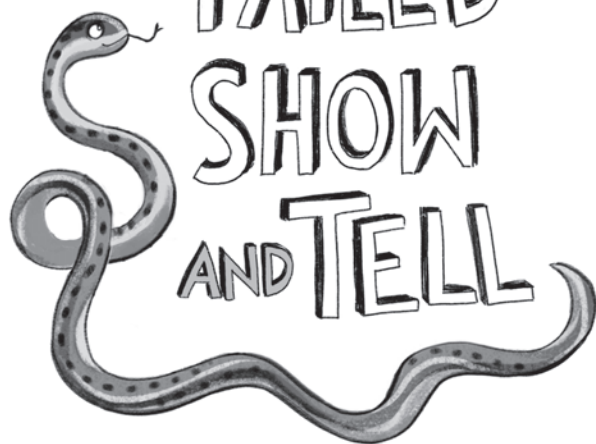


THE
BOY
WHO
FAILED
SHOW
AND TELL



BY JORDAN SONNENBLICK



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The luckiest boy in my class is this kid Kenneth. Last March, when we were in third grade, there was a massive fire in his apartment building. He had to jump from his bedroom window *on the seventh floor* onto one of those fire-department trampoline things. He almost died! When he came back to school, he had the best Show and Tell in history. Now he is a *legend*.

I mean, everything he owned got burned up in the fire, and he had to live in a hotel in Brooklyn for half a year or something. But that is a small price to pay, in my opinion. Because what Kenneth got in return was a treasure you can't buy anywhere, for any amount of money: He got to be special. He's The Kid Who Jumped Out Of 830 Howard Avenue And Lived.

Think about that. If his apartment had been a couple of floors lower, he probably would have just walked down the stairs—still a cool story, but not *permanently* cool. If he had missed the trampoline, he would still be famous at school but wouldn't be around to enjoy it. Every time his name

got mentioned, the girls might look up to the sky and their lips might tremble a bit. There might even be tears. The boys would look at each other, thump fists on chests, and say, “Kenneth, man. Kenneth.” But this is even better, because Kenneth *didn’t* miss the trampoline.

Basically, Kenneth hit the jackpot because some idiot in his building left their stove on, and then Kenneth did a good job of falling straight.

I am the opposite of Kenneth. I am a nobody. I am the un-legend. If I jumped out of a burning building, the firemen would probably move the trampoline at the last second because they didn’t notice me. I would give anything to stand out in some cool way, but every slightly unique thing about me is slightly *negative*. You want a perfect example? I am the third-shortest kid in my grade. Not the shortest, because that would be memorable, and I might even get a nickname out of it, or the girls might think I’m cute, or whatever. At least the shortest kid in the class has an identity.

I’m the second-smartest kid in the grade and the second-best singer, thanks to William Feranek, who is the smartest kid in the grade, the shortest boy in the grade, *and* the kid with the best voice in the school. He has *three* things. Three!

I might have the worst eyesight in the grade. Oh, and I was born with severely turned-in feet, so I have to wear incredibly dorky orthopedic shoes to straighten out my legs. But it’s not like those are titles you can win in your grade. Kid With Worst Eyesight And Most Pathetic Footwear?

Please.

I get in trouble at school a lot, but not in a cool way. Cool kids have what my grandmother would call *an attitude problem*, but I just have a problem. Until last year, the only problem was that I would forget to pay attention. I didn't mean to get in trouble, I swear. One minute, I would be cutting designs into the edges of a folded paper with everybody else in my kindergarten class. The next thing I knew, everybody else would be opening up their papers into perfect snowflakes, but my paper would just fall down onto my desk in tiny shreds. The kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Kowalski, would ask, "What happened, Jordan? You were supposed to be making a snowflake!" I would be like, "Well, I made it snow!"

Or I would be staring out the window and not notice the bell, so my whole class would line up for lunch without me. Once they actually walked out, and I didn't notice until the door closed behind the last kid. Then I kind of freaked out when I realized I was alone in the classroom with the lights out.

