

**AKEELAH
AND THE
BEE**

**A Novel by
James W. Ellison**

**Based on the
Screenplay
Written by
Doug Atchison**

The Present

Akeelah Anderson, small and skinny for a just-turned-twelve-year-old and smart beyond her years, sits in her bedroom staring at her image in the mirror and engaging in one of her favorite pastimes: daydreaming. She removes her glasses, cleans them on the sleeve of her blouse, then replaces them in a single, flowing, absent-minded movement. Slowly her image breaks into a smile.

“Akeelah,” she says in a surprisingly low voice, given her age and slight physical stature, “what a journey for a girl from South Los Angeles. Girls from this neighborhood just aren't supposed to have journeys like this. Everything seems like a dream. I know this happened and that happened and a whole bunch of other things, too, but it should seem more real than it does. What? the word for what I'm feeling? Come on, girl, words are what you're good at. What is it you're reaching for? 'Verisimilitude'? 'Somnambulism'? 'Déjà vu'? Nope—they're all wrong. But there? gotta be a word for it because it? how I've been feeling all year and it just doesn't go away...”

She sticks out her tongue and crosses her eyes. “You're crazy, girl, plain loco, talking to yourself this way. If you start answering yourself, you'll know you're in big, big trouble.

'Maybe the word I'm searchin' for is...what? Maybe it? 'magic.' Human magic....”

One

The Anderson family—mother, two sons, and two daughters—lived in a mostly black neighborhood in South Los Angeles, a dangerous, forlorn area that often erupted in violence, especially on Saturday nights and most especially on the hot nights of summer. It was light-years removed from the glitter and glamour of Hollywood and the majestic coastline to the west. Akeelah attended Crenshaw Middle School, an unkempt institution with gang graffiti scrawled on the walls. There were dangling pipe fixtures in the bathrooms where, in better times, the sinks used to be. African-American and Hispanic kids crammed into the overflowing classrooms, shouting, cursing, pushing one another, and ignoring the teachers who implored them to quiet down and take their seats. The teachers, for the most part, were tolerated but not obeyed. Already at ten, eleven, and twelve, many of the students at Crenshaw resented any official forms of discipline and fought against them with street anger and street smarts.

Ms. Cross, a petite teacher in her early forties, with lines of worry etched in her features, walked down a row of desks occupied by rowdy seventh-graders. Like all the classes at Crenshaw Middle School, Ms. Cross's was overcrowded. There were nearly forty students jammed into a

small space. They all wore school uniforms, and many of the girls were already wearing makeup. Ms. Cross handed out graded spelling tests. She tried to put on a smiling face, but gave up the effort as the noise level increased.

"You're all in the seventh grade now," she said. "What does that mean to you?"

"It mean we be in the eighth grade next year," said a tall boy lounging in the back of the room.

"Not necessarily, Darian," the teacher said. "What it means is, when I give you a list of words, you study them. Middle school means taking more responsibility. The average score on this test is very upsetting—barely 50 percent. Totally unacceptable. I know you can do better, but you have to work at it..." She paused in front of Akeelah's desk. Akeelah was busy whispering with her best friend, Georgia.

"Akeelah," Ms. Cross said, "I hate to break into your very private conversation."

She turned to the teacher and said, almost under her breath, "That's sarcasm, ain't it, Ms. Cross?"

She tried to restrain a smile.

"I guess you could say that. Tell me something. How long did you study for this spelling test?"

Akeelah shifted her eyes uneasily to some of her classmates who were following this exchange intently. She knew what lay behind the teacher's question and she didn't like it. In Crenshaw Middle School the wisest course was to remain anonymous, not to stand out, and above all, never to appear smarter than the other stu-

dents. And even above that, it was important never, ever to be labeled as the teacher's pet.

She said with a shrug, "I didn't study for it."

The teacher looked at her with surprise, an eyebrow lifted. "You didn't?"

"No, ma'am." She looked bored and uninterested, a pose she had developed in the past year as protective covering. Being smart was dangerous. She had learned that lesson the hard way, having accumulated in the past year a collection of bruises and bloody noses.

Ms. Cross slapped the test facedown on her desk.

"See me after class," she said.

Akeelah reached for the test and then pulled her hand away. "Why? I ain't done nothin' wrong."

"There's some things I have to discuss with you."

Akeelah turned to Georgia and giggled. The moment Ms. Cross walked away and the eyes of her classmates were no longer on her, Akeelah casually lifted up a corner of her test. 100 percent. Thirty words and thirty perfect spellings. When Georgia tried to sneak a look, Akeelah covered the test with her hand.

