY:** He seemed pleased. Very pleased.

**SCOTT:** (*Surprised*) Gilbert Flescher? You like Gilbert Flescher?

**LIZ:** Don't be ridiculous! Perry, one of these days I'm going to strangle you...or worse, I'll...I'll...I know. Grab him, Scott.

**NARRATOR #2:** Scott grabs Perry by the shoulders and holds on to him.

**SCOTT:** Okay. Now what?

**LIZ:** Put him in the locker.

**NARRATOR #1:** Scott stuffs the squirming Perry into a locker, the tall old-fashioned type. Liz slams the door.

**LIZ:** There. That ought to fix you.

**PERRY:** (*From inside the locker*) You're going to regret this!

**LIZ:** No, I'm going to enjoy this. Goodbye, Shrimp.

**SCOTT:** Do you really want to leave him in there?

**LIZ:** (*Shrugging*) I guess we'll have to. I don't know his combination.

**PERRY:** (*Calling from inside his locker*) Twelve—twenty-three—thirty.

**LIZ:** (*Smiling sweetly*) I don't hear anything. Do you, Scott?

SCOTT: Uh...Not a thing.

LIZ: Well, see you around, Shrimp. That is, if you ever get out of there.

NARRATOR #2: Laughing, Liz walks down the hall. Scott follows uncertainly.

NARRATOR #1: In a few minutes, Tina and Tom approach.

PERRY: Help! Help!

TINA: Did you hear that?

TOM: Yes. Where's it coming from?

PERRY: Help! Help! I'm in here!

TINA: In where?

PERRY: In here—locker thirty-four.

TOM: You're kidding. How did you get there?

PERRY: Who cares how I got here? Just get me out. I have claustrophobia.

TINA: Okay, okay. What's your combination?

PERRY: Twelve—twenty-three—thirty.

TINA: It won't open.

PERRY: Try again.

TINA: It's no use. It's jammed.

TOM: Mr. Nolan has a master key. We'll go get him.

PERRY: All right. But hurry!

NARRATOR #2: Tina and Tom hurry to the assistant principal's office.

**TINA:** Excuse me, Mr. Nolan, but there's a kid locked in locker thirty-four.

**MR. NOLAN:** A what?

**TINA:** A kid.

**MR. NOLAN:** How did he get there?

**TOM:** We don't know. We were just walking by and heard him yelling.

**MR. NOLAN:** I'll bet you don't know. Listen, Tom. If this is another one of your stunts...

**TOM:** It isn't, Mr. Nolan. Honest. I had nothing to do with it.

**TINA:** He didn't, really. We don't even know who it is in there.

**MR. NOLAN:** All right, all right. I'll go check it out in a minute. Now you two go on home. The halls were supposed to be cleared fifteen minutes ago.

**TINA:** The kid has claustrophobia, Mr. Nolan. Will you go right away?

**MR. NOLAN:** (*Suspiciously*) How do you know he has claustrophobia? I thought you didn't even know him.

**TINA:** He said so. He was yelling at us to hurry.

**MR. NOLAN:** (*Muttering to himself*) What next? The boa constrictor escapes in the science lab. Somebody pulls the fire alarm during lunch. And now I've got a claustrophobic kid who mysteriously wound up in a locker.

**TINA:** You will go get him out, Mr. Nolan?

**MR. NOLAN:** Of course I'll get him out, in just a minute. Now you two go on before I start trying to figure out how the kid got in there.

**NARRATOR #1:** Tina and Tom leave, quickly.

**TOM:** He sure can be a grouch. All we did was try to help someone in trouble, and he yelled at us.

**TINA:** I sure hope he hurries. I hope he doesn't get busy and forget.

**TOM:** He'll go when he feels like it, and not before. You can be sure of that.

**NARRATOR #2:** The next morning before school, Tina and Tom pass locker thirty-four. Tina knocks on it.

**TINA:** Anybody there?

**NARRATOR #1:** There is no answer.

**TINA:** I guess Mr. Nolan did rescue him.

**TOM:** I'd sure like to see who it was in there. He must have been an awfully little kid.

**TINA:** I'll look it up in the office first period. I'd like to see him, too. See you later.

**NARRATOR #2:** Tina reports to the office, where she is an aide first period. Quickly, she checks the locker list and finds that locker thirty-four is assigned to Perry Paulson.