Probably the worst was at the Jewish Community Center, where I went for preschool and where I still go for after-school programs. Once when I was younger, all the kids had to evacuate. There was a multipurpose room that was a theater and a gym. There was a stage at one end, and the rest of the room was a full-sized adult basketball court. Somebody had left the stage lights on, and the curtain caught fire. When the alarm went off, we all lined up and started walking out—but the emergency exit path took us right

through the gym. Every other kid was smart enough to know they were supposed to look straight ahead and keep walking until they got out to the street. But somehow I got distracted by the fire, so I leaned against the wall at the edge of the basketball court to watch. A teacher had to come back into the burning building to rescue me.

So I guess I *almost* got to be a kind of Kenneth, but not the good kind.

I have one other problem. This one is kind of new. It is also very terrible, but not in any way that makes me special. Last spring, I was sitting next to my mom in the audience at a play when all of a sudden I couldn't breathe. It felt like a giant was pressing his giant-sized, giant-weight fist down on my chest bones. I poked my mom with my elbow and tried to say something, but no noise came out except for a weird little squeak.

"Shhh!" my mother said. "I'm watching the play!"

I didn't think that was fair. I hadn't even said anything.

Also, I was pretty sure I was about to die.

I elbowed her again, harder. She turned and squinted down at me in the dark. I don't really remember what happened next, or next-to-next, or next-to-next-to-next, but what I *do* remember is sitting in a chair in our kitchen at home. I still couldn't breathe, and my mom and the father of my long-time best friend B.J. were standing in front of me. B.J.'s dad, Dr. Purow, is my pediatrician, and he was holding a huge needle up to the light, flicking his fingernail against the side to get rid of air bubbles.

Then there was a burning in my arm, my heart pounded like a horse was galloping in my chest, and—snap!—I could breathe again.

“Asthma,” B.J.’s dad said. “I gave him a pretty good shot of adrenaline. He should be fine until the morning. Then I’ll want to see him in my office.”

Ever since then, the asthma has kind of taken over my life. I have to carry around this stupid metal thing called an inhaler and shoot it into my throat whenever I start feeling that tightness in my chest. There are also three different kinds of pills. And allergy shots every week. But first I had to go for five weeks of special testing that was twenty shots at a time—two lines of five on each forearm. My arms looked like they had been attacked by an extremely organized army of ants.

I’m pretty sure nobody has ever become a legend by having asthma. They might have turned kind of blue and made whistle-y noises that made them sound like a dolphin every time they tried to breathe out, but that is not how the Kenneths of the world are made.

Back in second grade, when I would get sad because William Feranek was smarter than me, and better at singing, and the teacher’s favorite because he always paid attention, I used to try to make myself feel better by thinking, *Don’t worry, you’re taller than he is!*

Ever since the asthma thing started, that doesn’t really work.

William Feranek might be short, but at least he knows how to breathe.

1. I AM NOT GOOD AT FIRST DAYS

Every year, I get super excited for the first day of school. The week before, my mom takes me for a new haircut, we go to Steven & Jeffrey's Stride-Rite for new shoes, and I get all new school supplies. I especially love new pencils and crayons. I love the slightly burnt engine-oil smell of the pencils, and seeing all the colors in a new pack of crayons makes me wonder about all the new things I am going to learn and draw.

I love drawing. I am kind of terrible at it, but I love it.

Another thing I am terrible at is judging whether I am going to like my teachers. In kindergarten, I thought I would love Mrs. Kowalski. She was fat and had a jolly-sounding, booming voice. I thought kindergarten was going to be like spending the year with a lady version of Santa Claus. I was pretty surprised when it turned out Mrs. Kowalski hated kids who asked questions.

I couldn't help it. I always have a lot of questions. First of all, I wonder about a lot of stuff. Second of all, I miss a lot of directions because of my not-listening problem. Mrs. Kowalski yelled at me all the time. Once, she even taped my mouth shut.

Then, at the end of the year, she tried to tell my mom I should repeat kindergarten instead of moving on to first grade because I had “poor scissor skills.” That offends me to this day! I wasn’t bad at cutting things up. I was *too good* at cutting things up.

