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Paideia



I fell down the stairs the morning of the spelling bee, an occurrence that eighth-grade me interpreted as evidence of an assassination plot. Having won my place in the Vigo County Regional spelling bee by defeating the spellers in my middle school one by one, it made sense to me that someone, somewhere wanted me out of the picture.

I marched into the kitchen, where my mom was pulling the high-heeled leather sandals that she affectionately called her “hooker shoes” onto her feet. I rubbed the part of my leg I had landed on and made a face the way little kids do when they want mom to know that they have a boo-boo, but she didn’t notice.

“Ow,” I said, fishing for sympathy, “I think I just survived an assassination attempt.”

“You what?” she said, looking up at me. “I doubt it.”

“I fell down the stairs.” I showed her a patch of skin that had started to bruise slightly, tinged a light purple.

“Ouch!” she said. “Doesn’t look like you broke anything, though. You’ll be just fine.” She grabbed her pocketbook and tucked the wide metal ring that held her keys into her back pocket, letting the keys hang and jingle as she walked. “Let’s get out of here,” she

said. “You don’t wanna be late.”

I spent the weeks leading up to my school’s spelling bee utterly immersed in words. The bee’s coordinator had given me a photocopy of the official Scripps word list for that year, all 20-plus pages of it. The words were printed in a small font, in several columns across the page, further defined by difficulty. The pages were grouped into categories and then by difficulty (1, 2, or 3): “Food for Thought,” a collection of cooking words like mixer¹, casserole², and fricassee³; “Shake a Leg,” which included dancing words like quickstep¹, dervish², and zapateado³; and “*Watership Down*,” a list of words having to do with rabbits and nature, such as hare¹, gossamer², and rhododendron³. At nearly 4,000 words, it was a lot to take on all at once.

I’d already read *Watership Down*—Mrs. Cahill, a teacher I had for both first and fifth grade, read it aloud to the class after recess every day. She read each character with a different voice, giving the seagull Kehaar, who speaks with an accent, a guttural German voice.

Whenever I could, I convinced some unsuspecting soul to help me study. They read and I spelled and we moved word by word down the list, marking those I missed so I could return to them later. One by one my friends got tired of helping me and conveniently found other places to sit during lunch, at least until after the bee was over. It was nearly impossible to test myself, since reading the word gave away its spelling.

The one devoted word-partner I found was my mom.

“Membranous²,” she said, and scooped a bite of casserole² into her mouth. About halfway through dinner, once everyone else was done, we’d start practicing. I spelled the word and rewarded myself with a bite of dinner. Often, we’d leave the empty plates on the table as we worked, unwilling to pause, should it break my winning streak.

“Scrupulously²,” she said.

Though you win spelling bees by spelling words correctly, it’s just as much a test of endurance. Often, the bee comes down to just two spellers, taking turns until one misspells and the other spells an additional word correctly. After being bested my sixth and seventh grade years by someone who could hold out longer than me,

I finally won in eighth grade after relatively few rounds on stage. Sweaty and shaking and then smiling as I stood on the worn stage of the auditorium we shared with the connected high school, I reveled in the applause as they announced me as the winner.

After the school spelling bee, I began studying for the regional bee, redoubling my efforts. This time around they had given me the actual book from which my photocopies had been made. It had a bright yellow cover and was covered in images of bumble bees and honeycombs. In tall, thin letters across the front it read “Paideia,” which I learned from inside the book’s cover was a Greek tradition of providing children an education that left them well-rounded, intellectual individuals. The word is derived from two Greek words, “pais” and “paideuein,” which both mean “to educate the child.”



Spring break came, and we drove north to Valparaiso, Indiana, to visit my grandma. Even there we studied. I sat in my spot on the white-and-blue linoleum, directly in front of the dishwasher in my grandma’s cramped kitchen. I had to scoot aside every time someone wanted to open the fridge, but other than that it was fairly comfortable. My mom and grandma sat in tall chairs backed up against the walls in a small alcove¹ that contained the sink. Mom topped off her coffee from the brewer near her elbow every once in awhile, and my grandma crossed the kitchen to get her mug of instant tea from the microwave¹. We called it her “crappuccino,” since that’s what it tasted like. After 1 p.m. or so she transitioned to box wine.

