

## Choke and Die of Embarrassment

I couldn't breathe. When I stood up from my desk, my legs were heavy and my head felt light. I looked ahead to the front of the classroom and walked up the aisle. Everything moved slowly, like I was walking through water.

Was that my heartbeat? Why was it going so fast? Should it be taking this long to get to the front of the class?

Oh no! I think I have to pee!

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I finally made it to the teacher's desk and slowly turned to face the class—then froze completely, unable to speak. I felt hot, too hot. Sticky hot.

Say something!

Why was I just standing there? Why was I sweating so much? Why was I so gross?

I couldn't think straight. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't move.

What's happening? Something's wrong! I'm going to die . . . I am dying!

If you've ever heard the phrase "deer in the headlights," that was me. My name is Jake Murphy, and up until this moment, I was considered the smartest kid in Ms. Hardish's fifth grade class. That, however, was about to change. I was about to get run over by a giant truck called Anxiety.

I'd had panic attacks before, but never like this. And I'd never had trouble speaking in front of the class. In fact, I usually got into trouble for talking too much. So, none of this made any sense.

Ms. Hardish's sweet voice called out, "Jake, we're ready for you. You can start any time."

I'd studied. I knew this stuff. Come on, man, you're ready!

But I wasn't ready. I was anything but ready. And it didn't matter what I said to myself, I was stuck. Frozen.

"Choke!"

I recognized that sour voice immediately. It came from the meanest kid in my class, my archnemesis, "Mean Dean."

And he was right. I was choking. Badly. I was choking like no one had ever choked before. Great! I was going to be the first kid to choke and die of embarrassment.

Choke. That's the word people use when you were supposed to be able to do something, but when the time came to do it, you couldn't. As if I didn't have enough problems trying to survive fifth grade, now I couldn't talk or move. I was petrified!

I'd learned the word petrified when my family drove to North Dakota last summer. It was when a living tree turned into a rock, a real thing from the dinosaur age. The

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word's also used to describe someone who's really, really scared. When someone's so frightened they can't even move.

So not only was I choking, I was officially petrified.

Was this what comedians meant when they talked about “dying on stage”?

Well, I was no comedian, and this was not funny. I'd practiced my report at home all week. I knew it backward and forward. I'd memorized every word, every paragraph, every dramatic pause. I had even come up with some jokes.

But when my turn came, I forgot everything.

Every.

Single.

Thing.

I couldn't remember a word. Not one sentence, not one silly little joke. I couldn't even remember what I was supposed to talk about.

I looked around the class at all the blank faces staring back at me. My eyes got watery. It was like I was sinking in quicksand and was looking for something, anything, to stop me from going under.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't—

“Jake,” Ms. Hardish said gently, looking down at her list. “You were going to tell us about fossils? You can start anytime now . . .”

Nothing. Even with Ms. Hardish's reminder, I had nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero. And that was exactly what I was going to get on this assignment, zero. Because I was a zero. A zero who just stood there like a zombie. Then again, at least zombies could grunt and say “brains.” I couldn't even do that!

Mean Dean mimicked the sound of radio static. “Earth to Jake,” he said. “Come in, Jake.”

Ugh! I hated him so much! Why couldn't he just leave me alone?

Dean was the type of kid that laughed when someone fell and hurt themselves. Dean was the type of kid that would take your cap and throw it in a tree for no reason. The type of kid that came up with mean nicknames for everyone. Yep, you guessed it. Dean and I went all the way back to kindergarten.

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“That’s enough!” Ms. Hardish gave Dean a stern look, then turned back to me with an encouraging smile. “Take your time, Jake.”

As I stood there, trying to unfreeze, Dean coughed “choke” under his breath. Then his little henchmen, Lenny and Shawn, joined him and they all started coughing the word. Soon it felt like the whole class was doing it.

“Choke, choke, choke,” they quietly chanted.

But Ms. Hardish came to my rescue. “ENOUGH! The next person who speaks out will be sent to the principal’s office.”

The whole class went silent. Unfortunately, I remained silent as well.

Silent in English.

Silencio in Spanish.

Silencieux in French.

You can see why I was considered the smart kid in class. The other kids called me “the Brain” behind my back (and sometimes right to my face). I loved learning about new cultures and new languages. I loved words—words were my specialty. Not today.

Tears welled up in my eyes again. This was not good. Freezing in front of the whole class was bad enough, but crying? I would never live it down! Funny, this thought did not make me feel any better. Usually, my mind was my safe space. My thoughts were like good friends. Loyal, reliable, helpful, like my best friend, Matt.

Why was I such a jerk? Matt had wanted to do the presentation with me. But no, I had to be the smart guy, had to do the presentation all by myself. Nice job!

My brain seemed determined to make a bad situation worse. I wiped my eyes. I was able to move again, but my hands were shaking. Thanks for nothing, brain.

Wait. Did I hear something? I recognized that name . . .

“Jake?” Ms. Hardish called out my name again.

I didn’t respond.

“Jake?”

I still didn’t respond. I was stuck inside my head. It was not a pleasant place to be.

Way to ruin your life, Jake.

After what seemed like hours, Ms. Hardish walked over to me. And judging by the worried expression on her face,

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I must have looked pretty bad. “It’s okay, Jake. You can try again later,” she said softly, then took me by the hand and helped me through the aisle.

Dean said “Choke!” under his breath as we walked past his desk. He just couldn’t resist the urge to make fun of me. He couldn’t resist the urge to make fun of anyone, ever.

“Dean!” Ms. Hardish snapped. “I’ll see you after class.”

“It’s just a joke,” he said. “Sheesh, lighten up already.”

I collapsed into my seat and put my head in my hands.

No doubt about it. Worst. Day. Ever.

## Glossary of Karate Terms

Shorinji Ryu Karate Do is the traditional martial art developed on the Okinawa Islands, south of mainland Japan. Traditional karate training teaches effective and empowering self defense techniques in a safe and interesting way, improving the health and vitality of body, mind, and spirit.

DOJO (doh-joh): The place of practice in martial arts where you learn the way.

GI (ghee): The karate uniform, the white robes worn.

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KARATE (kah-rah-teh): "Empty Hand," a Japanese martial art.

KARATEKA (kah-rah-teh-kah): The practitioner of karate or the student of karate.

KATA (kah-tah): Form, or sequences of techniques performed.

KI (key): Mind. Spirit. Energy.

KIAI (key-aye): A short, loud shout used to focus physical and mental energy.

KIOTSUKE (key-oh-zoo-kay): Attention.

SEIZA (say-zah): A sitting position used for the formal opening and closing of the class.

SENSEI (sehn-say): A teacher. The chief instructor of the dojo.

REI (rey): Bow. A sign of respect, trust, and appreciation.

KAMAE (kah-may): Get into position, prepare.

YAME (ya-may): Stop. Return to starting position

HAJIME (hajee-may): Begin

MOKUSO: Close your eyes and meditate.

YOI (yoh-ee): Ready (both mentally and physically)

COUNTING in Japanese:

One: ichi (i-chi)

Two: ni (ni)

Three: san (sa-n)

Four: shi (shi) / yon (yon)

Five: go (go)

Six: roku (ro-ku)

Seven: shichi (shi-chi)

Eight: hachi (ha-chi)

Nine: ku (ku)

Ten: ju (ju-u)