See, I’d thought I was getting Santa, but really I got the Grinch.

I was on my guard when I walked into my first-grade classroom and met Mrs. Gross. She had a gigantic wart on her face, just between her mouth and her right nostril. Her hair was a big, sprayed-up black helmet. And let’s face it, the name didn’t help. But she turned out to be the nicest teacher in the history of P.S. 35! When I learned to read faster than everybody else in the room (thanks to the fact that William Feranek was in a different class), she let me do projects on my own at a table in the back. It was great. I was the first kid in the class to use a real encyclopedia all by myself, and the stuff she told me to look up was super cool. There were dinosaurs, and baseball stars, and Civil War battleships. I even got to make a poster about the world’s first fight between armored fighting ships, the *Merrimack* and the *Monitor*, and explain their battle to the whole class. By the end of the year, I thought Mrs. Gross was the most beautiful woman on earth.

When I headed off to meet Miss Williamsen, my second-grade teacher, I thought things might go well again. The signs were good. She was my big sister Lissa’s all-time favorite teacher. Also, she sang to us on the first day. None of my

teachers had ever sung to me. Her voice was beautiful! She sang a song about getting to know us, getting to know *all about us*.

I thought, *This is great! She wants to get to know me! She wants to like me! She hopes I like her!* Boy, was I dumb. Those were just the words of the song, and she hadn't written them. If she had been the writer, the song would have gone,

*Getting to know you,
Getting to know William Feranek is perfect,
Getting to like him,
Getting to wish Jordan Sonnenblick could be more like
William Feranek.
(Or even nice and quiet like his big sister, Lissa,
Who at least knew how to sit still and follow directions.)*

Second grade was a long year.

Last year, in third grade, I decided in advance that I was just going to hate my teacher, Mrs. Dowd. It probably took me until November to figure out that the reason why she was being nice to me all the time was because she was actually nice.

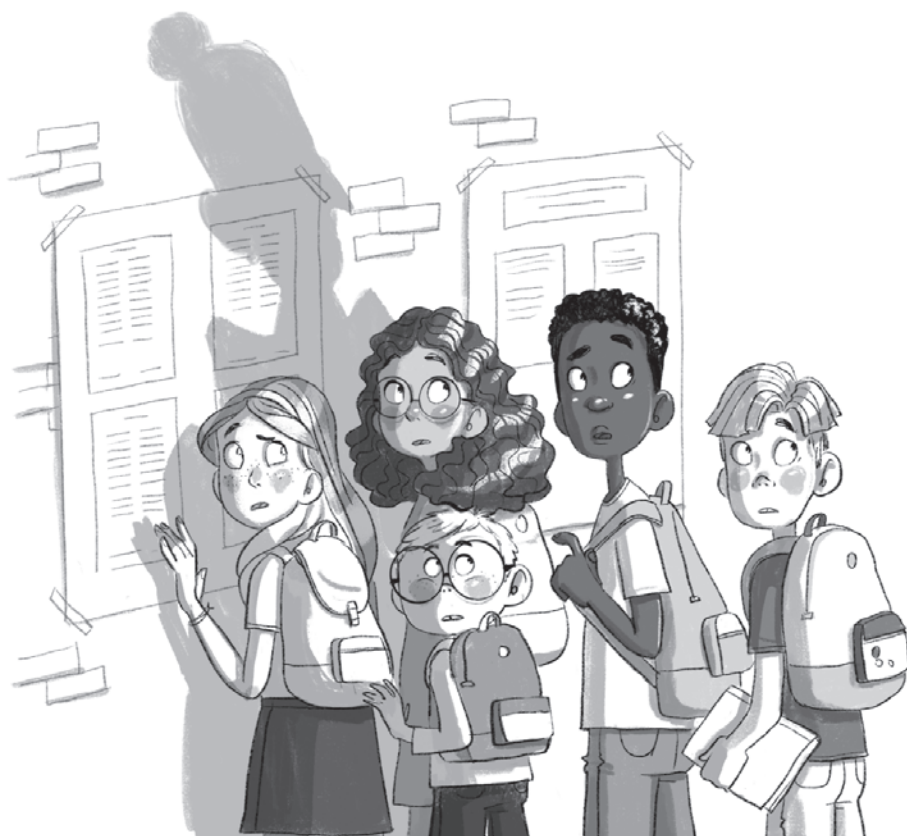
So this year, I am walking into class with no ideas at all. Lissa had my teacher, Mrs. Fisher, and liked her—but that could be a good thing or a bad thing. I hated my kindergarten teacher, liked my first-grade teacher, hated my second-grade teacher, and liked my third-grade teacher—so the pattern says I am going to hate my fourth-grade teacher. I am not sure that is how these things work, though. When we line up in

