A Real Crack in the Case

Janet’s main enemy has been accused of stealing answers to a test. Will Janet help unravel the mystery, or let past feelings prevent justice?

I had just finished the last science test of the year, a few minutes early. Staring out the window, I was thinking about all the things I would be doing that summer. Swimming, reading detective books, playing softball—but mostly, I was excited that I wouldn’t have to even see Roz Rosetta for three whole months. At my all-girls school, she was kind of the bully of the sixth grade. You know the type. She was really pushy. And she’d always try to get her way by shouting until you just gave up.

Speaking of shouting, I was still daydreaming when our teacher, Mrs. Foley, rushed into the classroom. While we take tests, she sits in her little office, which...
is right through a doorway at the front of the classroom. I had been expecting her to tell us the test time was up and that we should put our pencils down. Instead, Mrs. Foley yelled, “The answer sheet has been stolen!”

Mrs. Foley wasn’t like Roz. She never even raised her voice. So it was jarring to hear her shout. Plus, she looked frazzled, and there was a spot of something on her sleeve. I’d never seen her so upset.

Pointing her finger straight at Roz, Mrs. Foley said angrily, “You took the answer sheet with all the answers to the test. It was in my office when I first went in there, and now it’s gone.”

“What?” Roz spluttered. “You think I stole it?”

“It could only have been you,” Mrs. Foley said, her eyes blazing. “You got up to go to the bathroom during the test. You must have taken it then.”

Now, as you’ve probably figured out by now, Roz was not my favorite person. But, I had to admit, I didn’t think she was the thief. She looked genuinely shocked.

I decided to do my good deed for the day and offer my help. “Let’s have a dramatic reenactment,” I suggested.

“What’s that?” Roz asked. Then, noticing I was the one who had spoken, she added, “Sounds pretty dumb.”

I ignored her comment. “Reenactments are big parts of detective work. People act out what they know about a crime, hoping some new fact will come to light,” I said. “It’s kind of like putting on a play.”

Roz smirked. But Mrs. Foley told me, “All right, Janet. We have 15 minutes until the end of the day. You have that long to prove to me that Roz didn’t take the answer sheet. If we can’t find it, you will all have to retake the test.” The ten other girls in the class groaned.

“And the consequences for Roz will be far worse,” Mrs. Foley continued. “She will fail the class and have to take summer school.”

This seemed to hit Roz like a ton of bricks. Her smirk disappeared, and she couldn’t even speak. I guessed there was a first time for everything. The stakes were very high. But I was up to the challenge.

“Let’s go to the scene of the crime,” I said.

Mrs. Foley told the other girls to stay in their seats, and she went back to her office with Roz and me. The only furniture in the room was Mrs. Foley’s desk and a chair. And there was a hook near the door where the bathroom pass normally hung. That was it.

Everything else had been removed. The office was going to be remodeled over the summer. The workers had already ripped off the baseboards that ran along the bottom of the walls. They were going to knock the center wall down and combine the office with the room next door, which is where our lockers were. I looked around the nearly empty office. “Okay, let’s start the reenactment.
Where was the last place you saw the answer sheet, Mrs. Foley?”

“It was on my desk,” she answered.

I put a book on her desk to represent the answer sheet. “And where were you?”

“I was sitting right here.” Mrs. Foley took a seat at her desk, sitting upright and facing away from the door. That’s when I noticed there was a little pool of liquid on the desk. It matched the liquid on Mrs. Foley’s shirt.

I clucked my tongue. “Mrs. Foley, if the reenactment is going to work, you have to do exactly what you were doing at the time the crime took place. You weren’t sitting straight up like that. You were napping.”

“I was ... I was resting my eyes!” Mrs. Foley protested. Then, blushing, she admitted, “Okay, I was napping. How did you know, Janet?”

“There’s a little drool on the desk and on your shirt,” I said. “The kind of drool that comes with napping.”

“Yuck,” Roz said, and Mrs. Foley shot her a warning look.

Before Roz could get herself in more trouble, I said quickly, “Okay, let’s keep going. Mrs. Foley was sitting at her desk with her back to the door and resting her eyes. What were you doing, Roz?”

“This is stupid,” Roz said. When I just kept staring at her, waiting for an answer, she finally said, “Fine! In the middle of taking the test, I came into the office to get the bathroom pass.”

“Did you leave your locker key on the hook in its place, Roz?” I asked.

“Yes,” she snapped.

In the past, girls had forgotten to put the bathroom pass back on the hook after using it. So Mrs. Foley instituted a new rule: When you took the bathroom pass, you had to leave your locker key on the hook in its place. This reminded girls to put the pass back.

