



# The Bully and the Can Queen

by Elisabeth Deffner

**I**t all started when I got up from the lunch table to toss my carrot juice can in the trash. 1

“What are you doing, Jody?” my best friend Shannon asked. “You know that’s recyclable.” She shook her head sadly, like my dad did the time I made a smoothie and forgot to put the lid on the blender. 5

“But there’s no recycling bin,” I complained. “What am I supposed to do, carry it around?”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I’d made a mistake. I recognized the look on Shannon’s face: the puckered mouth, the knitted eyebrows, the scrunched-up nose. She had a plan. 10

“Hand it over,” Shannon ordered, snatching the can from me. (Did I mention she could be a little bossy?)

Shannon collected three cans from our class that day. The next day, she came prepared for more. She filled one reusable grocery bag during lunch, and half of another after school. By the end of the week, we were hauling four sticky, stinky bags of cans home. 15

But I guess Shannon got a little tired of the whole thing. Or maybe her mom got mad about her sticky clothes. All I know is, Shannon made an appointment with Mrs. Yim. I’d never heard of a kid wanting to see the principal—but Shannon was different. And she was determined to get recycling bins for Fletcher Elementary. 20

Shannon must have convinced Mrs. Yim, because soon the playground was dotted with tall green containers. Plus, Shannon had a new nickname: The Can Queen. (She liked it better than her old one: The Mouth.)

With the money earned from the first month of recycling, Mrs. Yim promised the school a pizza party. All the kids were into recycling after that. 25

Except for one.

Tara Conrad had transferred to Fletcher the year before. She liked butterfly barrettes, strawberry-scented lip balm, and tripping people during P.E. (I knew from experience.) 30

Tara wasn't big on recycling. More than once, Shannon had picked up a can she'd tossed on the ground. But not even Shannon would dare lecture Tara the Terrible.

One afternoon, Shannon and I overheard the school custodian, Mr. Ray, talking to Mrs. Yim. 35

"Yesterday was the third day there were no cans," Mr. Ray said. "Who's emptying the recycling bins—and why?"

As they headed into Mrs. Yim's office, Shannon grabbed my hand.

"Come on," she said. "No one messes with my cans *or* my pizza party!" Shannon may be bossy, but she's never boring. 40

We walked up and down the hallways looking for clues until we spotted Tara the Terrible. As we watched, Tara banged a can against a wall. Instantly, it flattened into a disk that she tossed into her daisy-patterned backpack.

Shannon ran right up to Tara. "Stop! Thief!" she shouted.

I gulped so hard I nearly choked. 45

No one yelled at Tara the Terrible.

But Tara just grinned. Somehow that made her even more terrifying. "Hey, Mouth," she said.

"Quit calling me that!" Shannon squealed. "And you better quit stealing my cans." 50

"Who, me?" Tara smacked another can flat and flipped it into her backpack.

"You! Yes! What—why—" Shannon sputtered.

*Smack.* Flip. "Whatever. Who's gonna stop me?" Tara heaved up her backpack and strolled away. 55

I silently pleaded this would be the end of the whole mess. Silly me.

"Let's go!" Shannon said, grabbing my hand again.

We trailed Tara the Terrible down Maple, onto Orange Street, until she shoved through a gate. Shannon jerked to a stop. We didn't take another step until we heard a door slam. Then we slipped up the gate and read the sign: YWCA. A banner hung from the roof. 60

"Recycle your cans here," it said in big red letters. "Support Our Fundraiser!"

"That weasel was stealing the cans—and bringing them here!" Shannon said. 65

Tara kicked the boys who teased her, and said snotty things to the girls who wouldn't let her play hopscotch with them. And yeah, she had stolen

the cans from the school. But donating them to the Y seemed kind of nice. Criminal, but nice.

“Stealing our cans is low, even for her!” Shannon added. 70

“But they’re not our cans,” I muttered.

Shannon shot me a look.

“They’re not!” I blurted. “We only wanted to help the environment. It doesn’t matter who gets the recycling money. Does it?”

Shannon didn’t say a word as we trudged home. 75

At school the next morning, both Shannon’s and Tara’s seats were empty. I gulped, picturing Shannon alone with the bully. Tickle torture. Noogies. Nothing was too awful for that kid. But then, just as the bell rang, Shannon slipped into the classroom.

With Tara. 80

And they were smiling.

Huh?

Suddenly Mrs. Yim’s voice boomed over the loudspeaker.

“Students, our recycling program has been a great success! Friday will be our school-wide pizza party.” 85

The whole class cheered—except me. I was still wondering how I’d stumbled into some alternate universe where Tara the Terrible and The Can Queen were pals.

“And next month,” Mrs. Yim continued, “our recycling program will benefit the YWCA’s fundraiser to build a new playground. Keep up the good work!” 90

My jaw dropped open, just in time for Shannon to notice my confusion.

“I called Tara last night,” Shannon said. “Once we stopped yelling at each other, she told me about the YWCA. Her mom works there. They help lots of needy families.” 95

“Yeah,” Tara piped in. “With The Mouth’s mouth and my power, maybe we can, you know, do stuff. Good stuff.”

Then Shannon leaned over to me and whispered, “You were right Jody.”

I just sat there, gaping like a goofball.

The bully and The Can Queen—business partners? 100

Tara—a bully with a heart of gold (or at least aluminum)?

Me—“right”?!

Tara glanced at me and grinned, so close I could smell her strawberry lip balm. Cautiously I smiled back. Maybe things really were going to be different now! 105

Then Shannon slipped a note onto my desk, and another onto Tara's. "I have an idea: unbeatable kickball kickers!" I read. "First practice at lunch."

A new idea so soon? This was fast, even for Shannon. I glanced up just in time to see Tara give her a high five.

110

Yep—things were definitely going to be different.

Elisabeth Deffner "The Bully and the Can Queen" *Spider* April 2014. © Carus Publishing Company. Reproduced with permission.