When the bell rang there was a stampede for the door to see who could escape first. Akeelah sat at her desk until the room was completely emptied out and then slowly approached Ms. Cross's desk. Through the small window in the door, Georgia tried to get her attention, but Akeelah ignored her.

The teacher looked up and studied her solemnly. "You're not telling the truth."

Akeelah went into an indignant hip-locked stance. "What do you mean?"

"You did study for the test, didn't you?"

"It don't make no difference if I did or not. It's just... I wish you wouldn't ask me stuff in front of the others."

Ms. Cross regarded her for a moment, slowly nodding her head. "You don't like to call attention to yourself, do you, Akeelah?"

She looked away and pressed her lips together in silence.

"You know," she said, "you could be one of my very best students—probably *the* best. But I keep asking myself, Why aren't you? What's holding you back? You don't turn in half your homework, and sometimes you don't even show up for class. So what's going on?"

Akeelah shrugged. "I don't know."

"I have a feeling you do know."

"Maybe I'm not as smart as you think I am."

"But you are. Does the work bore you?"

"Yeah. It's kind of boring."

"Would you like it if I gave you advanced assignments?"

"I don't know."

She spotted Georgia staring through the window making faces at her and started to giggle.

"Please," Ms. Cross said, clearly frustrated. "Try to pay attention."

Reluctantly Akeelah turned back to her. "Sorry."

The teacher cleared her throat, swiveled a pen around

between her thumb and first finger. Finally she said, "Akeelah—do you know about next week's spelling bee?"

"No."

"It's been posted on the bulletin board for weeks."

"I don't pay no attention to the bulletin board."

"Well, I think you should sign up for it."

She handed her a flyer for Crenshaw's Inaugural Spelling Bee. Akeelah's eyes swept over the flyer, then she let out an annoyed breath.

"I'm not interested."

"But why? You have a real talent for spelling. Some of the words on the test I gave you were very, very difficult—'picnicking,' for instance." She smiled. "I misspelled that in college."

"'Picnicking' wasn't hard, Ms. Cross," she said. "None of the words were really hard."

"Which is why you should be in the spelling bee."

Akeelah gave a barely perceptible shake of her head.

"Can I go now?" she said.

A very disappointed Ms. Cross stared after her as she slung her book bag over her slender shoulder and left the classroom.

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Akeelah and Georgia, both of whom had seen the movie *Hustle & Flow* the week before, walked home from school singing "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp," laughing and snapping their fingers. The South Los Angeles neighborhood was grim but they were hardly aware of the boarded-up storefronts, the walls crawling

with gang graffiti, the broken windows and sidewalks, and the littered streets. They had grown up in South Los Angeles and it had always been the same. They expected nothing from it, and it gave them nothing in return.

Georgia and Akeelah had been best friends since they were toddlers. Georgia was kind and easy-going, and one secret of their friendship was that Georgia accepted Akeelah for who she was—a really smart girl. She was proud of her friend and Akeelah knew it.

"Devon home on leave, right?" Georgia said when they had exhausted the hip-hop song.

"Yeah," Akeelah said. "He's got a two-week leave."

Devon, her twenty-year-old brother and the pride of the family, was in training to become a pilot. Akeelah had felt sad when he left for the service. With her father gone, Devon was the one significant adult male in her life.

"Your brother fine," Georgia said. "I got it all figured out. One day he gonna be the pilot of a big commercial jet and I'm gonna be the flight attendant."

Akeelah nodded, barely paying attention. Her mind kept returning to her conversation with Ms. Cross. Why was she pushing her so hard? She was a good speller, but why would she put herself in the position of being the school nerd—a freak for others to stick pins in? No way.... That was not going to happen.

They passed a weathered-looking man hanging outside a liquor store. He was suffering from the shakes. His skin was the consistency of old leather, full of fine cracks and fissures, and his breathing sounded like steam escaping from a leaky pipe. He had been hanging out on the

street as long as Akeelah could remember, and he symbolized for her all that was wrong with South Los Angeles.

"Got any change for an ol' man, girls?"

Akeelah noticed that the whites of his eyes when he gazed at her were not white but the color of egg yolks.

"You wouldn't be so old if you stopped drinkin' that Night Train Express."

He shook his head.

Georgia said, "Leave Steve alone. He's a good ol' guy."

Steve blinked rapidly and grinned. He was missing most of his bottom front teeth.

Georgia giggled as Akeelah kicked a soiled grapefruit half and two Budweiser cans off the sidewalk.

