

Freedom of the Press

JUDY MORGAN WAS a reporter for *The Westfield Gazette*, the local newspaper. Westfield was a quiet little town. There was the occasional burglary, the teenagers got rowdy once in a while, and there was some shouting at the town council or the planning board now and then. But mostly, things were calm and orderly in Westfield, and every Thursday *The Westfield Gazette* proved it.

Ted Bell sold advertisements for the paper, and he had a daughter in fourth grade at Lincoln Elementary. He told Judy that a bunch of fifth graders were making trouble and were not obeying teachers anymore, that there was something about a secret code word they were all using.

And half the students had been kept after school one day last week—including his own little girl.

The only other story Judy was working on was about eighteen new trees that were going to be planted along East Main Street. The trees could wait. This thing at the elementary school sounded like a real story.

So Judy Morgan showed up at Lincoln Elementary School at three o'clock the day after Mrs. Chatham had been to visit Nick's parents. The sign on the door said, "All Visitors Must Report to the Office," and she did.

On the bulletin board outside the office, Judy saw Mrs. Granger's notice about the punishment for using the word *frindle*. She stepped back two paces, aimed her camera at the notice, and snapped a photo. She read the notice once more, and then stepped into the office.

Mrs. Freed, the school secretary, looked up and smiled. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm sure you can. My name is Judy Morgan, and I work for *The Westfield Gazette*. I'd like to know about that poster outside the office, the one about this word *frindle*. Who should I talk to?"

Mrs. Freed stopped smiling. She was sick and tired of anything to do with that word. For the past week her phone had been ringing off the hook. If it wasn't a parent complaining about a child who had to stay after school, it was someone from the school board trying to get in touch with Mrs. Chatham or Mrs. Granger. Mrs. Freed pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. She said, "You'll have to speak with the principal. Let me see if Mrs. Chatham is free."

She was. There isn't a principal alive who won't find the time to talk to someone from the local newspaper. The reporter was invited into Mrs. Chatham's office.

Judy noticed right away that the principal was not comfortable talking about this stuff. When asked about the poster outside the office door, Mrs. Chatham laughed and said, "Oh, that? It's nothing really. Some kids have been playing a prank, and it was time to put a stop to it."

The principal's laugh sounded phony to Judy Morgan. "And did that notice put an end to the prank? I heard that a lot of children were kept after school last week. Would you tell me a little about that? Parents would like to know what's going on."

Mrs. Chatham looked like . . . well, like a kid who had been sent to the principal's office. She squirmed a little in her chair and tried to smile. She said, "Well, we do still have a little problem, but it's under control. Mrs. Granger may have overreacted a bit. I don't think the children have really been trying to be disrespectful. They are just having some fun, and it's more like a difference of opinion . . ." And then Mrs. Chatham went on to tell the reporter what she knew about the word *frindle*, and how it had become popular among the students. Judy Morgan took careful notes.

And when the principal had finished Judy said, "Would you mind if I asked Mrs. Granger a few questions?"

Mrs. Chatham said, "No, not at all." But Judy could tell that the principal wished she would just go away. What could she say, though? Mrs. Chatham couldn't very well keep the reporter away from Mrs. Granger because, after all, America is a free country with a free press. If Judy really wanted to, she would talk to Mrs. Granger sooner or later.

It was sooner. In three minutes Judy Morgan was standing at the doorway of Room

12, looking in at Mrs. Granger. There were about fifteen children sitting at desks scattered around the room, busy writing out their one hundred sentences. She knocked and the teacher and students looked up from their work. "I'm Judy Morgan from *The Westfield Gazette*, Mrs. Granger. May I have a word with you?"

Mrs. Granger stood and came out into the hallway and closed the door. Judy could see past her and saw that every kid in the room was straining to listen. Judy noticed Mrs. Granger's eyes right away—gray, maybe flecked with a little gold, and very sharp, but not hard or mean. Just bright, and strong.

The reporter didn't waste words. "So I hear that you plan to stop the students from using their new word. How goes the battle?"

Mrs. Granger did not smile, and her eyes got even brighter. "First of all, it is not a battle. I am merely helping my students to see that this foolishness should stop. Such a waste of time and thought! There is no reason to invent a new and useless word. They should each learn to use the words we already have. But of course, all of this is just a silly fad, and when you add an *e* to *fad*, you get *fade*.

And I predict that this fad will fade.”

Judy looked up from her note pad and asked, “Any idea how it all got started?”

Mrs. Granger’s eyes seemed to almost catch on fire at that question, and she said, “Yes, I have a *very* good idea how it all got started. It was one young man’s idea, a fifth-grade student named Nicholas Allen. And now you will have to excuse me, Ms. Morgan, for I have papers I must grade.” And with a brief, firm handshake, Mrs. Granger ended the interview.

The reporter didn’t leave right away. She walked back through the hallway and sat on a bench outside the office so she could look over her notes to make sure they made sense. It took her about five minutes. Then Judy stood up, put her notebook into her large black purse, waved good-bye to a frowning Mrs. Freed, and headed out the door.

As she walked to the parking lot, five or six kids who had just finished writing their sentences for Mrs. Granger came out another door. Judy walked beside them, listening to them laugh and joke. Then she asked them, “Why do you kids keep saying ‘frindle’? Don’t you hate staying after school?”

A boy who was almost falling over from the weight of his backpack looked up at her and smiled. "It's not so bad. There's always a bunch of my friends there. I've written that sentence six hundred times now."

And then the kids said Mrs. Granger didn't even look at their punishment papers anymore. They were sure, because where you were supposed to write "I am writing this punishment with a pen," everyone was writing the word *frindle* every fourth or fifth sentence. And Mrs. Granger hadn't said anything. One girl bragged that she had written the word *frindle* forty-five times on her sheets today. She grinned and said, "That's a new record."

"And this boy named Nick," Judy asked, "has he had to stay after school, too?"

The kids giggled, and a tall boy with reddish-brown hair and glasses said, "Mrs. Granger has kept Nick after school so much that everyone thinks she wants to adopt him."

The reporter smiled and said, "Do you think I could find Nick and talk to him this afternoon?"

The boy looked at Judy for a second, and then said, "I don't think Nick would want to

talk to you right now. He might say something stupid and get himself in trouble." Then he grinned at his friends. The kids laughed and poked and punched each other, and headed off down the block. Judy drove back to her office and started writing.

The next morning a brown envelope arrived at the *Gazette* offices addressed to Judy Morgan, and below her name was written "Frindle Story." When Judy opened it, there was a class picture, the fifth grade at Lincoln Elementary School. Mrs. Granger and the six other teachers were standing at the ends of the rows and the kids were dressed neatly, hair all combed. But there was something odd about the picture.

The reporter looked closely and saw that each kid was holding up a pen, and each little mouth was puckered in the same way. She was puzzled for a second, but then she said softly, "Of course! They're all saying 'frindle'!"

Written on the back of the picture in neat cursive was "3rd row, 5th from left."

Judy looked at the picture, and there she saw the same grinning red-haired boy with glasses that she had talked to in the school

parking lot yesterday. She chuckled and said, "Well, well, well. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Nicholas Allen."