“Bubbly¹,” my mom read, this time from the “Mood Swings” section of the book. I tapped my fingers on the linoleum as I spelled the word. Lots of the words were easy, but a few were difficult enough to make up for it. “Rutabaga²” got me nearly every time, and it wasn’t even the hardest.

“Listless¹,” my mom said.

“That one sounds easy,” my grandma said. “My Carey Lou can spell that one, easy.” She had much earlier stopped trying to spell along with us, claiming that she had learned to spell phonetically as a child and it hadn’t helped. Deciphering her handwriting was like trying to read the original copy of the Declaration of Independence—her curly handwriting was fraught with randomly capitalized words and

sprinkled with extra letters. She had grown up in an era that didn't place any value on educating women past childbearing age.

"Testy¹."

Oh, I knew that one. It was easy. "T-E-S-T-E," I spelled. My mom laughed into her coffee and had to set it down to keep it from spilling.

"Now that's a word I should know!" my grandma said, leaning forward in her chair. If I had been sitting next to her, she would have elbowed me for effect. Seated on the floor, I blushed, ashamed that that's the first spelling that popped into my head.

Though food had motivated me throughout my studying, I didn't eat any of the cookies set out for the participants and their families at the regional spelling bee. The cafeteria at Otter Creek Middle School¹ was unfamiliar and much larger than the cafeteria we shared with West Vigo High School¹. Most of the long tables were filled with other spellers and their families, eating cookies and doing some last-minute word-cramming. Instead of benches or chairs, the tables had built-in stools¹, and my mom and I found two unoccupied seats and sat, waiting for the officials to usher us into the gymnasium.

Otter Creek's gym had a basketball court painted with extra lines so that it could also be used for volleyball, soccer¹, and other sports. A large rope cargo net for climbing hung from the ceiling, bunched together to keep it out of the way. Two¹ of the six basketball hoops around the court's edge had been folded up toward the ceiling in a similar manner. On one wall was a tall mural of a dog poking its head and front legs out of a doghouse, which I thought was a strange choice for a school with a different animal in its name. My mom was led to a stretch of fold-away bleachers that had been pulled out, intended for the audience, and an official pointed me toward an arrangement of plastic chairs set in rows out on the wooden gym floor. At the far end of the chairs, there was a table where the judges and pronouncer sat. Front and center stood a single microphone.

I was so nervous that I shook in my chair and ended up sitting on my hands to keep them still as I waited for my turn at the mic. After taking a turn, a speller had to return to his or her seat and sit there until the round was over, whether they spelled the word

correctly or not. The first round wiped out about half of the twenty or so participants, and within a few more rounds it was down to me and two others. I stood and received my word.

“Chunga,” the pronouncer said.

Oh, God, that word wasn’t on the list!

I asked for the definition: a type of African cricket. I asked that it be used in a sentence. I would have asked to phone a friend if I had known it would work. I readied myself, nails digging into palms.

“C-H-U-N-G-A,” I spelled. The buzzer trilled and I sat down in my chair, tears beginning to spill from my eyes. I sat there until the bee was over, trying to remain professional in front of a crowd of about a hundred. The two remaining spellers had to battle it out until one of them misspelled a word and the other spelled two words right. Once they announced the winner and released me from my chair, I rushed to the stands and into my mom’s arms, the tears flowing freely.

In the years to come I would search for that word, for its spelling. My mom claims that the pronouncer said it incorrectly, which led me to misspell it. I read the book back to front and front to back and didn’t find it. I checked all the dictionaries we owned. I searched all over the Internet, to no avail. A disclaimer in the book read that local competitions are not necessarily limited to the words in the book, and that they can use words from outside sources to narrow down remaining spellers. To this day I still can’t spell it—it’s the only word that has ever defeated me.

“Look,” my mom said, nudging me. “Go back up there—you won something.”

Smearing the tears off of my face with a shirtsleeve, I trudged back out onto the gym floor and stood next to the first and second-place spellers. The first-place speller would be invited to the National Bee finals in Washington D.C. If she were unable to go, the second-place speller would take her place. If neither of them could make it, well, I’d be able to go. I tried not to imagine them getting into car accidents on the way home from the bee.

In my mind I had lost, but in reality I was the second runner-up, which is a fancy way to say “third place.” I came out of that middle school with a plaque verifying that I was a third-place nerd, a \$50 savings bond, and an official Scripps National Spelling Bee fanny pack.