"This neighborhood is *wack*," she said as she reached in her purse and withdrew two quarters and placed them in Steve's outstretched, trembling hand. "Hey, drink yourself stupid, ol' man. Maybe that's the only answer around here."

Georgia shook her head. "Girl, you always trippin'."

As they reached the corner, a new Ford Explorer passed by, a rap song pumping full blast from the stereo. A young black man, Derrick-T, was behind the wheel. He gave the girls a wave and a grin. Derrick-T was famous in the neighborhood for the quick fortune he had amassed dealing drugs. Akeelah disliked him, certain he was a bad influence on her fourteen-year-old brother Terrence, who aped Derrick-T's clothes and mannerisms and took great pride in riding up front with him.

"Dang," Georgia said, "Derrick-T's new ride is *tight*."

"He been tryin' to get Terrence in trouble."

"Come on, Kee. Your bro can get his own self in trouble."

"You just don't like Terrence."

"I like him all right. He's always trippin', just like you. Only in a different way."

They walked for a block in silence until Georgia said, "Okay—aren't you gonna tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What did Cross Face want? All that hush-hush stuff."

"Nothin'. Just a whole rap about some stupid spelling bee. She tried to talk me into it, like I'm some freakin' spelling genius."

"Well, you are good, you know," Georgia said quietly. "You gonna do it?"

"Nah."

"You'd probably do really good, Kee. You ace those tests."

"Can you see me gettin' up in front of everybody? I'd pee my pants for sure."

Two

Akeelah's bedroom was an expression of her innermost self, that secret part of her that she kept hidden from her family, even from her best friend, Georgia. Only the photograph of her dead father shared the room with her and her secret passions. A year ago Akeelah made a pact with her mother: she would dust and vacuum her room and change her bedsheets on Saturday, and in exchange Tanya, her mother—a loving woman but a decided busybody, in Akeelah's opinion—would stay out of her room unless invited in.

Stacks of books, mainly classics and contemporary novels, lined the shelves and were piled up around an ancient computer. A game of computer Scrabble was in progress. Akeelah was hunched over the screen, studying it with a scowl of intense concentration. She muttered under her breath for a moment and then used all her remaining letters to spell "fuchsia," and racked up 69 points. A small smile curved her lips and she whispered, "Way to go, girl."

A moment later her older sister, Kiana, a single mother at the age of seventeen, burst into the room.

"You're supposed to knock," Akeelah said, still facing the screen.

"Mama says come eat."

Akeelah sighed and turned slowly in her chair. "You're the only one that don't knock, Kiana."

"I guess that makes me different."

"I guess it does. It makes you a pest."

"Mama's not in a good mood. You better get your skinny butt to the table."

Akeelah looked back at the screen wistfully. "I just got my highest score ever."

"Well, whoop-de-doo. Do you think I care? The food's on the table, li'l sister. Shake it."

The Andersons ate their meals in the kitchen and the aroma was always delicious. The rich smell of beef stew made Akeelah's stomach growl. She seldom thought of eating as anything more than a natural function to maintain strength and life, but suddenly she felt famished. Her eating habits were a source of frustration to her mother because no matter how hungry Akeelah might profess to be, a few bites seemed to fill her up.

Devon sat at the head of the table. Tall and handsome, he wore his hair in a military brush cut. From the way his mother looked at him, her eyes aglow, a tender smile on her lips, it was clear that her oldest child was the apple of her eye.

He looked up from his plate and winked at Akeelah.

"And how's my baby sister?"

"I'm fine."

She felt bashful around Devon. He was too good-looking and too charming, she felt, to be a member of the family.

Kiana flounced into a chair and pouted as she began

to feed her baby daughter, who sat in a high chair making gurgling sounds. In the living room the TV was playing at high volume.

"I'm your baby sister, too, Devon," Kiana pointed out.

"So you are," he said. "But you're also a mother. And you've lost your baby fat."

"I've never had any baby fat," Akeelah said.

"Shut up," Kiana said. "Nobody asked you."

"Mama," Devon said, quickly changing the subject, "I've been dreamin' about your cookin' for the past five months. Military chow does not cut it."

"Thank you for those kind words," Tanya said. "Least I got one child who appreciates what I do 'round here." Suddenly she frowned, touching her throat with her hand. "Where's Terrence at? He should have been home from practice an hour ago."

"Three guesses, Ma," Akeelah said.

"Don't get smart, young lady."

"He's probably hangin' with Derrick-T."

