

The Bug in Her Ear



“OK, OK, let’s see. Number six,” Rosalie read off the test paper in front of her. “What is the longest river in the United States?”

At once Rosalie turned her head toward Aaron’s desk. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of his answer sheet. She spotted number six but could read only the word Miss after it. Aaron’s hand covered the rest of the answer.

Rosalie quickly copied this onto her paper. “Miss?” she said to herself. “Miss who?”

Her head swiveled toward Clara’s desk. This

was better. The answer to number six was in plain view on Clara's sheet, and Clara was never wrong. The longest river in the United States was the Mississippi River. Rosalie quickly jotted it down.

Rosalie swiped her brown bangs out of her eyes with a brush of her hand. "This social studies test is certainly a lot more work than I thought it would be," she said, reading the next question. "OK, OK. What is the capital of the United States?"

Again she looked toward Aaron's desk. Drat! This time Aaron's hand covered his entire answer. Rosalie's gaze returned to Clara's paper. Drat again! Her answer was out of view as well.

Rosalie shook her head and batted her bangs again. "So now what am I supposed to?" she said under her breath.

Charlie sat in front of Rosalie. Just as she was leaning forward to peer over Charlie's shoulder, she heard something peculiar—a small voice coming from someplace very near.

"No, no, no, Miss!" it said. "You don't need to copy that answer."

Rosalie fell back in her seat. She swiveled her head from side to side. "Says who?" she said. "Who said that?"

"The capital of the United States is Washington,

D.C.," said the mysterious voice. "That stands for the District of Columbia."

Rosalie moved her eyes up and down. "OK, come on, whoever you are," she said. "That sounds like a silly name for a capital."

Rosalie spun around in her chair. Her ponytail whipped from side to side. Was Roger whispering the answer to her? Impossible. Roger knew less about social studies than she did. So who was saying those things?

Rosalie looked toward the ceiling and under her desk. "OK, OK, now," she said softly, almost to herself. "Where are you? Who are you? What are you?"



"I'm here, Miss. I'm near," came the voice again, extremely close to her right side. "I'm the tiny doodle bug in your ear."

Rosalie made a sour face. "A bug? In my ear? Oh, ick!"

From the front of the classroom came the tall teacher's *shhhhhhhhhh*.

Rosalie looked down at her paper, pretending to work.

The bug in her ear sounded indignant. “Ick, indeed, Miss,” it said. “I’ll have you know I’m a bug of distinction—well-groomed and refined. And, may I add, I’m exceedingly cleaner than this ear hole in which I am sitting.”

“My mother warned me something like this might happen if I didn’t keep those things clean,” Rosalie muttered.



“Great crop of potatoes growing in here, though,” the bug put in.

Rosalie swatted her brown bangs. “OK, OK, little bug,” she said uneasily. “Now that you are in my ear, what do you intend to do in there? I have this quiz to finish, you know.”

“Well, Miss, don’t think I’m here just to bug you or beat the drum,” said the bug. “I’m here to help. And from the way I’ve watched you copy all your answers, I figure you can use all the help you can get.”

Rosalie scowled. Regarding her test again she said, “OK, little doodle bug, if you think you’re so smart, what’s the answer to number eight? How many states are there in the United States?”

“Fifty,” came the immediate answer.

“Fifty!” Rosalie exclaimed a tad too loudly, so that the tall teacher looked up from his desk and gave her his famous “warning” stare.

“Are you sure fifty is the right answer, little bug?” said Rosalie, dropping her voice. “That sounds like an awful lot of states to me.”

“Rely on me, Miss,” said the bug. “We Bug-in-the-Ear know the answers to everything. Just name it—math, spelling, reading, writing—I can tell you anything you need to know.”

Rosalie twirled her bangs with her pointer finger. “You don’t say,” she said thoughtfully.

“Here’s the bargain,” said the bug. “Let me stay in your ear during school hours, and I’ll guarantee you will never miss another fill-in-the-blank, true-or-false, or multiple-choice question on a test for the rest of your days at school.”