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the lunchroom by the class lists on the walls, I see some good news and some bad news. Two of my best friends are in my class. There's Steven Vitale (The Richest Kid In School, also The Piano Genius), whose mom worked with mine before we were even born, and Robert Falcone (The Coolest Kid In The Grade), who spent a month with me at sleepaway camp this past summer.

But William Feranek is in our line, too. He's smiling, laughing, and saying a friendly hello to everybody around him. He even says hi to me.

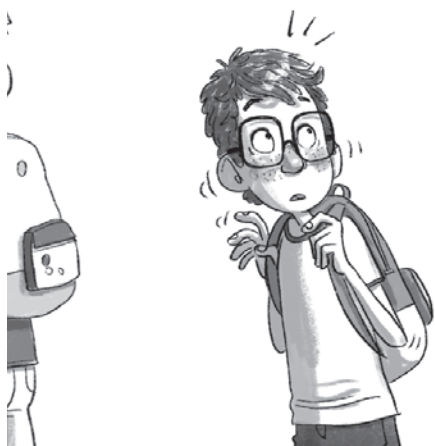
That is probably my least-favorite thing about William Feranek. He isn't just the smartest, the shortest, and the best at singing. He's also nice. So then I



have to feel bad for hating his guts, like it's my fault he exists on this planet to ruin my life.

I look to the front of the line, and my heart jumps in my chest. It has already been fluttering all morning, thanks to my asthma medicines, but this feeling is much worse. My sister has somehow never mentioned that Mrs. Fisher is *terrifying*. She is dressed all in black: a lacy black dress with a high collar that looks like it would choke a normal person, plus black stockings and black boots. Her hair is long and black with chalk-white streaks, and it is pulled back into a bun so tightly that her eyebrows are yanked up into points. She looks us over, clears her throat, and says, "Follow me, children," in a low voice that sounds like she has small, sharp pebbles in her throat.

Great! My fourth-grade teacher is the Wicked Witch of the West. What could possibly go wrong?



When we go upstairs to room 4-210, Mrs. Fisher makes us line up in the doorway. Then she gives us our seats. I really don't like the way she talks to us. She sounds like we are already in trouble.

"CHILL-dren!" she says. "I expect that you and your new seatmates are going to CON-centrate and be-HAYVE!"

The desks are set up to make three sides of a rectangle. The fourth side is the front of the classroom, where Mrs. Fisher's desk and the blackboard are. I get a seat to Mrs. Fisher's right. The outside wall of the classroom is behind me, which means that if I lean my chair back, I will be touching the radiators. Above the radiators, the rest of the wall, all the way up to the high ceiling, is made up of tall windows. There is a long wooden pole with a metal hook on the end leaning against the front wall of the room, behind Mrs. Fisher's desk, that is made for raising and lowering the top windows in their tracks. It looks creepy to me, like some kind of weapon from the Middle Ages.

Robert Falcone is one of the last kids to get a seat assignment. There is an empty desk next to me. "Oh, please!" I whisper. "Oh, please. Please!"

I am in luck. Mrs. Fisher puts Robert next to me. He walks across the room with a smile on his face, and everybody watches. This is because Robert has a special coolest-kid walk. I can't explain it, but he looks like he is almost *dancing* across the newly polished wooden floor. Robert has a brand-new 256-pack of Crayola crayons. This is like nothing any of

us has ever seen before. Some of us have 8-packs. Some have 16-packs or 32-packs. The luckiest kids who aren't Robert might have the awesome 64-pack with a built-in sharpener. But Robert's coloring equipment is on a different level. His crayons come in a cardboard *briefcase*. With a plastic *handle* on the side.

