

OUTWITTING ANNE

By Macdara MacColl

"Ouch. Quit it," Nelly growled under her breath. She was trying to compose a brilliant essay in her life journal at school. But her classmate, Richard, was swinging his leg under their table, kicking her with each swing. Thud. His shoe slammed into her ankle.

"I said quit it," she hissed.

"Nelly, please be quiet and focus on your writing," their teacher, Mrs. Patience Lee, said.

Nelly glared at Richard, who flashed back a dopey grin. He didn't seem to be writing anything. She leaned over her journal, and then—thump—his foot wacked into her shin. Nelly tapped her pencil on the desk with rage. She was sick of Richard's nonsense. He did this every day. Always kicking her or shoving her or pinching her. And somehow he got away with it. It was completely not fair. He was an awful, awful boy and she was the smartest girl in the class and yet the teacher had

OUTWITTING ANNE

yelled at her.

Suddenly, something flooded Nelly's body. A pulsing, tight, tingling, niggling, jangling feeling raced through every nerve in her being. Her skin burned; her toes curled; her stomach clenched; her jaw tightened; her head throbbed. She slammed her pencil down hard.

As it hit the desk, KABOOM! The classroom was plunged into inky blackness. Nelly felt the earth shake, then she began to tremble, then her body lifted up, spinning and whirling, and then she fell back into her chair and everything was still.

She was still in her classroom, and Richard sat across from her, but her teacher and other classmates had disappeared. Her hand still lay on the pencil, and she felt the object growing. Its tip shot out, hissing as it turned steely silver. The eraser stretched; bubbling red and golden. The pencil transformed into a giant sword. The hilt was covered in rubies. The long, sharp, blade glinted on her desk.

She looked over at Richard. He too had changed. No longer a mere boy, he was now a monster, covered in shaggy hair and wielding long, claw-like fingers. He growled at her through his jagged teeth, "I'm going to ruin you, Nelly. I'm going to make you fail at school. I'm going to kick you under the desk for the rest of your life!" he taunted.

"No!" Nelly yelled. "No you won't!" She jumped up and grabbed the sword with both hands and swung it over her head. It was so heavy she could barely hold it aloft. But she was determined. He must be stopped, this terrible, annoying, sneering, kicking thing. She would fight him to the death if she had to, so he would never

OUTWITTING ANNE

bother anyone again. She took two shaky steps toward Richard, who raised his arms for battle.

A loud “crack” echoed through the room and Nelly and Richard froze. Sister Shrug appeared, standing between the two children. A large woman with a wide smile, lots of blue eye shadow and red hair piled on top of her head, Sister Shrug taught a girl group Nelly was in called Tween Tribe. Shrug was not an ordinary teacher, though. She had a touch of magic in her.

“Well don’t this just beat all,” Shrug said, surveying the tableaux. She looked right into Nelly’s eyes. “Anne, I know you’re in there,” she said addressing Nelly. “Stop bothering that child right now. Don’t make me come in there and get you.”

Nelly’s skin began crackling. Little glassy nodules bubbled up all over her body. They sizzled and popped and exploded like teeny firecrackers, giving off rancid smoke. The smoke flew around the room for a moment, and then coalesced into a strange, craggy woman. Everything about her was sharp and edgy. Her feet were pointy little protrusions. Her back was as bent and pointy as razor wire. Her fingers were so narrow they could cut paper. Her lime green eyes were lined with knifelike lashes and her jagged teeth had spider webs stretched between them.

“Well hey there, Annie, why ya stirring up trouble here?”

“Do not call me Annie,” the brittle woman said, bringing her face close to Shrug and waving her fingers irritatingly in Shrug’s face. “I am called by my last name only.”

Shrug guffawed. She tickled the grotesque creature under the chin. “Well darlin’, whatever I call you, I want you away from Nelly.”

OUTWITTING ANNE

The creature shuddered at the sound of Shrug's laugh and stepped back. "I'm afraid I can't oblige. This young lady invited me in. Seems that boy child was bothering her. You know well and good that when someone invites a mad monster in, I'm allowed to enter. She has to get rid of me herself. There's nothing you can do about it. And children have such a hard time outwitting a mad monster like me. I might just settle into little Nelly forever!"

Shrug put her hands on her hips. "You sure are right, girlfriend. Nelly's got to get rid of you herself. But that child's got a chunk of wise inside her. We'll just see what she's capable of."

Shrug snapped her fingers, and Nelly unfroze. She staggered under the weight of the sword, still held high over her head, then looked around at Shrug and the beastly jagged woman standing next to her. Nelly let the sword drop to her side.

"What is that?" she gasped hoarsely, pointing to the creature.

"That," said Shrug, "is a mad monster."

The hideous figure stepped forward and put her nose close to Nelly. "Noiance is the name."

"Well get her out of here," Nelly said, backing away, "She's awful."

"I can't," Shrug replied. "Only you can do that, Nelly. You see, you brought her here, and she's been living inside of you."

At that, Nelly barked out a short scream. "She's been inside of me?" she wailed. "No! She's disgusting. I did not bring her here!"