“You mean I’ll never have to copy off another paper?” said Rosalie. “Copying answers is becoming more and more difficult all the time.”

“That’s right, Miss. No more copying. From now on you’ll just have to listen to the Bug-in-Your-Ear.”

Rosalie picked up her pencil. “OK, OK, little doodle bug,” she said. “It’s a deal. Let’s get to work.”

That afternoon Rosalie's classmates received the first hint that things had changed for Rosalie. Not once during spelling did they hear the tall teacher call out, "Keep your eyes on your own paper, Rosalie," or "Rosalie, do your own work," or "You'll never learn anything by copying answers, Rosalie."

When the bell rang to go home, Rosalie felt a tickle on her cheek. Soon she spotted a tiny speck, the size of a period, skitter across her desktop. She followed the dot until it disappeared into the heart-shaped pencil sharpener she kept on the right-hand corner of her desk.

Rosalie leaned forward and whispered, "So long, little doodle bug. Nice having you in my ear. Now remember, tomorrow at eight-thirty



sharp, I expect you back there helping me with answers on my math. A deal is a deal.”

The next morning, with ears scrubbed clean, Rosalie sat at her desk. She faced a purple ditto sheet filled with three-place subtraction problems. She had already turned toward Clara’s paper before hearing, “Two hundred fifty-six.”

Rosalie beamed. “Good morning, little doodle bug,” she said brightly. “How do you like my ears today?”

“Smells like bubble bath in here, Miss,” the bug answered. “Now should we get to work on your math?”

“OK, OK. But are you a clever enough bug to do hard mathematics like this?”

“A Bug-in-the-Ear can answer anything,” the bug reminded her. “Now, if you will, the answers are two hundred fifty-six, one hundred fifty-two, seven hundred thirty-three ... Can you keep up with me, Miss?”

“Yes, yes,” said Rosalie, furiously filling in answers.

So it went. All morning long the bug poured answers into Rosalie’s head. Naturally, she had a perfect score on her spelling test. Her oral reading was also flawless and fluent, for the bug told her all the tough words as she came to them in her reader. Rosalie amazed her classmates by reciting two long paragraphs in the

book without even looking at the pages.

In the afternoon the class had a writing assignment—What I Want to Be When I Grow Up. Rosalie’s pencil never moved faster as the bug dictated every word, period, comma, and capital letter for her to write. At the end of the first sheet of writing, Rosalie threw open her desk to get out more paper.

“This is great, little bug,” she said. “This is the best report I’ve ever written.”

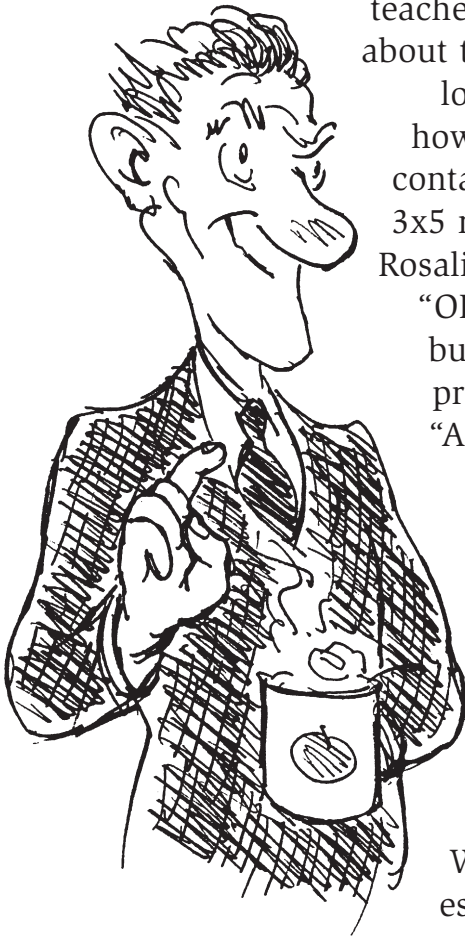
“Miss, don’t interrupt!” snapped the bug in her ear. “Now where was I? Oh, yes ... After my Oscar-winning performance in a movie, I would like to write a great novel, then be the first human on Mars.”