"Derrick-T?" Devon said, looking up from his plate. "That boy still alive?"

"Not after you get done with him," Akeelah said, smiling. "I know how you two feel about each other."

"That's right, princess. Bad feelings all the way back to kindergarten. He's got no damn sense and never did. Why does he want to hang out with a kid like Terrence, anyway?"

"Somebody to Step 'n' Fetch for him."

Tanya gave Akeelah a sharp glance. "Watch your mouth."

Devon laughed. "This girl's a smart one, Mama." He reached for Akeelah's hand. "Give me some sugar," he said.

Akeelah leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Look, Ma," Kiana said. "The girl's blushing."

"So how many planes you shot down so far?" Akeelah said, ignoring her sister.

"So far? Zero. You don't do much shootin' when they got you behind a computer screen in Nevada. Don't make me out to be a war ace—not yet, anyway."

"And that's good, as far as I'm concerned," Tanya said. "We want you on the ground where you belong."

"Devon *looks* like a war ace," Kiana said. "Denzel at the controls."

"He don't look anything like Denzel," Akeelah said.

Devon laughed. Rubbing Tanya's shoulder, he said, "Mama, I'm gonna have my wings and my college degree before you know it." He reached out his other hand and tousled Akeelah's hair. "Unless this one beats me to it. I wouldn't bet against her."

Tanya's mouth tightened. "Not if she keeps *skippin'* class with Georgia Cavanaugh, she won't. Akeelah—go turn off the TV."

"Ah, Ma, leave it on," Kiana said. "It soothes the baby."

"You mean it soothes you."

Devon whispered in Akeelah's ear, "Flip it over to ESPN real quick. Check out the Lakers score."

Akeelah giggled as she left the table. She walked into

the living room and switched on ESPN. Instead of the Lakers game, she found a telecast of a spelling bee. A thirteen-year-old, red-haired girl was at the mike. She rubbed her hands together nervously, but when she spoke she sounded confident, even slightly arrogant. "...c-e-p-t-o-r," she spelled slowly but with assurance. "'Nociceptor.'"

Akeelah gazed at the screen, open-mouthed. "What's this?" she muttered to herself. She lowered herself onto the couch without moving her eyes from the screen. They had spelling on TV? Did other people really care about this stuff?

"I said turn it off, Akeelah," Tanya shouted from the kitchen.

Akeelah barely heard her mother's words. She watched curiously as the vast audience applauded the girl. Next, a thirteen-year-old Japanese boy named Dylan Watanabe marched up to the mike, a superior smirk on his handsome face.

The Pronouncer gave him his word. "'Brunneous.'"

As the boy hesitated, Akeelah started mouthing the letters. "B-r-u-n..."

Finally the boy began spelling. "B-r-u-n-e-o-u-s. 'Brunneous.'"

A bell sounded and a demoralized Dylan sat down, while the red-haired girl marched up to the mike again.

"Akeelah," Tanya shouted again, now plainly annoyed. "Turn off the television and come eat. I mean *now!*"

The red-haired girl again spelled slowly and with confidence. "B-r-u-n-n-e-o-u-s. 'Brunneous.'"

"That is correct," the Head Judge said. "If you spell

the next word correctly, you will be the new national champion."

Akeelah leaned forward on the couch, her eyes narrowed with curiosity and concentration.

The Pronouncer slowly said, "Schottische."

The red-haired girl could not restrain a smile. "Schottische," she said, her voice firm and clear. "S-c-h-o-t-t-i-s-c-h-e."

"Congratulations!" intoned the Head Judge. "You are the new Scripps National Spelling Bee champion."

Akeelah watched the girl jump for joy as she was handed a huge check for \$20,000. She was swarmed by photographers as she waved the check in the air.

"Dang, that's a lot of money," Devon said, popping his head into the living room. "Maybe Akeelah should try out for something like that."

Tanya also poked her head in. "Maybe Akeelah should try listening for a change," she said. "Now turn the set off and come eat."

Akeelah clicked it off reluctantly and returned to the table, but she had heard nothing that either her brother or her mother had said. Her mind was a million miles away, jumping with words and letters.

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Later that evening, alone in her room, Akeelah slowly wrote "schottische" under "nociceptor" and "brunneous" in a thick notebook filled with handwritten words, a pink Post-it taped to the front cover. It said: *Property of Akeelah Anderson. Private and confidential. Do*

not open. Everyone in the family had honored her request except Kiana, who took a peek one day while Akeelah was at school. One look was enough. She was greeted with a stream of words, none of which she understood. Terrence had never been inside her room and had no interest in anything his little sister did, said, or thought.