**NARRATOR #1:** Tina leaves the office to go from room to room, picking up the attendance cards. Automatically, she glances at each card to see if anyone she knows is absent.

**NARRATOR #2:** On one card she sees the name "Perry Paulson."

**TINA:** I hope he wasn't hurt being stuffed in that locker. I wonder how long it took Mr. Nolan to get to him, anyway.

**NARRATOR #1:** She finishes collecting the cards and returns to the office.

**MRS. MARTINEZ:** Here, Tina. Would you staple these papers together for me, please?

**TINA:** Sure, Mrs. Martinez.

**NARRATOR #2:** Tina sits down to work at a table next to Mr. Nolan's office.

**NARRATOR #1:** Mr. Nolan is talking on the phone, and she can hear him through the door, which is slightly ajar.

**MR. NOLAN:** ...It was the end to a terrible day, I'll tell you...Well, he was dead by then, I'm afraid...Suffocated...I know, I know. I probably should have checked on him sooner, but I was so busy...No, I'm not going to tell them, not now...Maybe I could pretend he ran away? Pretend I don't know what happened to him?...Oh, don't be gruesome...Well, if you must know, I stuck him in a garbage bag with some trash...No, I didn't think he needed a decent burial...

**NARRATOR #2:** Tina stares at Mr. Nolan's door, her eyes wide in horror.

**MRS. MARTINEZ:** Tina, see if you can get this message to the gym before the bell rings.

**NARRATOR #1:** Tina continues to stare.

**MRS. MARTINEZ:** Tina?

**TINA:** ...Oh...What?

**MRS. MARTINEZ:** I asked you to run this to the gym.

**TINA:** Oh...oh, sure.

**MRS. MARTINEZ:** Take your books. The bell's going to ring soon, and you won't have time to come back.

**NARRATOR #2:** Tina walks slowly down the hall, looking sick. She delivers the message to the gym and goes to another classroom to wait for Tom.

**NARRATOR #1:** The bell rings, and she sees Tom come out of the classroom.

**TINA:** Tom, I've got to talk to you.

**TOM:** What's up?

**TINA:** You won't believe this. You know that little kid who was in the locker yesterday?

**TOM:** Sure. The one Mr. Nolan was going to take his time rescuing.

**TINA:** Well, he did take his time, Tom. The kid died!

**TOM:** Come on, Tina. Be serious.

**TINA:** I am serious. He suffocated! I heard Mr. Nolan talking on the phone. He didn't get to him in time. Mr. Nolan killed him!

**NARRATOR #2:** Scott walks up to Tina and Tom.

**SCOTT:** Mr. Nolan killed who?

**TINA:** A little kid named Perry Paulson.

**SCOTT:** Oh, I met him yesterday. Only it was Liz who wanted to kill him then. I guess he just drives everyone nuts. *(Smiling)* Do you know what we did? We stuffed him in his locker and closed it and left him there.

**TINA:** So you were the one.

**NARRATOR #1:** Liz walks up to the group.

**SCOTT:** Actually, it was Liz who got the idea of shutting him in a locker. Right, Liz?

**LIZ:** It served him right. That little brat is the most annoying thing I've ever...

**TINA:** Stop it. Don't be disrespectful to...to the dead.

**NARRATOR #2:** There is silence as the others look at Tina, puzzled.

**LIZ:** What do you mean, "the dead?"

**TINA:** He died, Liz. We told Mr. Nolan he was there, but he waited too long to get him out. Perry suffocated.

**SCOTT:** Stop kidding around.

**TINA:** I wouldn't kid about a thing like that. I heard Mr. Nolan talking about it on the phone. Believe me, Perry Paulson is dead.

