

BIRD LEGS NELSON

By Joyce Hansen

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As Nelson walked the six blocks to Queensbridge Middle School on a sunny May morning, he vowed that this would be the day that he'd put an end to the torment. Big Reggie, better known around the school as Big, was the tormentor. He was the biggest and widest kid in middle school. Not only did he have a peculiar big body, but he had a big mouth and created the best insults in the world. He must have dreamed insults at night and thought them up all day. They were always on the tip of his tongue. No one ever challenged him.

With Nelson, it started back in September, the very first day of the seventh grade, when Big saw him in gym class wearing shorts. "Is that a chicken you riding or are those your legs?" he shouted and of course everyone laughed. "What's your name? Isn't it Nelson? Bird Legs Nelson?" He kept repeating Bird Legs Nelson until the teacher shut him up.

The name stuck, shortened to Bird Legs by popular demand. Only the teachers called him Nelson. Even, the pretty new girl who had just come to his class last month, called him Bird Legs. To make a bad situation worse, Nelson had a crush on her.

He wasn't going to take it anymore. It was time to give Big a dose of his own medicine. Nelson had been making up insults to hurl at Big, but never had the nerve to say them to his face. This day things would be different.

When Nelson walked into the school yard that morning, he looked around for Big, but didn't see him. Maybe he was absent, giving Nelson time to build his arsenal of insults.

But just as Mrs. Hill, their teacher, was leading them into the building, Big rolled through the school yard and caught up with the class. Nelson straightened his back and squared his shoulders.

When they reached their classroom, Mrs. Hill ordered everyone to settle down. She made Big sit in the front of the room so that she could keep one eye on him and her other eye on everyone else.

Her eyes didn't actually work together. One eye looked at Big on her right and the other eye scanned the rest of the classroom. Most of the time the students didn't

know who she was looking at. Big had a few choice things to say about her too. He said that she could be a private eye because you couldn't tell when she was looking at you and when she wasn't.

Mrs. Hill taught them English and Social Studies. During English class that morning, she talked about brainstorming in order to help you get started when writing a composition. Nelson's brain was stormy indeed. The words flowed from his pen to the paper: Planet, sunshine, thighs, thunder, Mars, slapped, nose. If Mrs. Hill had checked his work as he wrote, she might have wondered about those words. Then he wrote: You were so big and mean when you were born you slapped the doctor then the doctor slapped your mother for having you. Your nose is so crooked I'm reporting it to the police.

Nelson chuckled and Mrs. Hill walked toward him, but her eyes were all over the place. The bell rang, and she assigned the brainstorming for homework. The boys charged out of the classroom and headed for the gym. All of them, even Nelson, had dreams and fantasies of being famous basketball players.

Nelson put on a brave face and tried to keep his spirits up as he ran in the boys' locker room. They quickly changed into their gym shorts and Nelson knew that the insult of the day was on its way when Big looked him up and down.

"Hey, Bird Legs. I know why your head's so big and your legs so skinny."

Nelson opened his mouth, but mumbled and hesitated. Big fired first.

"Heard you had fat chubby legs when you was a baby. Then the baby fat slogged up to your head."

The whole locker room burst out laughing and Nelson felt himself shrinking into a tiny ball of humiliation. His mind and his mouth locked on him and he walked out of the locker room into the gym without saying one insulting word back to Big.

As they performed their exercises, Nelson felt like slapping himself for not having the nerve to even open his mouth when he had the chance to. He felt as if he would explode, but what a small explosion it would be and who would notice.

Because it was a double period of gym, and the May air was even sweeter and warmer than it had been in the morning, the teacher allowed the boys to play basketball in the school yard.

Now there was one thing Nelson had going for his little, skinny, self. He was a superb basketball player. What he lacked in size he made up for in heart. He was the best point guard, knowing instantly who to pass the ball to. He'd practiced his bank shots and could bounce the ball off the backboard at an angle that made the ball drop right into the basket. When they picked sides everyone wanted Nelson, because as Big would say, "Bird Legs knows who to pass the ball to."

And that was the other thing. If Big wanted you on his team, you were supposed

to say yes. No one ever said no to Big.

