

# GUERRILLA TACTICS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

There were two kinds of rules at school. Get caught breaking them, even if you didn't know them, and you could find yourself punished. There were classroom rules: don't talk in class, don't pass notes, don't answer back and so on. Mr Wallace, in his black gown spotted with chalk marks and with a leather strap in the depths of its long pockets, had a habit of throwing the wooden blackboard duster at anybody who didn't look deep in study. Sometimes his aim wasn't good. Ellie learned to keep her head down and look absorbed in multiplying vulgar fractions.

Music was a problem, as she'd never managed to make the lines and blobs turn themselves into a tune. Sometimes the teacher put a record on the ancient record-player and told the class to prove they were listening by running a finger along the score, keeping up with the music. Luckily Ellie sat beside Gillian, who had piano lessons, and copied what she was doing. Mostly, she learned to put herself somewhere else, to shut out the knocks and threats and small humiliations. When sun streamed in from the high windows, dust particles swirled in the light. She could watch this for hours.

There was a separate list of unspoken rules in the playground: share your sweets with your friends, don't clype to the teachers about anyone, take turns in games. The punishments: being 'sent to Coventry', being gossiped about, being shoved into The Hedge with its cocktail-stick twigs that scarted your arms and legs. When it came down to it, it was your friends who protected you, who made you laugh and made school bearable. If you'd any sense in your head, you kept these rules.

Trish had been Ellie's friend since Primary One. The friend in the same street she'd called on and who had called on her to come out to play. From the first, she'd learned to be wary of Trish's moods. Trish always insisted on choosing games. Trish lost interest in Monopoly if she was losing and once threw the board in the air, showering them both with green houses, red hotels, paper money and a metal top-hat that pinged Ellie's head painfully. When Ellie's

mother was pregnant, Trish told Ellie some mothers died in childbirth. Ellie's parents were always telling her she didn't stand up for herself but never explained how you stood up to someone a head taller and a lot heavier.

One day in Primary 7, Trish, with her face red and a scowl on it, said: I'm going to beat you up on the way home from school.

What for?

Just cos.

It was part of the general weirdness of life. Ellie sifted through her options:

1. Fight back? (too small)

2. Sprint out as soon as the bell rang at the day's end? (too flat-footed to run fast. Also, the teacher thought it was rude and sometimes held people back as punishment. That would mean Trish could lie in wait behind The Hedge.)

The answer came to Ellie by chance. In the cloakroom area, a hundred identical navy blazers hung in rows, each class allocated a separate row. Ellie had dropped another blazer on the floor in her hurry to grab her own, and, about to hang it back on the peg, noticed the name tag: Patricia Fraser. Then she found her body doing something surprising. She hung Trish's blazer on a peg four rows away. Ran off.

For a whole week she hid Trish's blazer at the end of the school day. The time it took Trish to find it gave Ellie the start she needed to get home safe.

She arrived home on Friday to see Mrs Fraser standing at her front door. Ellie's mum stood in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. Ellie's stomach felt like she'd been forced to eat school macaroni cheese. Her legs trembled. Trish was scary but her mother was worse, prone to the same outbursts of rage, but in a bigger body. Ellie swallowed down the sick feeling and walked towards that murderous expression. The air turned to jelly and slowed her legs.

Goodbye, Mrs Fraser, she heard her mum say, I'll deal with my own child, thank you very much!

Mrs Fraser looked like she wanted to spit in Ellie's face but just looked up to the sky as if asking God to explain to her the awful burden of children, and pulled her handbag further under her left armpit.

Get inside, said Ellie's mother and the door slammed behind them, And tell me what this is all about.

Ellie took off her satchel, hung up her blazer. Putting off the moment she'd to walk into the living-room and face things. The baby was crying in her cot and her mum went to lift her and plonk her down on the floor with bowls and spoons to play with.

Have you been hiding Trish's blazer? Her mum's been at the door because she's been late home from school all week and this is her excuse. Tell me it's not true.

It's true.

Sometimes telling the truth was the simplest.

Her mum let out a harassed sigh. The baby was crawling towards the fireplace. Well, it's got to stop right now.

Yes.

Ellie could only manage one word. Something in her was frozen. She put herself somewhere else.

Och, look, I know what that woman's like. I sent her away with a flea in her ear. But the girl, you know, she's difficult, but ... there are things you don't know. You need to not do stuff like this. It's not how we brought you up. If you're going to fight, fight fair, not sneaky. Understand?

Yes.

She didn't.

Later that night, when he came home, her father sat her down on the sofa. Why did you do it, Ellie?

There was no punishment but this was worse, him being gentle.

She couldn't find words. He lit a cigarette and was distracted by a flake of tobacco on his tongue. There was a long silence.

*Anne Hay has written short fiction and comedy for Radio 4 and Radio Scotland. She's published poetry in magazines including Gutter, Magma, Envoi and Interpreters House and won a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2020, aged 67.*