

A Memory from My Elementary Education

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I searched the carpet for the “A” that marked my spot and sat down on Mrs. Sigsby’s alphabet rug. It was reading time for the first graders, the most exciting part of our day, except recess perhaps, because Mrs. Sigsby had the best reading voice of all the teachers in the school. Her narrative voice drew the attention of the entire class to her and her book. She was the teacher that made everyone love reading, even if they absolutely despised it before. So, I took my spot on the carpet, the right corner of the rug in the back of the room, and leaned against the bordering brick wall.

Mrs. Sigsby opened her book, and my peers immediately took their cue and stopped their conversations so they did not miss a word. As she read, she changed the speed and volume of her voice with the rhythm of the book, her words like a snake charmer that conducted the students through the story. I was entranced as well, my entire focus on the book that had come to life in front of me. When Mrs. Sigsby read, the book was not just words on a page and there were no still pictures. The characters lived, talked, and moved. I listened to the story, I saw the story, and then, I was in the story. Dropped straight into the narrative. I felt the way the words slid together into a Doctor Seuss rhyme and how the pictures shifted into a motion-picture movie.

And then, the mirage disappeared. I was shot back into the room, felt the rough carpet on my ankles, and then something else: *my tooth. Or not my tooth? A hole where my tooth was? No, wait, what was that? Yes, it is definitely a tooth, just not where it is supposed to be.*

When did it fall out? I did not even notice.

What if I had swallowed it? What if I swallow it now? I started to panic; my hands twisted the ends of the rough carpet and pulled the fibers apart in frantic movements.

Should I spit it out? Wait, I can taste something metallic. Is that blood? My heart rate quickened, I did not like blood. My favorite color was red for three years until someone told me it looked like blood. The sickly substance that oozed out of gashes. Skin torn apart by sharp objects. A red that haunted my nightmares, made me dizzy and confused. I pinched myself in the arm. *Wake up. It is just a tooth, nothing bad. The blood will end, you just have to wipe it up. Yes, I can do that.*

But wait! If I spit my tooth out will blood come with it? I do not want to get a stain on the carpet. I did not want to ruin anything. I did not want to disturb anything or anyone with my problem.

What about when I speak? Will blood come out of my mouth if I talk? How then am I supposed to tell Mrs. Sigsby about my tooth? My brain felt frazzled. I had so many questions, yet I could not find a single clear solution. If I tried to speak, blood might come out of my mouth. *Dripping? A mouth dripping blood? Scary, that is so scary. The class would turn to me. They would see my bloody mouth and be terrified. My own terror would be reflected in their horror-stricken faces, their mirroring eyes round with fright. Scary, Scary, Scary! Nonononono.*

Wait. If I do not tell her, then what? I just stay here? I thought of the blood in my throat, the taste so strong it had started to overcome my senses. *No. No, I do not want that.*

Should I tell her? I looked around, and everyone was still focused on the book, no eyes had noticed my distress. It was so quiet, only Mrs. Sigsby talked, and I did not want to disrupt her. *But I taste blood. I do not like the taste, and what about my tooth?*

A compromise, that is what I decided. *I will spit my tooth out and then swallow the blood, that way I can tell Mrs. Sigsby about my tooth without making a mess. Blood cannot spill if it is swallowed. It will not be seen if it is hidden. Yes, that works.* I unclamped my hands from the rug and nestled them in a bowl under my chin. I began to open my mouth but stopped immediately. *My lips. I must purse my mouth to stop the blood from escaping.* I did as my internal narrator advised and was thankful when a little white tooth popped into my hands with no trace of blood. I worked up a wad of saliva before I swallowed the blood in my mouth, so its pungent tang glided faster down my throat.

“Mrs. Sigsby?” I called out. I stood up. *When had I stood up?* I felt weak and my legs shook. My hands shook too. I was glad that I wore my favorite hoodie today. It was comfortable and black, and most importantly, it had pockets. Pockets to hold stuff. To hide stuff. Like my hands and the way they shook nervously. *Yes, I am so glad I can hide them. I am scared, and they are out of control. But why? Is it because of the blood? The actual blood or the blood in my head? Or is it the class? Their eyes are all trained on me; I ruined their reading time. They probably hate me for that. I am sorry. Should I say sorry?*

“Yes, dear? Do you need something?” Mrs. Sigsby looked over to me, a confused but friendly look on her face. *Yes, that is right. I just interrupted her. I never interrupt. Mrs. Sigsby is nice; she just spoke so sweetly to me. Does that mean she forgives me for interrupting? Or is she just pretending?*

“Um...I am sorry. My tooth fell out and I was wondering if I could maybe go to the office, please? I can wait though; I do not have to go right now--.” I was so nervous I could feel my voice about to crack. *I should stop talking. Yes, that sounds good. Their eyes will look away and I can sit back down. It will be quiet. The voice in my head will be quiet. Wait, this is the*

voice in my head. It is still speaking. It is never quiet in here, why is it never quiet in my head? I just want it to--.