When it was time to pick teams Big yelled to Nelson, “Bring those little chicken legs over here.”

Nelson dug up a little nerve. “I want to go on the other team, coach,” he told the gym teacher.

Big scowled at him. “Now you really gonna get it Bird Legs. You dissed me.”

“Shut up,” the teacher said to Big and the game started.

Nelson was still so angry at not having the nerve to insult Big, he played like a champion. He dribbled the ball from one side of his body to the other like mad. He made bank shot after bank shot. His mind worked as fast as a computer. He saw the whole court and knew instantly who to pass the ball to. Big lumbered after him, but couldn’t catch him.

Now, there were a lot of other kids in the schoolyard on that warm spring day, and Big and Nelson and the other basketball players were so intense they didn’t hear the teacher blow his whistle, stopping play. The kids practicing track and the soccer players were out there too, so the teacher didn’t notice as he walked inside with everyone else, that a few of the basketball players were still outside. He locked the door. .

Shortly after, one of the players realized that everyone else was gone. “Hey, we’re locked out here in the school yard,” he said.

Big and another boy banged on the door. The bell rang for the next period and Nelson knew that they would be in trouble if they didn’t hurry and get back in the building. Nelson ran toward the gates at the end of the yard, but they were locked with chains. He saw a space though between the locked gates and called the others. “We can get through there.” He easily slipped through the opening. Big pushed another kid out of the way and squeezed through the opening too, but he got stuck and couldn’t budge. In the meantime, Miss Hill opened the school door. Nelson couldn’t tell who she was looking at or what she saw. The rest of the kids scrambled into the building as Miss Hill yelled at them. Nelson was outside of the gate and no one but him saw half of Big’s bulky body wedged in the opening. Only his head was free.

“Hey, man, get me some help. I can’t breathe, man.” Suddenly, great oblong tears rolled down Big’s face.

Even his tears are big Nelson said to himself. Uncontrollable laughter bubbled up from Nelson’s stomach forcing the anger out. Big bad Big, crying like a baby. Nelson waved goodbye. “Lose some weight.”

Big was still blubbering and crying for help and didn’t seem to hear what Nelson said.

“Don’t leave me. Where are you going?”

Nelson kept walking and laughing, but the sound of Big calling for help followed him down the street. He stopped. Why should he help Big? Let him yell. Nelson walked slowly toward the front of the school. Big looked like he would burst like a balloon Nelson thought. Can a human burst? What would be let loose in the atmosphere if that happened.

He turned around and walked back over to Big. “Too bad you don’t have bird legs like me. But if you stay stuck here you can’t eat. If you can’t eat then you’ll lose weight and slide between the gates like I did.”

“Will you shut up, Nelson and help me?”

“So you know my name now,” Nelson grinned right into Big’s face and at the same time pushed on Big’s shoulder. “At least the sun is shining ’cause your big butt ain’t out there blocking it.” He pushed Big’s shoulder again.

“I’m gonna get you man,” he said, still blubbing. He sniffled. “It’s getting looser.”

Nelson pushed again, giving it all of his measly strength. “You couldn’t be no astronaut. Send you to outer space and the Martians think you another planet.”

“What’s wrong with you, Nelson? Why you acting like this?”

Nelson pushed with every ounce of strength he had left and Big’s shoulder and arm were free.

“Now we got to get that thunder thigh loose. Might need a tractor to lift that boulder,” Nelson chuckled.

“You wait, Nelson. You just wait ’till I get out of here.”

Nelson laughed and gave one, last hard push and Big was free. Big rubbed his leg and limped to the back door which had been locked again. Nelson was free too. He bent over, held his stomach and fell down laughing.

The whole school learned what had happened to Big. He and Nelson had to explain to Miss Hill why they were late for Social Studies class. But Nelson never told how Big had cried and anyone who dared to bother Nelson, had to answer to Big. Big eased up on the insults too, especially when someone would snap back, *were you stuck anywhere today?*

Nelson discovered though that he owned the name, Bird Legs. It was his. When he was on the basketball court during games against other schools and the kids from his school yelled, Go, Bird Legs! Go Bird Legs! Nelson would soar like a shooting star, especially when the pretty new girl smiled at him.