“When you were done, did you drop off the bathroom pass and pick up your key?” I asked.

“No,” Roz said, reaching into her pocket and taking it out. “The test today really freaked me out. I forgot to put the bathroom key back and pick up my locker key.”

Nodding, Mrs. Foley held out Roz’s locker key. “That’s how I knew it was Roz who was in here. I found her key with her name on it on the hook. She was the only other person in here, so she must have taken the answer sheet.” Mrs. Foley started to stand up as if the case had been solved.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I said. “Let’s finish with what we know. What did you do right after you took the bathroom key and left your own key in its place, Roz?”

“I opened the door,” she said, “and I left.”

“Don’t just tell me, show me,” I said. “This is a dramatic reenactment.”

Sighing, Roz opened the door to the office. A slight breeze from the
classroom caused the hair on her forehead to blow back. For the first time, I could see that Roz had a smattering of freckles underneath. Freckles were the kinds of things she would make fun of on other kids. She must have worked really hard to hide them. She pushed the hair back into place.

Looking at her freckles, a lightbulb had gone on in my head. “That’s it!” I cried, taking a quick look at the wall that separated the office from the locker room next door.

“What’s it?” Mrs. Foley asked.

“I just figured it out!” I said. “Follow me.” I led them out the door through the classroom and into the hallway. We walked down the hall and into the locker room, where I took a look around.

“What are the odds?” I wondered out loud, and walked over to Roz’s locker. “Roz, can you open your locker?”

Mrs. Foley handed her key back, and Roz crouched to unlock her locker. She swung open the door, and inside, on the floor of the locker ...was the answer sheet.

“So it was you, Roz!” Mrs. Foley cried. She was furious.

But Roz was even angrier. She wheeled on me. “I thought you were going to help me! I should have known you were going to frame me!”

I held out my hands. “Don’t you get it? I just proved you’re innocent. You couldn’t have possibly taken the answer sheet.”
Discussion Questions

Who is telling the story? ______________________________

What is missing? ______________________________

Who is the main suspect in the case? ______________________________

Does the suspect have an alibi? If so, what is it?

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What is the possible motive in the crime?

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What do you think happened to the answer sheet? Do you think Roz took it? Why do you say that?

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__________________________________________

NOW KEEP READING TO SEE IF YOU CRACKED THE CASE!
DON'T PEEK BEFORE ANSWERING THE PREVIOUS QUESTIONS!
“What?” Roz looked flabbergasted. “What did you just say?”

I explained calmly, “You put your locker key on the hook before you left Mrs. Foley’s office. If you took the answer sheet at that time, you wouldn’t have been able to open your locker and put the answer sheet inside.”

“That’s right!” Roz said. “I didn’t have my key.”

“So how did the answer sheet get inside her locker?” Mrs. Foley asked.

Glancing at Roz, I said, “The solution is in your freckles.” Roz looked surprised and self-consciously touched her forehead.

“I never noticed you had freckles before,” I said. “And I wouldn’t have if that little breeze hadn’t blown back your hair when you opened the office door. That breeze is the key to everything.”

Mrs. Foley started to ask me a question. But I said, “Let’s run the reenactment again. It will make sense then.”

I led everyone back to the office and closed the door. I asked Mrs. Foley to take a seat and put the answer sheet on her desk. “This time, we’ll use the actual answer sheet instead of a book to represent it,” I said. “Now, Roz, open the door like you did right after you picked up the bathroom pass.”

She opened the door. We watched as the breeze that had blown back Roz’s hair lifted the answer sheet off the desk. The page slid across the floor and halfway under the crack in the wall.

“Do you see?” I exclaimed. “The breeze is the thief. Not Roz. It blew the answer sheet off the desk, through the crack in the wall, and right into her locker. Roz didn’t notice because she was leaving the room, and Mrs. Foley didn’t see it because she was napping.”

Mrs. Foley’s eyes went from the door to her desk to the crack under the wall. The teacher’s anger evaporated. “Oh, my,” Mrs. Foley said. “Roz, I am so sorry for wrongly accusing you! I apologize.”

Just then, the school bell rang. I had solved the case just in time!

A few minutes later, I had packed my book bag and was heading out the door when I felt a tapping on my shoulder. It was Roz.

“Hey, Janet,” she said quietly. “Thanks for helping me.” She gave me a smile and a big, friendly hug.

Now it was my turn to be speechless.

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Why should detectives not jump to conclusions when solving cases?

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