**LIZ:** Then why haven't we heard about it?



**TINA:** Because Mr. Nolan isn't telling anyone. He put the body in a garbage bag and threw it out. He's going to tell the parents he doesn't know where the kid is. He's going to tell them he probably ran away.

**SCOTT:** Liz, we were the ones who locked him up. That means we're...we're murderers!

**LIZ:** But I didn't mean to kill him. I only meant to pay him back. I knew someone would hear him yelling and let him out. I thought the custodian would be around even if no one else was. I didn't mean to kill him.

**TINA:** You didn't kill him. Mr. Nolan is the one responsible. He's the one who didn't go get him when he should have. Mr. Nolan really killed him.

**NARRATOR #1:** Tony walks up to the group.

**TONY:** Mr. Nolan killed who?

**SCOTT:** Perry Paulson. A seventh grader.

**TONY:** How? Did he scare him to death by yelling at him? Boy, that man can yell. I ought to know.

**SCOTT:** No, he really did kill him. The kid died!

**TONY:** What? How?

**TINA:** He suffocated. And Mr. Nolan doesn't want anyone to know, so he stuffed the body in a garbage bag.

**NARRATOR #2:** Carolyn approaches the group.

**CAROLYN:** What's up? Why so serious looking?

**TONY:** Mr. Nolan strangled a seventh grader and stuffed him in a garbage bag.

**CAROLYN:** *(Smiling)* Big, bad Mr. Nolan.

**TONY:** No, I'm serious. They say he really did.

CAROLYN: Don't be ridiculous. Who did he supposedly strangle?

TONY: Perry Paulson.

CAROLYN: Oh, well, he deserved to be strangled. Do you know what he told Gilbert Flescher?

LIZ: Let me guess. He told him you want to go to the dance with him.

CAROLYN: How did you know?

LIZ: It doesn't matter. And he didn't strangle him. He....

NARRATOR #1: The bell rings.

CAROLYN: We're late.

TINA: Let's all meet back here next period. We've got to decide what to do.

NARRATOR #2: The students all hurry to class.

NARRATOR #1: At the end of the next period, they meet again.

TINA: I've decided the first thing we've got to do is find the body.

SCOTT: You mean...?

TINA: Yes, we've got to go search through the dumpster.

CAROLYN: How awful!

TINA: We can't prove anything against Mr. Nolan unless we find a body.

TONY: And if we find the body, then the police can prove he was strangled.

TOM: And then Nolan will go to prison.

NARRATOR #2: Shelly joins the group.

**SHELLY:** Mr. Nolan's going to prison? Great. Then he can't give me detention anymore. What's he going to prison for?

**TONY:** He strangled Perry Paulson and cut him up and put him in a garbage bag.

**TINA:** Who said he cut him up?

**TONY:** Well, he had to. I mean, they do make garbage bags strong, but not that strong. He must have cut him up to put in several bags.

**CAROLYN:** I'm going to be sick.

**TINA:** Don't be sick. We don't have time for it. Now, quick. Who's going to go search the dumpster?

**SCOTT:** Well, I have class.

**TINA:** We all have class. Someone's just going to have to cut.

**CAROLYN:** I have a test in algebra.

**TOM:** My parents would kill me.

**LIZ:** I hate blood.

**TINA:** There's no blood from suffocating.

**LIZ:** But how about from cutting him up?

**NARRATOR #1:** Bill walks up to the group.

**BILL:** Who cut up who?

**CAROLYN:** Mr. Nolan. He killed Perry Paulson and chopped him up with an axe!

**TINA:** Who said anything about an axe?

**CAROLYN:** What else would you use to chop up a body?

**BILL:** I knew the guy was crazy, but I had no idea...

**TINA:** Come on, now. The bell's going to ring. Who's going to the dumpster?

**SCOTT:** Well, I think you should.

**TINA:** Why me?

**SCOTT:** Because...because you're an office aide. No one will question why you're out of class.

**TINA:** Office aides don't work at the dumpster.

**SCOTT:** Well, they could. I think you're it, Tina. See you later.

**NARRATOR #2:** All the students hurry off, except for Tom and Tina.

**TOM:** I'll go with you, Tina. I can't let you do this alone.

**NARRATOR #1:** Tina and Tom go out to the dumpster behind the school. Tom hoists Tina over the top and she climbs inside. In a few minutes, all the students except Liz and Scott show up.