"Yes, you did," Shrug said calmly. "When you got all riled up at that boy kicking you."

"But that was his fault," countered Nelly.

OUTWITTING ANNE

“Ah, yes,” said Shrug, “but then you made up a big story in your head. Goes something like: ‘Everything’s so awful. It’s not fair. I got to get real mad.’ That’s the invitation for the mad monsters to come in. They fill you up with a mad mess. You can feel it from your toes to your head. Under your skin. Behind your eyes. In your jaw. Noiance here especially likes hanging around elementary schools, waiting for boys to bug girls, which they always do.”

Nelly thought back to the moment just before the kaboom. She had felt something flow into her – a pulsing, tight, tingling, niggling, jangling feeling. Was that Noiance the mad monster roosting in her?

Noiance put her pointy nose close to Nelly’s. “You’ve got a lot of anger bubbling in there, little one. I’m going to pop right back inside of you now, and we can get to work slaying that boy monster.”

Nelly glanced over at Richard. There he stood, frozen, his arms lifted in defense of her sword. Except he didn’t look like a monster now. He just looked like Richard, a 9-year-old boy with a rumpled t-shirt and grass-stained jeans. And the immense sword in Nelly’s hand seemed ridiculously big compared to this kid. Nelly thought she understood. She turned to Noiance.

“I’m not mad at Richard anymore,” she said, “I’m mad at you!” With that, she raised the sword over her head and swung it hard at Noiance. The sword sliced through the middle of the rickety creature, but instead of slicing her in half, the sword seemed to make her stronger. Noiance’s back straightened a little, and she stepped closer to Nelly.

“Good girl,” the creature said. “Swing again.”

OUTWITTING ANNE

Nelly could feel rage flow through her. She used her strength to swing again, this time slicing through Noinance's neck with such force that the sword flew out of Nelly's hand and clattered against the wall. Noinance's breath came hard and fast. "Perfect!" she exhaled. She grabbed Nelly by the shoulders. Nelly struggled free and ran behind her desk. She looked wildly at Shrug.

"You can't fight a mad monster with anger," Shrug said. "You've got to trick her. Outwit her. You're the girl for it, Nelly. I know you are. Let me give you a hint. Her first name is Anne. Put it with her last name."

"Anne?" Nelly said. "Her name is Anne. So it's Anne Noinance. Her name is Anne Noinance--annoyance?" Nelly actually smiled at that. The mad monster took a step away and quivered.

"So every time I get mad, it's cause I've been visited by Anne Noinance?" Nelly giggled. "Where is your Uncle Ima?" asked Nelly.

"Ima?" asked Annie weakly.

"Yeah, Ima Pain and his son, Ima Pain II," said Nelly, howling at her own joke.

The sound of laughter cut through the mad monster like no blade could. She crumbled onto her knees.

"It's not funny!" she cried.

"Well, it kind of is," Nelly said, merriment ringing in her voice. "I was ready to kill Richard just because I was being visited by Anne Noinance. I mean, that is kind of funny," Nelly fell into a chair and let out a heartfelt laugh.

"AAAARrrrrrrrrrr" screamed Anne. Her jagged body blew apart into millions of shards, which whizzed around the room, then began

OUTWITTING ANNE

bubbling and hissing and finally burst into puffs of smoke which disappeared.

“Well done,” Shrug said once the smoke had cleared. “You outwitted her.”

“She can’t stand laughter, can she?” Nelly asked.

“Sure as sugar she can’t. Turns out she can’t stand a lot of thing. Like laughter. A relaxed body. Calm, peaceful thoughts. There’s lots of ways to outwit a mad monster. But I’ll tell you, laughter is just about my favorite.” Shrug wrapped one arm around Nelly’s shoulder and tussled her hair. “You ready to get back to class?” Shrug asked.

“Yeah, but I won’t be needing that,” Nelly answered, pointing to the sword still lying on the ground.

Shrug laughed and snapped her fingers. The sword slid across the floor, shrinking as it went, until it flew into Nelly’s hand, transformed back into a regular #2 pencil. She gave Nelly a quick nod, then snapped again. Shrug disappeared and Nelly’s classmates were all around her once more. Her journal was still right in front of her.

“How I Outwitted the Mad Monster” she wrote at the top of her page.

Thud. A shoe hit her leg. Her jaw tightened and she looked up at Richard, who stared back at her with his stupid smile. She started to snap at him, then thought of Anne and smiled. She whispered into the air around her. “I know what you’re doing, Annie Anne Anne. I know you’re here. Well no way. Not today. You won’t bother me little old Anne. I can outwit you, yes I can.” She liked the rhyme and hummed a little tune in her head, repeating the phrase, “You won’t bother me little old Anne. I can outwit you, yes I can.”

OUTWITTING ANNE

Nelly heard a voice inside her head cry, “Oh drat!” She felt her feet unclench, her stomach soften, her jaw loosen, her shoulders relax. She felt warm and comfortable. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a puff of smoke disappear out the window.

“So long, Anne,” she whispered. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again. But don’t forget, I’m ready for you now.” Nelly grinned, gave Richard a little smile, and hummed for the rest of the day.

