

**THE
MYSTERIOUS
SKUNK**



“Mom, I’m going out to walk Buddy!” Henry zipped up his jacket and grabbed the leash for his beautiful spotted black-and-white dog Buddy and hurried outside to his yard where his pet awaited him, barking madly. “Hey there, boy, you want to go for a nice little walk, eh, huh, Buddy?” cooed Henry, scratching his dog’s floppy ears. Buddy wagged his long tail, stuck out his tongue, which started dripping with saliva, and started bouncing around. Henry clipped the leash onto him and opened the gate. Together they hopped off, Buddy barking at the people passing by.

The chill swirling wind whipped their faces as they trotted along the sidewalk. Buddy barked loudly, his voice echoing around Walnut Creek. Henry didn’t mind at all. He was his own dog’s owner, and he could do anything he wanted with him. He waved merrily at his fellow classmates from school; they looked disgusted and shouted, “Would you keep that dog *down*, Henry!” But he merely grinned and continued waving.

As they neared a dark alleyway, something unpleasantly smelly reached their noses. Buddy whimpered and stopped walking. Henry tugged at his leash. “*C’mon* Buddy, it’s only the garbage. You don’t have to be so scared.” But Buddy did not move an inch. Henry was not going to give up this early. He tugged his hardest, but almost instantly let go, because something else interested him more than having a tug-of-war game with his puppy.

A black-and-white figure was scuttling across the road. He looked much like Buddy, but much smaller and a much bushier tail that curled. He was also much too hairy and fat; Buddy was skinny and his tail went straight out. But the strangest thing was the animal was letting out some sort of green gas. So this was why Buddy was not moving. Henry set down the leash, and crept nearer to the creature, which had paused to pick something up. But very quickly he stopped in his tracks because the greenish stuff was swiftly floating toward him. Before he had time to run, it had reached his nose.

The animal was a skunk.

“Ok, Buddy, we’re going back home!” called Henry, backing away back to where Buddy was, who was whimpering with fright. Both of them couldn’t stand smelling something stinky, and this was like having their nose in a garbage bin full of slop.

They started to dash home like cheetahs. Henry had forgotten the leash, but he didn’t care. He could always buy a new one. And Buddy was well-trained enough to follow him everywhere. Running away from something that would make them faint was more important than a leash.

Suddenly, Henry sighted a sharp hook sticking out of the brick wall. He tried to dodge it, but—

RIP.

Henry’s pants had been ripped, and his underwear was showing. A few girls across the street turned their heads to look at Henry. He tried to cover up the rip, but the girls had already seen it. They started to laugh, and soon every person’s eyes on the whole street was upon him.

Henry blushed and started running again. He kept tripping and ripping his clothes, and very soon his pants had fallen off, leaving him in his underwear.

The people roared with laughter. Henry tried to hold back the tears; he hated to be laughed at.

As they neared home, they slowed down with every step they took. Henry was exhausted; he could see Buddy was too. His tongue was hanging down as usual, but there was a lot more saliva dripping.

Finally they got to the doorstep. Henry scratched Buddy’s ears and shouted through the open kitchen window, which the smell of sausages was wafting out of, “Mom, we’re back!”

The front door opened, and Mrs. Taylor's face appeared. "Back so early already? I'm still cooking dinner; I just started five minutes after you left. And you were only gone ten minutes. Oh, *honey*, what happened?" She had caught sight of Henry's naked legs.

"Mom, I'll tell you what happened inside." Henry stepped inside, took off his jacket, and put it on the coat hanger. Mrs. Taylor was already sitting on the couch. Buddy scampered off into the kitchen for his food bowl. Henry sat down on the couch. He noticed his mother looked worried.

He told her the whole story—about Buddy not wanting to move, about the children shouting at him, about them laughing, about the skunk—everything. But he did not say anything about losing his pants, because he didn't want his mother to jeer at him too. To his surprise, his mother smiled at the end.

"Henry, I don't see how a skunk can be that smelly. Don't worry about the leash, we'll get you a new one, but I don't know why you—yes, Buddy, I'm coming—had to go home just because of a skunk. And it was right there, you could've just grabbed it," said Mrs. Taylor, but she was smiling. "I've never seen skunks around here before. But I suppose—I'm coming, Buddy, just wait, and stop *barking* like that—they always hide themselves." She bustled off to get Buddy's food and water, leaving Henry sitting on the couch, feeling ashamed of himself.

Why did he have to be like this, afraid of bad smells? He could have given Buddy a proper walk and just run past the old skunk. And kids had been watching them as they ran home pants-less. They must have thought they were silly. Did this mean that for lunch at school next week, if he was served something smelly, he would run away from it? And he had just lost one beautiful leash; it would be a long time until he could get another one. Sometimes, he wished he didn't have to be scared little Henry, afraid of some bad smell.

Henry didn't want to think about what had just happened, but his mind seemed to have ignored him. He thought about the terrible smell reaching his nose, and about how he could have thrown stones at the skunk. He was still playing a movie in his head when his mother came hurrying back and saying, "There's no more dog food, honey! Poor Buddy has no food to eat! Can you—?"

But Henry glared at her. Kids would be laughing at him at the pet shop after they saw the incident with the skunk and jeering him about how silly he had looked.

"Alright, alright, I'll go. Don't answer the door if you don't know who the person is, and take care of Buddy," said Mrs. Taylor, slipping on her jacket. "Ok, then, 'bye! Sorry, Buddy," she added, as Buddy came scampering over.

