

The Back of David's Head

Have a belief in yourself that is bigger than anyone's disbelief.

August Wilson

I couldn't stand fifth grade. I didn't like the milk that was warm by lunchtime from sitting near the radiator all morning. I didn't like recess because I could never get a turn on the swing. But most of all I didn't like my teacher, Mrs. Kelly, because I was sure that Mrs. Kelly didn't like me.

Mrs. Kelly never let me pass out books or collect papers. Mrs. Kelly made me sit in the last seat of the sixth row behind David Abbot, the biggest kid in the whole class. David was bigger than most of the eighth-graders, and he never, ever took a bath. The only thing I could see all day was the back of David's head.

At the beginning of fifth grade, Mrs. Kelly had explained all the classroom rules including the one about being excused for the rest room. She told all the students that they had to raise their hand with one or two fingers when they wanted to be excused. Then she would know what they were going to do in the restroom, and how long

they would be gone from the classroom. The whole class would laugh whenever anyone held up two fingers to be excused.

One Monday in October, Mrs. Kelly said, "Clear your desks and take out your composition books. Today I want you to write a composition called 'Something Interesting' about something you have personally seen. Do not repeat any topics."

"Can we write about Disneyland?" Maureen Murphy asked. Everyone in the class knew that Maureen had been to Disneyland more than anyone else in the whole school. "That would be perfect, Maureen," Mrs. Kelly answered with a smile.

I opened my black and white composition book. I tried to ignore the huge red U for "unsatisfactory" that partly covered the title, "My Summer Vacation." I remembered Mrs. Kelly's comments without even looking at them.

It has been brought to my attention that this composition is about your last year's summer vacation, and you have already written about the same trip for a composition last year during the fourth grade. Therefore, this assignment is unsatisfactory. Your penmanship is also unsatisfactory.

I didn't care about the penmanship comment. That was on every assignment I turned in. What bothered me was that Mrs. Kelly would not accept my composition about my train trip to Denver. The only trip I had ever gone on in my whole life had been the trip to Denver. In the fourth grade, my composition had been about all the things I had seen from the train windows on the way to Denver. For the fifth grade, I wrote a whole new composition about the hotel in Denver with the glass elevators.

Mrs. Kelly wrote an outline on the blackboard. One paragraph for an introduction, then three paragraphs to describe the topic in detail. A final paragraph for a conclusion. I knew that Maureen Murphy had a composition book filled with E's for excellent and even S's for superior while my best grade had been an F. In spite of Mrs. Kelly's red marks, I really liked to fill the pages of my composition book with words and ideas. I frowned and stared at the back of David's head.

That's when I noticed that the back of David's head looked like a brown forest with a long, brown, hairy trail that ran down his neck. He had three big brown freckles peeking out from the forest. The top of his head looked like a cartoon porcupine with brown hairs sticking up all over. David's ears were reddish tan with pudgy lobes that flapped against his neck when he raised his hand with only one finger. Looking at the back of David's head, I decided this composition could be different. It could be full of imagination instead of boring and embarrassing because I had never had the chance to see anything interesting, outside of the trip to Denver.

I opened my composition book and began to write. I wrote and wrote until Mrs. Kelly said, "Mary Ellyn, this is the third time I've called your name. It is time to line up to go home. However, you will stay after and write 'I will pay attention in class' one hundred times before you are excused."

On Wednesday, Maureen tiptoed around the room in her fancy shoes passing back everyone's composition notebooks. I ignored her snotty smile and opened my book, paging past all the F's and U's. I couldn't wait to see a beautiful letter at the top of my composition, entitled "The Back of David's Head."

By the time I found the page, my whole body was so tense with excitement I almost fell off my seat. But what I

saw made my breath stop in a gasp. Across the whole composition Mrs. Kelly had scrawled a huge red U. It was the biggest and reddest U I had ever seen. The red words in the margin swam in a blur from the tears that filled my eyes. A huge tear plopped onto the page, splashing over the comment about penmanship. I slapped the book shut and raised my hand with two fingers. I didn't care who laughed.

In the bathroom, I sat on the edge of a toilet and cried for a long time. After a while I heard the restroom door swish open.

"I know you're in here, Mary Ellyn," Maureen Murphy's voice oozed under the green painted metal door. "Mrs. Kelly says you'd better get back in class, right now."

I waited for the sound of the door swishing closed. "You just wait and see, Mrs. Kelly," I said in a low scary voice. "Someday I'll show you. Someday I'll write lots of stories and SELL them for lots of money. Someday my stories will be in books! Just you wait and see."

And when I grew up, that's *exactly* what I did.

SO THERE, MRS. KELLY!

Mary Ellyn Sandford

EDITORS' NOTE: Mrs. Kelly and readers might be interested to know that Mary Ellyn's work has been published in several magazines as well as Chicken Soup for the Kid's Soul.]