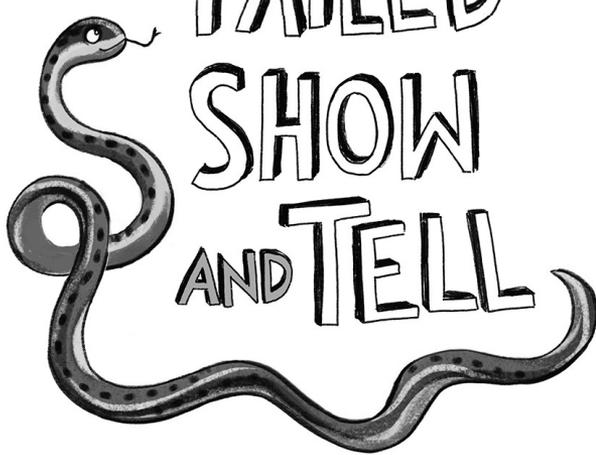


THE  
BOY  
WHO  
FAILED  
SHOW  
AND TELL



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 unlegend. 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.