Robert is like a *professional fourth grader* in a roomful of amateurs.

He sits down next to me with a grin. I smile back and try to slip my 32-pack of crayons into my desk when he looks away.

Once we are all seated, Mrs. Fisher starts giving us a big speech about the Rules for Successful and Mature . . . well, I don't really know what the whole thing is about. As soon as I hear the word *mature*, I give up on listening and check out the room instead. Kenneth, Survivor of Fire, is in one of the seats along the back edge, directly facing the board. He looks cheerful, probably because he is a hero, and also is not dead. Steven Vitale is directly across from me, paying attention. William Feranek, in the front seat practically touching Mrs. Fisher's desk, is sitting with his hands folded, staring at her like there is going to be a test after the speech.

How does he *do* that?

Now that I have checked out the boy situation, I examine the girls. I notice two of them right away. To my right, sitting with her hands neatly folded on her desk, is Britt Stone, The Meanest Girl In The World. In second grade, when we were

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playing kickball and I tripped over my shoelace running to first base, Britt laughed in my face *while I was still bleeding*. Her secret talent is looking sweet whenever a grown-up is looking, but she is poisonous inside.

My grandfather, who was a science teacher in Brooklyn until he retired and moved to Florida, buys me lots of cool books about nature. My favorite one is called *Venomous Snakes Around the World*. The snake that scares me the most is called the eastern coral snake. It lives in Florida, and it is beautiful. It has bands of bright color along its body that go like this: red-yellow-black-yellow. The terrible thing about the eastern coral snake is that it looks a lot like the Florida kingsnake, except the kingsnake's color pattern is red-black-yellow-black. So you have to remember the patterns to tell them apart. This is a problem because the kingsnake is a good guy that catches and eats rats and other pests, but the coral snake has the deadliest poison of any snake in America. Even its bite is sneaky. It has little tiny teeth instead of big fangs, and when it bites you, you can feel okay for several hours as the poison spreads through you. Then, all of a sudden, the stuff reaches your nervous system and starts to paralyze you. You might not even know anything is wrong until your chest muscles stop working and you can't breathe.

When I look at Britt Stone, I see the eastern coral snake. Beautiful, sneaky, deadly.

Britt isn't as beautiful as Jennifer Deerfield, though. Jennifer is in the front, near William. Here's the crazy thing.

Other kids are terrified of getting glasses or braces, right? I know I was super mad when I had to get glasses in second grade, and I still hate wearing mine, even though I have to because without them I would be crashing into things all day. And when my dentist told my mom and me that I would probably have to get braces by the time I hit sixth grade, that was the worst! Life is hard enough without train-track teeth. But when Jennifer got glasses in third grade, they only made her *prettier*. I bet other girls probably started going home and begging their parents to take them for eye exams after that. And now she has done it again—this time with braces. Every time she smiles, the wires and brackets on her teeth glisten and sparkle across the room at me, like—

“JORR-dan!” Mrs. Fisher growls. “Would you like to tell us the Third Rule for Successful and Mature Fourth Graders?”

Sure, I’d love to. But how am I supposed to know what it is with Jennifer Deerfield glistening and sparkling at me?

Robert Falcone, with his back to Mrs. Fisher, tries to mouth the answer to me, but I am not a good lip reader. I shrug because I don’t know what to say or do.

Mrs. Fisher calls on William Feranek, who has helpfully raised his hand.

“Pay attention at all times!” he says confidently.

“VER-ry good, William!” Mrs. Fisher proclaims. Britt Stone smirks at me. I can feel my face turning bright red.

I focus for a moment on the board and see that there are

numbers there for seven Rules for Successful and Mature Fourth Graders. I can't name one, aside from *Pay attention at all times*. Which I have already messed up before snack break on the first day.

I have a feeling it is going to be a long year.