“Boy, this sure beats copying,” said Rosalie, writing as fast as she could.

“Glad to be appreciated, Miss,” said the bug. “You can always rely on a Bug-in-the-Ear.”

At the end of the day the tall teacher stood in front of the class with a solemn look on his face. He took a long gulp of coffee from his mug and said, “All right, people, remember on Monday you will be giving your oral reports on a famous American.”

Rosalie remembered this all right. The idea of getting up in front of the entire class to talk about Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, had been bugging her for weeks. But as the tall



teacher continued to talk about the speeches—how long they should be, how to use proper eye contact, and how many 3x5 note cards to use—Rosalie recalled the bug.

“OK, OK, little doodle bug,” she whispered, practically to herself.

“Are you any good at writing speeches?”

“A Bug-in-the-Ear is good at everything, Miss,” the bug repeated.

“OK, then will you write me a speech about Neil Armstrong? Will you make it an especially good one?”

All the kids in the class are going to hear it.”

“You can count on me, Miss,” the bug assured her. “Your talk will be first-rate. I’ll slip you plenty of long sentences and three-syllable words to say. I’ll add the right number of ‘in my humble opinions,’ and tell you when to clear

your throat importantly and when to shake your fist in the air.”

“Sounds good, little bug,” said Rosalie. “But you can skip the fist-shaking part.”

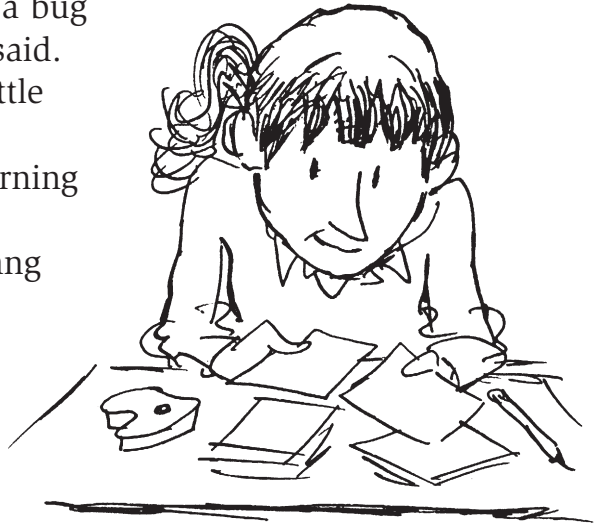
“You know, Miss, this speech will be a big deal for me as well,” said the bug. “It’s a true test of my ability. In fact, I shall invite all my friends and relations to this classroom to hear you speak.”

“You mean there are other bugs like you around?” asked Rosalie.

“Certainly, Miss,” replied the bug. “There is a bug for any student who wants one in his or her ear.”

Rosalie watched the bug cross her desktop and enter the pencil sharpener. “Well, I can’t imagine why any kid wouldn’t want a bug like you,” she said. “Good night, little doodle bug.”

Monday morning came. As the morning bell rang Rosalie sat at her desk shuffling through a stack of 3x5 cards she



had filled with notes about Neil Armstrong. The tall teacher said you were expected to hold note cards during your speech, but Rosalie certainly had no intention of using hers.

She studied the heart-shaped pencil sharpener on her desk. “OK, OK, little doodle bug,” she whispered. “Time to come out and climb into my ear.”

It was at this point that Rosalie smelled something peculiar in the room. She took a deep sniff. Phew! It smelled sweet and perfumy.

Again she hailed the bug, but still there came no reply. “I bet that little bug is busy preparing my speech,” she said, continuing to sort through her note cards.

Up front the tall teacher leaned against his desk. “Good morning, people,” he said. “Let’s begin the morning with the speeches you prepared about a famous American. Who wants to go first?”

When not a single hand went up, the tall teacher called on Charlie. Charlie trudged forward and began talking about the painter Norman Rockwell.

