

**Meet the Author: Richard Peck**

"Priscilla and the Wimps" is Richard Peck's first short story. In the 1970s, an editor asked him to write a very short story about life in a junior high school. Peck had only thirty-six hours to write it. "But," says Peck, "I liked those characters so much, I wrote a novel for them called *Secrets of the Shopping Mall*. So now I very much believe in writing a short story first, to get me started in a certain direction."

"Priscilla and the Wimps" by Richard Peck

Listen, there was a time when you couldn't even go to the rest room around this school without a pass. And I'm not talking about those little pink tickets made out by some teacher. I'm talking about a pass that cost anywhere up to a buck, sold by Monk Klutter.

Not that Mighty Monk ever touched money, not in public. The gang he ran, which ran the school for him, was his collection agency¹. They were Klutter's Kobras, a name spelled out in nail heads on six well-known black plastic windbreakers. **1**

Monk's threads were more...subtle². A pile-lined suede battle jacket with lizard-skin flaps over tailored Levi's and a pair of ostrich-skin boots, brassed-toed and suitable for kicking people around. One of his Kobras did nothing all day but walk a half step behind Monk, carrying a fitted bag with Monk's gym shoes, a roll of rest-room passes, a cash-box, and a switchblade that Monk gave himself manicures with at lunch over at the Kobra's table.

Speaking of lunch, there were a few cases of advanced **malnutrition** among the newer kids. The ones who were a little slow in handing over a cut of their lunch money and

Practice the Skills**1. Key Literary Element**

Plot The exposition sets the stage for the action and conflict. It also gives information about characters and setting. What do you learn about Monk Klutter in the first two paragraphs?

1. A **collection agency** is a company that tries to force people to pay their debts.

2. **Threads** is a slang word for *clothes*. **Subtle** means "not very noticeable." In this case, the use of *subtle* is sarcastic because Monk's clothes are very noticeable.

were therefore barred from the cafeteria. Monk ran a tight ship³. 2 3

I admit it. I'm five foot five, and when the Kobras **slithered** by, with or without Monk, I shrank. And I admit this, too: I paid up on a regular basis. And I might add: so would you.

This school was old Monk's Garden of Eden.

Unfortunately for him, there was a serpent⁴ in it. The reason Monk didn't recognize trouble when it was staring him in the face is that the serpent in the Kobras' Eden was a girl. 4

Practically every guy in school could show you his scars. Fang marks from Kobras, you might say. And they were all highly visible in the shower room: lumps, lacerations⁵, blue bruises, you name it. But girls usually get off with a warning.

Except there was one girl named Priscilla Roseberry. Picture a girl named Priscilla Roseberry, and you'll be light years off. Priscilla was, hands down, the largest student in our particular institution of learning. I'm not talking big. Even beautiful, in a bionic⁶ way. Priscilla wasn't inclined toward organized crime. Otherwise, she could have put together a gang that would turn Klutter's Kobras into garter snakes.

Priscilla was basically a loner except she had one friend. A little guy named Melvin Detweiler. You talk about The Odd Couple. Melvin's one of the smallest guys above midget status ever seen. A really nice guy, but, you know—little. They even had lockers next to each other, in the same bank as mine. I don't know what they had going. I'm not saying

2. English Language Coach

Prefixes The prefix *mal-* means “bad,” and reverses the meaning of the base word. What does **malnutrition** mean?

3. Guiding Question

What characteristics of a bully do you see in this description of Monk in the first four paragraphs?

4. English Language Coach

Prefixes The prefix *un-* means “not, opposite of,” or “lacking.” What does **unfortunately** mean in this sentence? What other words can you think of with this prefix?

3. Running a ***tight ship*** means being strict.

4. In the Bible story, Adam and Eve live happily in the ***Garden of Eden*** until a ***serpent*** causes them to be sent away.

5. ***Lacerations*** are cuts or wounds.

6. ***Bionic*** refers to characters in science fiction stories who have artificial body parts that make them unusually fast and strong.

Vocabulary

slithered (SLITH urd) *v.* moved along with a sliding or gliding motion, like a snake

this was a romance. After all, people deserve their privacy.

Priscilla was sort of above everything, if you'll pardon a pun⁷. And very calm, as only the very big can be. If there was anybody who didn't notice Klutter's Kobras, it was Priscilla. **5**

Until one winter day after school when we were all grabbing our coats out of our lockers. And hurrying, since Klutter's Kobras made sweeps of the halls for after-school shakedowns⁸.

