

## The Spelling Bee

By Rachel Robinson-Zetzer

All of my classmates stared, wide-eyed, at me and Corey as we both awkwardly stood at the front of the dimly-lit classroom, which always smelled like crayons and dried Play-Doh. Two classes of students crammed into the room all sitting anywhere they could grab space; some were in chairs, some were on desks, some were criss-cross-applesauce on the dingy blue-gray carpet, some were even standing along the back wall, their heads barely tall enough to reach the chalk holder. Our teachers stood like sentinels at the exits, and no one uttered a sound.

I didn't like all the eyes on me, so I kept fidgeting as I stood there. My hair, wild and loose, created a frizzy halo around my head that I had to keep pushing out of my eyes with my pink plastic headband. My jean shorts cuffed at the thighs to reveal skinned knees from playing outside on my bike the day before, and my shoelaces had come untied. All together, I looked quite unkempt. Corey, on the other hand, was stock still and put together. He wore gray slacks and a big, black polo shirt with three buttons up to his neck, all tightly buttoned up. His hands were at his sides; he didn't move. It looked like he'd just had a haircut. My eyes kept darting around the room, first to him, my best friend, then to my teacher, Mrs. Wiggs, then to my classmates, all staring at me, then to the principal, sitting poised and confident—regal even—at a too-small desk and chair in the classroom.

This was the final round of the 1st grade Spelling Bee.

“Uh, can you repeat the word, please?” I said. I fingered the hem of my shirt, rolling it between my chubby index finger and thumb as I waited. My fingernails, I noticed, had dirt underneath them.

The principal put her perfectly-manicured red nail on the page in front of her, drew it down to the appropriate line, and said, “The word is *tree*. *TREE*.”

“Ok, um. Tree. T-R-E-E. Tree,” I repeated.

“Correct,” said Mrs. Harrell, the principal.

The students all erupted in cheers.

I let out a huge sigh of relief and shuffled backward until my back touched the wall and Corey was in the forefront. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath. I caught the eye of Mrs. Wiggs as I shuffled, and she gave me a secret thumbs up. I loved Mrs. Wiggs, but I thought I was a nuisance to her, constantly interrupting class to ask if I could sharpen my pencils or get water or generally just wander about the room while she was teaching us about the solar system or Phonics. She was firm and taciturn, with brown hair piled on top of her head and sprayed into an unmovable nest. Her smart slacks and button downs were the opposite of my mom’s flowy dresses, and I constantly sought her approval, which she was often stingy with. The thumbs up felt like a personal victory as she stood in the back of the room with her arms crossed, watching the Spelling Bee as it came down to Corey and me, two of her own students.

“Corey, are you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said clearly and firmly, still unmoving. He seemed born for this.

“Okay, dear. Your word is *bag*. *BAG*,” said the principal.

Corey and I had been best friends since we started Kindergarten. We both loved coloring and make-believe and hanging upside down on the monkey bars at recess. What more was needed to build a lasting friendship, I thought. We always chose each other during group activities, we sat together at lunch, and we rode the bus together before and after school. We had, what I thought was, the beginning of a lifelong companionship.

But standing in front of all of our classmates, going head-to-head down the 1st grade spelling list made something change. Corey seemed more distant. He had distinguished himself from me in appearance in a way I wasn't prepared for. Perhaps I hadn't thought enough in advance about the Spelling Bee to take it seriously. Neither of my parents were in attendance, but Corey's mom sat front row, smiling and snapping pictures. I clearly hadn't dressed for the occasion, but Corey had obviously taken time with his look for the day. He was presenting himself to our grade in a way I wasn't, in a way I didn't even think was necessary or possible.

"Bag? Hmm. Can you use the word in a sentence, please?" His eyes never left the principal as he spoke, but I knew Corey, and I could tell that he was a little thrown by this word. I saw his right hand curl up into a fist, barely perceptible to anyone else. Other than that, though, his confidence was unwavering.

Mrs. Harrell paused only for a moment before saying, "I put all of my groceries in the *bag*. *BAG*."

I knew this word. B-A-G. In my head I went over and over the spelling. If the word came back to me, I had it in the...well, bag. I loved spelling and turned it into a game whenever momma and I were in the car together. It was my favorite subject, and apparently, I was pretty good at it.

Corey shifted his weight on his feet. "Can you give me the definition, please, Mrs. Harrell?"

The other first-graders heads' wobbled from Corey to Mrs. Harrell in unison.

"Of course, Corey," said the principal. "BAG: a container used for carrying things. *BAG*."

Corey shifted his weight again. He was obviously stalling. The classroom was still. I could hear the seconds hand on the clock tick away, above patterns of cursive letters above the chalkboard. I looked at Corey, worriedly. What would happen if he didn't get this word? I looked at his mom in the crowd. She looked so proud, with her legs crossed at the ankles and her hands placed firmly on the desk in front of her. Her brown skin glistened under the harsh fluorescent classroom lighting. She was so beautiful. She swayed slightly, like she was dancing to a slow song no one else could hear.

Corey looked up from the principal to his mom. His fist unfurled a little. He cleared his throat: "BAG. B-U-G. BAG." His eyes flicked over to meet mine, but they didn't stay there. He knew. He just knew.

"I'm sorry, Corey, but that's incorrect. Rachel, you now have a chance to spell the word *BAG*. If you spell it correctly, you win the Spelling Bee," explained Mrs. Harrell.

