

Little Rubber Feet

It was raining, as usual in November, in the Pacific Northwest. School children didn't mind. They joyfully jumped into puddles with their yellow, green and red boots. Outside their classroom, the boots lined up in a rainbow of colors below the coat hooks. Miss Chang's second-grade classroom was always so colorful inside too, with dozens of art projects adorning the walls. Her students loved to make new projects to show off in class and during parent night. But child boots don't ever cause a problem, no not like the little rubber feet in this story.

No, I'm talking about the little rubber boots, shoes and pads that you find on dozens of household and electronic devices. I'll bet you don't realize how many objects have little rubber feet on their bottom, in order to cushion and balance the device quietly in place.

You can find them on portable speakers, laptops, computer keyboards, lamps, stools and even on a kitchen food scale. When one falls off, the object doesn't balance. It wobbles and can drive you crazy, like a table that is too short on one leg.

Mrs. Johnson spent hours on the phone and her computer trying to find replacement rubber feet for the various ones missing. Of course, it isn't as simple as it might seem. First of all, you can't go back to the store where you purchased it. The product isn't damaged and no store keeps an inventory of little rubber feet. Then, if you do find the manufacturer, they usually put you on hold (they're laughing at this time) and give you an 800 number or website to follow. Once online it's impossible to find the little rubber feet in the product description. Calling technical support won't help; they say little rubber feet are not a technical problem. Mrs. Johnson finally found a contact us button where she could describe her problem. Embarrassed, she asked if she could

purchase a replacement little rubber foot for the item in question. When she tried to submit the question, the stupid “I’m not a robot” gotcha made her select street signs, chimneys and other objects in the grid of squares. A few days later, she received an email. The company would repair the unit if she would mail it back to them. At that point, she gave up. Mrs. Johnson was forced to repeat this process for the half dozen objects in her house that had missing little rubber feet. She estimated that it took her over twenty hours and a couple bottles of wine to find the missing feet.

While she was on the phone, her daughter Heather tugged on her mom’s sleeve. “Mom, will you help me with my art project?”

“Dear, it’s more important that you do it yourself.”

“But mom, I want mine to look good.”

“Heather, I’m sure your dad and I will love it, as well as your teacher. Just do your best.”

Heather walked away sadly. “All right.”

“Come back here.” Her mom gave Heather a big hug. “We love you and whatever you do will be perfect. Now have fun with your project.”

It was parent’s night at school. Heather held her mom’s hand and pulled her into the classroom. Mrs. Johnson greeted Miss Chang warmly.

“Miss Chang, your room is fantastic. How do you find the time to get all these wonderful projects done?”

“Well, most of these on the back wall were done at home, an assignment.”

“Lovely. What was the theme?”

“Students were encouraged to find bits of junk and objects thrown away at home and create a project about our town. You can see many of the kids have depictions of the harbor, some of the state park and even a few showing shops where their parents work.”

“Mommy, come see mine.”

“Just a minute Heather. I’m talking with your teacher.”

“They are all so well done. Are you sure the parents didn’t create some of these?”

Miss Chang smiled. “Well, we have a don’t ask, don’t tell policy.”

Heather finally got her mother’s attention. She pointed at her project.

“Look mommy, I made this one for you.”

Her mother looked at the art project with a mix of love and regret. On the page was a decoration with a half dozen little rubber feet, in a landscape of the town harbor. Little rubber feet for car tires and boat life preservers. Little rubber feet on school buses and flower pots.

She gave Heather a big hug. “It’s wonderful. You did great.”

Heather smiled at her mom. “And I did it by myself without help.”

“Yes, you did dear.”