“Oh, sweetie. Yes, of course you can! Go, go on! Why did you not mention something sooner?” *Oh, she interrupted me. Well, that is good. I do not think I could have said anything more anyway.*

“Come on, here is the door. Take your time, you will not miss anything.” Mrs. Sigsby let out a soft laugh as she held the door open for me, as if she had found something funny about this. *Was I funny? I do not understand. Why is she laughing?*

I dug my hands deeper into my pockets, gripped my tooth in one of my clenched fists, and trudged to the door. *Wait, she is looking at you. Look up and smile. Say “thank you!” Come on, you do not want to be rude.* I smiled up at Mrs. Sigsby and rasped out a weak “thanks” before I stepped through the doorway.

“Next time though, let me know right away, okay? There is no need to sit there with a bloody mouth!” she called out to me. I turned and saw her chuckle as she closed the door, and the mirror on the back of it reflected my confused face as it shut. *What is funny? She laughed twice, there must be something I am missing. Think.*

Her face. Her face when I told her about my tooth. She was confused, maybe as confused as I am right now.

“*Why did you not mention something sooner?*” *That is what she had said. She wanted me to say something? That was...okay? But I was interrupting her, she should have been mad. This does not make sense. Why was she not mad. Why did she not tell me to wait and sit back down? She wanted me to say something? She wanted that? Am I supposed to do that? Am I supposed to*

Speak up? Interrupt? My other classmates interrupt, why? They do it all the time, why am I not able to? They break the rules, I can too, right? Is it a rule? Mrs. Sigsby told me to break it. Does that mean it is not a rule?

I can speak up? I can interrupt? I am supposed to speak?

There is no way. That cannot be possible. What about the rule? The rule, the rule! The unspoken rule. What about the rule?

It is a bad rule. Yes. My teacher thinks so. My classmates too. Maybe a rule to follow sometimes, but not always.

Yes. That makes sense.

I can speak up. I can interrupt. I am supposed to speak. I can break the silence when I am in need. No more quiet suffering.

I smiled then, a toothless, bloody smile. A small, weak smile, but it was enough. It is okay. Tell the voice it is okay.

Wait, this is the voice. Am I the voice?

Okay, then I can speak to it.

Can I change it?

I must try, right? Yes, go on, try. Tell the voice to be quiet.

It is okay! IT IS OKAY! You are the voice, and I am the voice, and this is what I say: there is no blood on the carpet, no swallowed tooth. No angry faces, no yelling. I spoke up. I will continue to speak up.

YOU HEAR THAT, VOICE? I AM SPEAKING UP! AND I WILL NEVER STOP, NOT FOR YOU OR ANYONE ELSE!!!

Being quiet hurts. Listening to the voice in my head hurts.

It feels like an impenetrable band wrapped around my forehead that prevents me from thinking about anything else.

It covers my mouth and hides the truth my words could reveal.

It binds my hands and prevents me from escaping the dark hole my mind traps me in.

But the band is mine. The darkness is my own creation, my own fears that my mind brings to life. Bent to distortion, exaggerated and large. A small feat made impossible.

A small feat that can be possible. Not easy, but manageable. I just need to change the mindset, switch the pictures so they make sense. There is no blood, no scared faces. No raised voices or conflict.

Communication.

Assertion.

Two solutions to the band that suppresses me, the thoughts my mind puts into my head and heart. The overthinker and doubter need them both. To communicate is to know, and to assert is to challenge and grow.

Thank you, Mrs. Sigsby, for that lesson. You will never know how you have changed me. Because of you, I will always question my inner thoughts and choose to speak up.

Author's Note

I chose this memory because it is one of the memories of my adolescence that has always stuck with me. I am not the kind of person who can pull out numerous childhood memories with ease, and sometimes it feels like I am missing a gap in my younger years. However, I have always been able to vividly remember this memory because it is especially important to me. It changed the way I thought of myself and my own importance because it taught me that it was okay to speak up when I needed to. I am a habitual overthinker, but that day, I learned that I did not need to overcomplicate things. I realized that people wanted to help me, and I just needed to let them.