**BILL:** We decided to come help.

**TONY:** We couldn't let you do this alone.

**SHELLY:** Solving a murder is more important than taking an algebra test.

**CAROLYN:** (*Muttering*) I hope you'll explain that to my mother.

**NARRATOR #2:** Tina begins throwing garbage bags over the side of the dumpster. The students apprehensively open them and begin poking tentatively inside, spilling trash all over the sidewalk.

**NARRATOR #1:** As they work, Mr. Nolan quietly walks up behind them. He watches for a minute, frowning.

**MR. NOLAN:** What, may I ask, is going on here?

**NARRATOR #2:** The students jump. They are horrified to see Mr. Nolan.

**TOM:** Oh, no. I'm too young to die.

**TONY:** We won't tell a soul, Mr. Nolan. Honest.

**SHELLY:** We won't breathe a word.

**BILL:** What's one less seventh grader, anyway? We don't miss him.

**CAROLYN:** And he was awfully aggravating.

**TINA:** Please, sir. Spare us.

**MR. NOLAN:** Spare you? After you've cut classes and dumped trash all over the place? There's not a chance I'll spare you.

**CAROLYN:** Then...then could you please use something besides the axe? I hate pain. And blood.

**MR. NOLAN:** Axe? What in the world has gotten into you people? I'm going to get to the bottom of this one way or another. Come on, all of you. Inside.

**NARRATOR #1:** The students follow, looking sick and frightened.

**NARRATOR #2:** Inside the school, they see Liz, who is standing at her locker. Scott has just walked away from her.

**NARRATOR #1:** As Scott passes, Tom whispers to him.

**TOM:** Call the police. He's going to kill us. Hurry.

**NARRATOR #1:** The group continues toward the office, and Liz opens her locker.

**PERRY:** Boo!

**NARRATOR #2:** She lets out a bloodcurdling scream as Perry Paulson jumps out at her.

**NARRATOR #1:** Liz runs away, toward the group heading for the office.

**NARRATOR #2:** Perry stands beside the locker, laughing.

**PERRY:** It was worth it. What's five more minutes of claustrophobia when I can get a reaction like that?

**SHELLY:** He's alive!

**TONY:** Or he's a ghost!

**CAROLYN:** Or Mr. Nolan really killed someone else.

**TINA:** Or maybe he's killed lots of people.

**TOM:** We're done for.

**TINA:** Not me. I'm not going to go along with this. (*Shouting*) Help! Help!

**NARRATOR #1:** The students begin running away, in different directions.

**NARRATOR #2:** Up and down the hallway, teachers hear the commotion and come out of their classrooms.

**NARRATOR #1:** Students crowd at the doors to see what is going on.

**NARRATOR #2:** Soon a siren sounds in the distance.

**NARRATOR #1:** Mr. Nolan stands bewildered, shaking his head.

**MR. NOLAN:** I don't think I'll ever understand teenagers.

**NARRATOR #2:** Later, the students are in the assistant principal's office, along with a police officer. Tina has just finished telling her story to the group.

**PERRY:** Interesting. I thought I was absent this morning for an orthodontist appointment. Now I hear I was absent because I'm dead. You'd think I'd be the first to know.

**MR. NOLAN:** You're not the one dead.

**TINA:** Then it's someone else?

MR. NOLAN: Yes. I confess. It's Maynard.

POLICE OFFICER: Maynard who?

MR. NOLAN: Maynard...Nolan, I guess.

TINA: Your son? You killed your own son?