Meanwhile, Rosalie tapped nervously on her pencil sharpener. “OK, OK, little bug,” she said, irritated. “I need you in my ear this instant. It’s showtime!”

When Charlie finished, the tall teacher called

on Mary, who came forward to talk about Helen Keller.

Almost in a panic, Rosalie lifted her pencil sharpener and shook out its contents. Pencil shavings sprinkled down on her desktop, but no bug.

“Come on, little buggy, where are you?” she said. “You can’t let me down. We had a deal. I could be called on next.”

Sure enough, when Mary finished, the tall teacher said, “Rosalie, will you now tell us about the astronaut Neil Armstrong?”

Rosalie swiped her bangs aside and grabbed her note cards. Her ponytail swished left and right as she plodded toward the front of the room. “I pray you’re in my ear, little bug,” she muttered under her breath. “I’m counting on you. I can’t give this speech without you.”

At this moment the classroom door opened. Into the room walked Mr. Leeks, the custodian. His finger was poised on the nozzle of a spray can, ready to blast the first thing that moved.

“Anything the matter, Mr. Leeks?” the tall teacher called out.

Like a hunter stalking its prey Mr. Leeks shuffled up a row of desks, his spray can aimed toward the classroom floor.

“The matter? The matter?” he said, scratching his sandpaper whiskers. “Something is always the matter in the room at the end of the hall.



Bugs! Bugs everywhere! You should have been here before school started today. Tiny bugs covered this entire floor. But I took care of them. I blasted the room with my Bug-Off Bug Spray. You should have seen those buggies skedaddle out of here.”

Bug spray? Rosalie stood as stiff as a yardstick in the front of the room. Did Mr. Leeks say bug spray? She felt hot and sticky. Bug spray?

“Does this mean the bug won’t be in my ear during my speech?” Rosalie asked herself. “Does this mean I’m going to have to give this speech without his help?”

Mr. Leeks stumped up and down the rows of desks with his spray can at the ready. “Looks like my Bug-Off Bug Spray did the trick. Every one of those bugs is gone,” he said, heading for the door. “Always something. Always something odd, something strange, something peculiar going on in this room at the end of the hall. What next?”

“Thank you, Mr. Leeks,” said the tall teacher. “Now, Rosalie, you can start your speech.”

For the next ten seconds Rosalie stood petrified, staring at her classmates. The 3x5 cards vibrated in her hands.

“That little bug let me down,” she said under her breath. “I’m going to have to do it all by myself.”



All at once a voice in her ear startled her. At first she failed to recognize the voice. It did not belong to the bug. It was her own voice, and it was trying to tell her something.

Rosalie's eyes fell on the first note card in her hand. She listened some more. The words came more clearly now. The inner voice was reciting the speech to her. Of course. Hadn't she spent hours that weekend writing all those notes? Maybe she could say the speech by herself. Why did she need a double-crossing doodle bug to tell her the words? Rosalie brushed aside her bangs. She listened again, then said out

loud, "OK, OK. Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the surface of the moon."

Who could have guessed that Rosalie was able to give such a fabulous speech? Certainly not Rosalie herself. But for the next three minutes she fascinated her audience with the life of Neil Armstrong. The words flowed out of

her in clear, organized sentences. At one point in her talk, she became so excited she even shook her fist in the air.

Not until the afternoon did Rosalie hear the bug's voice in her ear again. She had a sheet on nouns and verbs in front of her. She had filled in half the answers already without copying off a single paper.

"A dance is a noun; to dance is a verb, Miss," said the Bug-in-Her-Ear.

Rosalie crammed her pencil into the pencil sharpener and twisted it slowly. "Sorry, little bug," she said. "I don't need you anymore."

"But we had a deal," the bug reminded her.

"I'm sure there are many other kids who would love a doodle bug in their ear," said Rosalie. "As for me, I'm never going to rely on anybody or anything but myself for answers again."

"Then it's farewell, Miss," said the bug. "Thanks for lending me an ear."

Rosalie never saw the bug leave. Not until she finished her language sheet did she even look up from her work.