Corey took a step back, and I shuffled forward. I stepped on one of my shoelaces in the process.

"Rachel, your word is *BAG*. *BAG*."

"BAG. B-A-G. BAG," I spelled the word in a rush before I could even think about it.

"YES! That's correct, Rachel. You win the Spelling Bee. Congratulations!" Mrs. Harrell gracefully pried herself out of the desk and stood up. She looked like an ironing board unfolding. The students burst into applause and cheers, and I started shaking. I looked over at Corey, but he wouldn't meet my eyes. He seemed to disappear into the wall and abundance of classroom bean bags as the students rushed the front of the classroom to hug me and give me high fives. They all wanted a piece of the win for themselves.

What had I done? I'd won, but at what cost? I fought back tears as the other 1st graders crowded my vision. I saw Corey slowly walk up to his mother who was standing with Mrs. Wiggs at the back of the classroom. He hung his head. His mother outstretched her arm to him and folded him into an embrace. She rocked with him. Corey didn't move; he was stiff with his arms by his sides. He looked so uncomfortable. Mrs. Wiggs bent down, looked him in the eye, and said something to him I couldn't decipher. He nodded at her.

Mrs. Harrell walked up to me and handed me a small trophy. It had a faux marble base and a plastic "gold" genie's lamp on top. There was a little plaque affixed to the front that read "First-Grade Spelling Bee Champ 1987." It was surprisingly heavy, and my hands shook as I took it from her. Then my eyes filled with tears. I fought them back harder than I'd ever fought back anything in my 6-year old life.

Mrs. Harrell briskly clapped her hands twice. "Okay, students," she said in a tone no one would argue with, "That's all for the Spelling Bee! It's time to return to our classes for the remainder of the day. Everyone line up, single file behind your teacher."

Students dispersed and began forming lines. Usually, I would run and elbow my way up to be as close to the front of the line as possible, but I couldn't move. I just stood there, with two palms out shakily holding my trophy, like an offering. My headband had slipped down to the top of my forehead, but I was too scared to push it back again. I didn't want to drop the trophy; it seemed too precious to me, like I'd just given up too much to earn it. Like it cost me something priceless.

Mrs. Wiggs cut through the sea of children to walk up to me. She knelt down so that she was eye level with me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Rachel, you won! Congratulations! Are you okay?" she said, and I just started crying. I couldn't hold the tears back anymore. She

put her hand on my shoulder and shepherded me into the classroom's bathroom where I splashed water on my face and took some deep breaths to calm down. She didn't say anything else to me, and I didn't say anything to her. She knew what I was feeling, but I didn't. Not then. Or, at least, I couldn't articulate it.

I dried my face and joined my classmates in line, still carefully gripping my trophy. We all walked quietly down the hallway in the new Elementary wing of our school building. When we got to our classroom, Mrs. Wiggs unlocked the door and we dispersed inside to find our desks. I made my way to mine, which was right beside Corey's, but he wasn't there and his Sesame Street backpack was gone. He didn't come back for the rest of the day. I stared at his empty seat and his desk with his tablet still laid out. He'd been practicing his cursive Js before the Spelling Bee—a neat row of swoops and dips, all in an imperfect 6-year old's handwriting. Now, his desk was like a time capsule, a frozen moment of when life was simpler, easier, more equal.

“Okay, everyone. We've had an exciting morning, but we need to move on. It's time to practice some math. Everyone get out your tablets and pencils, and let's do some addition,” exclaimed Mrs. Wiggs, trying her best to regain some of the class's attention and focus for the day. The students groaned but obliged and papers began shuffling all across the room.

I placed my trophy on the edge of my desk so that I could see it. I didn't dare rub the genie's lamp right then, but later, in the quiet of my bedroom at home, I would rub it until my fingers were sore and red. In the background, I could still see Corey's unfinished cursive letters. I took out my tablet and pencil and began to work on my math problems.

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I study emotions and vulnerability in academic spaces, specifically imposter syndrome. When I work with writers in the CommLab or the classroom who seem—on the exterior—like they have it all together, I’m always reminded of this time with Corey and the 1st grade Spelling Bee. My main goal in these types of interactions is to do what my 6-year old self could not: to encourage what academia deems as “failure” and to preach that “failure” is really the first step on the pathway to figuring out what you want to say and how you want to say it.

It’s the first step in allowing a writer’s voice to be heard.

It took me much too long to realize that I could fail in academia and still be successful. In fact, it’s something that I still struggle with sometimes. That frizzy-haired girl with the skinned knees and dirty fingernails was quick to spell *BAG* in the Bee because she saw what (public) failure had just done to her best friend. It made him crumble and go inside himself. I still see that happen to my students and the writers I work with today. But failure should not be our enemy; in fact, I might argue that if we learn to embrace failure more in our writing, we might actually get to the heart of clearer communication because we aren’t guarding ourselves so much or trying to communicate to an, often, invisible metric.

I guarantee Corey never forgot how to spell *BAG* after that day. I didn’t, either, and though the word always stuck with me, six-year old Rachel was much too young to realize the importance of failure in that moment. She didn’t do it in the Bee, but she would go on to (publicly) fail many, many, MANY times. She/I still fail every day, and I hope I continue to for the rest of my life. For without failure, there is no growth, and growth is really what sustains us.