Anyway, up to Melvin's locker **swaggers** one of the Kobras. Never mind his name. Gang members don't need names. They've got group identity. He reaches down and grabs little Melvin by the neck and slams his head against his locker door. The sound of skull against steel rippled all the way down the locker row, speeding the crowds on their way.

"Okay, let's see your pass," snarls the Kobra.

"A pass for what this time?" Melvin asks, probably still dazed.

"Let's call it a pass for very short people," says the Kobra, "a dwarf tax." He wheezes a little Kobra chuckle at his own **wittiness**. And already he's reaching for Melvin's wallet with the hand that isn't circling Melvin's windpipe. All this time, of course, Melvin and the Kobra are standing in Priscilla's big shadow. **6 7**

She's taking her time shoving her books into her locker and pulling on a very large-size coat. Then, quicker than the eye, she brings the side of her enormous hand down in a chop that breaks the Kobra's hold on Melvin's throat. You could here a pin drop in that hallway. Nobody'd ever laid a

5. Guiding Question

What does it mean when the narrator says, "Priscilla was sort of above everything"? Why might this be important to the story?

6. Key Reading Skill

Identifying Sequence

The Kobra walks up to Melvin's locker. What is the next thing that happens? Then what does the Kobra say after that? List two more events that happen next.

7. Key Literary Element

Plot The writer has introduced the setting and characters. Now he begins the rising action. The rising action is the series of plot events that build toward the climax. Which event starts the rising action?

7. A **pun** is a joke in which a phrase has two meanings. Priscilla is "above everything" in two ways.

8. **Shakedowns** are threats that are used to demand money from victims.

Vocabulary

swaggers (SWAG urz) *v.* walks in a bold or proud way

wittiness (WIT tee nes) *n.* ability to be smart and funny

finger on a Kobra, let alone a hand the size of Priscilla's.

Then Priscilla, who hardly ever says anything to anybody except to Melvin, says to the Kobra, "Who's your leader, wimp?"

This practically blows the Kobra away. First he's chopped by a girl, and now she's acting like she doesn't know Monk Klutter, the Head Honcho of the World. He's so amazed, he tells her. "Monk Klutter." **8**

"Never heard of him," Priscilla mentions. "Send him to see me." The Kobra just backs away from her like the whole situation is too big for him, which it is.

Pretty soon Monk himself slides up. He jerks his head once, and his Kobras slither off down the hall. He's going to handle this interesting case personally. "Who is it around here doesn't know Monk Klutter?"

He's standing inches from Priscilla, but since he'd have to look up at her, he doesn't. "Never heard of him," says Priscilla.

Monk's not happy with this answer, but by now he's spotted Melvin, who's grown smaller in spite of himself. Monk breaks his own rule by reaching for Melvin with his own hands. "Kid," he says, "you're going to have to educate your girlfriend."

His hands never quite make it to Melvin. In a move of pure poetry Priscilla has Monk in a hammerlock. His neck's popping like gunfire, and his head's bowed under the **immense** weight of her forearm. His suede jacket's peeling back, showing pile.

Priscilla's behind him in another easy motion. And with a single mighty thrust forward, frog-marches⁹ Monk into

8. Key Reading Skill

Identifying Sequence

The narrator tells this story in chronological order. Each event follows another event in time order. Scan this page and the previous page, and write down any signal words you see.

9. When Priscilla **frog-marches** Monk, she holds him from behind and forces him to walk in front of her.

Vocabulary

immense (ih MENS) *adj.* of great size; huge

her own locker. It's incredible. His ostrich-skin boots click once in the air. And suddenly he's gone, neatly wedged into the locker, a perfect fit. Priscilla bangs the door shut, twirls the lock, and strolls out of school. Melvin goes with her, of course, trotting along below her shoulder. The last stragglers leave quietly. 9

Well, this is where fate, an even bigger force than Priscilla, steps in. It snows all that night, a blizzard. The whole town ices up. And school closes for a week. 10 11

9. Key Literary Element

Plot The climax is the high point in a story. What is the climax of “Priscilla and the Wimps”? Why do you think so?

10. Key Literary Element

Plot The resolution of a story is the final outcome. What is the resolution of “Priscilla and the Wimps”?

11. Guiding Question

Do you think Priscilla chose the best way to deal with a bully? Support your opinion with details from the text.

Vocabulary

stragglers (STRAG lurz) *n.* people who lag behind the main group

fate (fayt) *n.* a power that people believe determines events before they happen