"Don't worry, Bud, she'll be back with your food. Oh, and Mom, buy him some Crunchy Dog Bone Crackers, or whatever they call it, ok?" Henry told his mother.

"Sure, for my little pooch!" she replied happily. And she flung open the front door and set off.

Henry got up and closed the door she had left open. Then he sat down with Buddy, who was whimpering, not with fright, but hunger. His tongue was sticking out as usual, and saliva was dripping from it. "You don't need to worry, Bud, she's getting you your food," Henry reassured him. And he continued to think about what had happened this afternoon.

Mrs. Taylor came back in what seemed like two seconds. "Got them *both!*" she announced. Then in a much unhappier voice she sighed, "They each cost twenty dollars."

As the days dragged on, Henry did not see the skunk out in the open again, but hiding in places where you usually wouldn't notice. One day, for instance, he was outside in the garden helping his father pull the weeds, when something not

quite as smelly as the skunk had been before, but still enough to make someone faint, reached their noses. Then they heard the soft rustling of something moving in the bushes, and then saw a black-and-white bushy tail sticking out. But almost instantly it popped back into the bushes, because it must have noticed people were staring at it. Mr. Taylor said it was just an old raccoon, but Henry knew they did not usually come out in daylight.

No one seemed to understand how Henry felt. No one was able to, of course, because there were so many feelings whirling around his head. He felt ashamed and sad of himself because he had lost a useful leash, and worried and anxious, because the kids who had saw him tearing away might laugh at him and spread the news to the whole school.

The next night at dinnertime, Henry wasn't touching his pork chops and peas. He sank down into his chair, looking glum. No one seemed to notice; they were too busy gulping down their food hungrily. Henry didn't care. The only thing he was really concerned about was how the kids at school would treat him. Of course, his best friend George would understand; he hated terrible-smelling things, too, especially skunks.

Just as Henry was about to cry, his mother spoke. "Henry dear, you haven't touched your food! Eat up now, honey, you need the energy for tomorrow!" She hadn't noticed Henry's glum face yet, but saw very quickly. She changed her voice to a soft, sad coo, and said, "Aw, poor Henry is unhappy. Whatever is your terrible problem?"

Henry burst out into tears. "Mom, oh Mom, I made a fool of myself when I went back home, everyone was watching me! I lost my pants; that's why I came home in my underwear! I don't want to go back to school and get laughed at by other students, Mom, please, help me! I don't want to be laughed at, Mom, even George might do it!" he sobbed, splattering tears all over his pork chops.

“But—but why didn’t you say that when you were telling your story?” Mrs. Taylor asked.

“I didn’t want you to laugh, Mom,” Henry cried.

“Do you *ever* think I would?” asked Mrs. Taylor with a warm smile.

“No,” Henry smiled, wiping away his tears.

And he started to happily shovel food into his mouth.

Henry awoke that morning with feeling glum. Today was the day he would be laughed at, be jeered at, and be shoved. Everyone would be against him, maybe even George. He squinted around the room, looking for his glasses. He snatched them up when he found them (they were simply on the bedside table) and glanced at his clock. It was only six o’clock. He decided to go out to the garden and pull the weeds to get one of his chores done. He climbed out of bed, hastily changed his clothes, flung open his door, and galloped down the stairs to the living room.

He saw it before he was even in the garden: the skunk was sitting right in front of the back yard door, the green stuff wafting towards the door.

He hurried outside quickly, shouting, “Shoo, shoo! Move it, stupid! UUUURRRGG!!” The green stuff had reached his nose. Henry tried to hold his breath, but he sucked the stuff in by mistake. This time it was ten times stinkier than before. He gripped his neck tight with his hands—it was terrible, terrible. “Stop, please,” he choked, but he didn’t know why he was talking when there was nobody else there.

Suddenly, a boy with round glasses and a chubby face came shooting across the road. “Save me!” Henry croaked, waving his hand in the air. “Get the stupid skunk away!”

The boy nodded, hobbled over to the gate, swung it open, and shot across the lawn to where Henry was with the skunk.

“I’m sorry. He’s mine. My pet. Real stinky. Seemed to like you and your lawn,” the boy panted, snatching the skunk up. Henry finally took a breath of the cool air. It had never been this good before.

“So—so you’re not afraid of skunks’ smells?” he asked, watching the green stuff waft toward the open gate.

“Did I say that?” asked the boy, laughing. “He’s horrible! It doesn’t make me choke like you, but it does make my nose scrunch up! I don’t blame you at all for not liking it!”

Henry grinned. “Yeah? Does everyone else hate him? Oh—yeah, I guess you don’t go to Switzer School, huh?”

“Of course I do, I’m new! Everyone in the school runs away from him, he’s terrible!” said the boy.

“Wow,” muttered Henry, so nobody could hear him. “I guess there was no reason to be glum after all.”

“Sorry? Didn’t hear you,” said the boy, cupping a hand around his ear.

“Oh, no, nothing. Well, I guess I’ll meet you at school then. I need to go inside—get some breakfast, you know. So—I guess, ’bye then,” said Henry, smiling.

“They have breakfast at school, you know?” the boy said. “Oh, I’m sorry, my name’s Donald. Don for short.”

“Oh, I’m Henry. So, you want to go to school and get some breakfast? I’ll just get my bag,” Henry said, and he dashed inside, shouted, “I’m leaving for school, Mom!” grabbed his backpack, and dashed outside again.

“Kay, let’s go,” Don said. “I have my backpack.”

And they set off happily, Henry telling the whole story of the skunk incident, and Don listening.