MR. NOLAN: No, Tina. Maynard is my son and daughter's gerbil. My wife and kids are visiting her mother, and I said I'd bring Maynard to the science lab while they are gone.

BILL: You mean you wouldn't even feed your own kids' gerbil for them?

MR. NOLAN: Of course I'd feed him. But, well, Joey didn't think I would give him enough attention. He wanted me to bring him to the lab where he'd be with other animals.

CAROLYN: And that's where you strangled him?

MR. NOLAN: No, that's when the fire alarm went off—when I was opening the cage to pet him. *(Sheepishly)* Melissa made me promise I'd pet him.

SHELLY: So you accidentally petted him too hard and squashed him?

MR. NOLAN: I didn't squash him. But I did hurry to the office to see about the fire alarm, and I accidentally left the cage open.

TONY: And he got out?

MR. NOLAN: Yes. And, unfortunately....

SCOTT: I know! The boa constrictor got him.

MR. NOLAN: No. The refrigerator got him. He climbed into the science lab refrigerator somehow. And by the time anyone noticed, he had suffocated.

LIZ: So it was the gerbil you put in the garbage bag—not Perry?

MR. NOLAN: Of course it wasn't Perry.

PERRY: That's a relief.

**TINA:** And you weren't going to tell your son and daughter Maynard had died?

**MR. NOLAN:** Well...only if I had to. I was hoping I'd be able to find another gerbil that looked just like him. You see, Joey and Melissa really loved that gerbil.

**PERRY:** Just like Liz loves Gilbert Flescher.

**LIZ:** Perry! You know, I think it's too bad you weren't strangled. And maybe I should correct that mistake right now...

**NARRATOR #1:** Liz steps toward him threateningly.

**PERRY:** Let me remind you, Liz, that there is an officer of the law present.

**POLICE OFFICER:** No one down at the station is going to believe this one. No one at all.

**MR. NOLAN:** (*Grumbling*) I don't believe it myself. Listen, maybe we could just forget all the unpleasantness and band together for a noble purpose.

**LIZ:** What noble purpose is that?

**MR. NOLAN:** We could all start looking around for a new, cute little brown gerbil, about this size....

**TINA:** And teach him to answer to "Maynard?"

**MR. NOLAN:** Well, it's an idea...

**CAROLYN:** Mr. Nolan, I think you're going to have to tell your children the truth.

**PERRY:** After all, you're supposed to be setting a good example for us. And how would it look if you had all of us impressionable young people helping you deceive your children?

**MR. NOLAN:** (*Scowling at Perry*) You know, I think Liz had a point a minute ago. It is too bad no one strangled this kid. (*Sighing*) Don't worry. I know I've got to tell them the truth; I promise.

**POLICE OFFICER:** Speaking of truth, I hope you've all learned something here today.

**CAROLYN:** Yes, don't spread rumors.



**SCOTT:** Be sure you have the facts before you repeat information.

**TINA:** Don't listen to gossip.

**TONY:** Never leave a gerbil cage unlocked.

**LIZ:** Never, ever live next door to Perry Paulson if you can help it.

**PERRY:** *(To the police officer)* She'd rather live next door to Gilbert Flescher—you know, so they could be closer.

**LIZ:** Officer, is assault always against the law?

**POLICE OFFICER:** I'm afraid so. *(Smiling)* Yes, I'm afraid so.

# For Discussion

1. What led to the belief that Mr. Nolan had chopped Perry up with an axe and left him in a dumpster? Trace the steps that led to the misunderstanding.
2. At what different points in the misunderstanding could things have been cleared up? How? What could different individuals have said or done?
3. Tina truly believed the rumor she started. Did that make the rumor any less harmful? How can a person guard against spreading rumors unintentionally?
4. Can you think of some real-life situations where confusion, misunderstanding, or rumor led to a very wrong conclusion?

A number of years ago, for example, a junior high teacher had a cat named *Ballou*. He also had a student who was quite a behavior problem and whose last name was *Belew*. One day the teacher was talking to a friend who had moved away. The friend, who had often heard the teacher complain about his student, said, "How's Belew doing?"

"He died last month," said the teacher.

"Oh no!" said the friend. "How did he die?"

"Brain tumor. I was actually kind of relieved, in a way. He had been behaving so strangely."

"Relieved? I mean, I know Belew was difficult, but isn't that a bit harsh?"

"No, he really was sick. At the end, he jumped into the bathtub with me and started walking on my stomach."

At that point, the friend was quite convinced the teacher had lost his mind. It took awhile for them to unravel the confusion and see that the teacher was, of course, talking about the cat, while the friend was talking about the student.

# Truth that Misleads

Is something true just because someone says it is? Of course not. However, sometimes even a true statement can be very misleading.

Let's suppose that Mary says, "My parents won't give me any lunch money, even though they are wealthy." That statement makes the parents sound rather heartless and cruel. Mary may be telling the truth, but perhaps she has left out some information—that she spent her lunch money on video games and her parents won't give her any more. They want her to learn to live within a budget. This added information changes our impression of the parents.

For each statement below, see if you can imagine information that might have been left out, information that would change the impression each statement leaves.

1. My teacher kept me after school just because I said, "Yes, ma'am."
2. April gave her brother Joe a black eye.
3. My mother grounded me for a month, just for forgetting to vacuum the living room.
4. My son didn't come home until 3:30 last night, after I had to pick him up at the police station.
5. My parents won't let me go to church anymore.
6. We didn't do our homework because the substitute teacher told us not to.
7. The teacher told my daughter she couldn't write her paper on gorillas, but she let another girl in the class write on that subject.
8. If students give the principal money, he will let them out of detention.

A statement can be true yet leave a false impression. Sometimes there is a difference between the truth and the *whole* truth. Have you ever deliberately told only part of the truth to someone—perhaps to your parents or to a teacher? Have you ever been misled because you heard only part of the truth? How can people guard against being misled by statements that leave out important information?

# Proving Just About Anything

In a small town many years ago, an old man was murdered. The leading suspect was a high school senior in the town. As soon as the boy was brought in for questioning, people began talking. Nearly everyone was convinced that the boy had done it. Why? There was a great deal of evidence.

First of all, those on his bowling team remembered that the boy was absent the night of the murder, and he had never been absent before. Teachers remembered that the boy had often been in trouble at school. A number of people had seen the boy in the neighborhood on the afternoon of the killing. And, finally, the boy had no alibi for the evening.

According to rumor, the boy was guilty. But was he really? No. Eventually the police discovered the murder had been committed by a man who had escaped from a mental institution. What about all the “evidence” that the boy was guilty?

As it turned out, he had stayed home from bowling because he had the flu. He had been seen in the neighborhood the afternoon of the killing because his girlfriend lived near there. Yes, he often got into trouble at school, but so did a lot of other students. That didn’t mean he had murdered someone. And he couldn’t prove where he was the evening of the murder because his parents had been out of town.

Unfortunately, it is often easy to “prove” things that aren’t true. If you look for evidence for what you want to see, you will probably be able to find it. You may, however, have to ignore a lot of evidence to the contrary.

Try the following experiment. Find all the evidence you can to “prove” one of the false statements listed below. List your “evidence” in complete sentences.

1. Your teacher robbed a local bank last week.
2. Your teacher hates girls.
3. Your teacher hates boys.
4. Your school is about to be closed because the structure is likely to explode.
5. There was a poisoning at lunch last week. Police are investigating one of the cooks.
6. Someone is buried behind the school.
7. There are three aliens from outer space attending this school.
8. This class is the brightest group of students your teacher has ever taught.
9. Brown is the most popular color in your school.
10. Your principal is really a movie star in disguise.

It is possible to “prove” statements that are actually false. How can you apply this knowledge to the real world? Think about television, newspapers, books, speeches, conversations, etc. Why is it important for people to read and listen critically?