Akeelah grabbed the massive Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, which she had inherited from her father, its dog-eared pages filled with her notes and Post-its, and found the word that kept running through her mind.

Brunneous," she said out loud. "Dark brown, used chiefly scientifically...Well, why can't they just say 'brown'?"

She closed the dictionary and looked up at a framed photograph of her father, a gentle-looking man with a warm smile.

"You ever heard of these words, Daddy?"

She smiled at his image. "Yeah, you probably did." She stared into her father's eyes and then, against her will, remembered the scene from three years earlier that recurred again and again, both in her dreams and when awake. A game of Scrabble was in progress. Her father was hunched over the board, thinking. Akeelah was waiting for him to line up his word. Her father had taught her Scrabble the year before and she had immediately fallen in love with forming words and combinations of words. He smiled up at her before making his word. During the game he went out to the corner deli for a pack of cigarettes. Half an hour later, when he hadn't returned, Tanya

began pacing the living room nervously. She knew the neighborhood and feared it.

Akeelah's smile faded as she remembered. It could have been yesterday, the scene was so vivid—the sound of gunshots from the street, the wail of police sirens growing louder. Those sounds haunted her mind now. And those memories triggered another: the sound of pounding on the front door, a somber-looking police officer on the front porch, her mother with a piercing cry knocking over a lamp that smashed to the floor.

Akeelah jerked suddenly in her seat. Returning to the present, her breathing ragged, she stared at her father's photograph. Her eyes filled with tears. "God, I miss you," she whispered. "You left us and we couldn't let you go. We still can't let you go. You're in every corner of the house. Your voice—your spirit—they're everywhere, Daddy. You understood...you understood everything."

She removed her glasses, damp from her tears, and wiped them absently on the sleeve of her blouse. Then she went to the window and slammed it shut, muffling the sounds of the neighborhood. She grabbed her word list and started methodically spelling words out loud. "Anachronism.' A-n-a-c-h-r-o-n-i-s-m. 'Assiduous.' A-s-s-i-d-u-o-u-s...." The spelling, as it always did, had a calming effect on her. She was safely tucked in a world of her own, with her nonthreatening friends—letters and words that never bullied or belittled her. Bad images of the past evaporated. Her mind was at rest.

Three

The following morning when Akeelah arrived at Crenshaw Middle School, the exterior walkway was clogged with students. When the bell rang the students began slowly drifting to class, except for a few habitual truants, mostly male. Akeelah didn't hurry, either. She leisurely strolled up to a water fountain. Two of the toughest girls in her class, Myrna and Elaine, walked up behind her.

"Hey, freak," said Myrna, who was built like a football lineman. As Akeelah turned to find Myrna towering over her, the girl gave her a shove.

"How's the genius today?"

"I'm fine," Akeelah said. "And I ain't no genius."

"Oh yes, you are. Everybody know you are."

"No, I ain't."

"Me and Elaine, we want for you to take care of our English homework. Everybody call you a brainiac."

Akeelah shook her head emphatically. "Well, everybody is wrong. I ain't no brainiac."

"Like hell you ain't," Elaine said menacingly.

"Don't be tryin' to fool us," Myrna said. "You're always pullin' down As."

Akeelah tried to twist away from the girls, but they grabbed her and started punching her face and shoulders.

Coming down the hall at that moment, as Akeelah fought the bigger girls with all the fury in her tiny body, was the school principal, Mr. Welch. Conservatively dressed in a dark suit and white shirt, grave and sanctimonious in manner, he was deep in conversation with a tall, somber African American in his mid-forties. With his tweed jacket and black turtleneck, he was the perfect model of a professor. All he lacked was a pipe.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your coming here today, Josh," Mr. Welch was saying. "The district's been breathing down my neck. Test scores dropped again last semester."

Dr. Joshua Larabee nodded, his lips pressed together. "Well, I appreciate your dilemma, but I don't think there's much I can offer."

"I just think if you see the kids in action you'll change your mind. I honestly think you will. Some of them are very special."

As they turned the corner, they came upon Akeelah fending off Myrna and trying to butt Elaine in the stomach with her head.

"Girls!" Mr. Welch shouted, "Why aren't you in class?" Dr. Larabee looked at the melee in dismay.

"She holdin' us up," Myrna said, nodding her head at Akeelah.

The two girls scampered off and when Akeelah started to follow them, the principal called out to her. "Akeelah—wait!"

She stopped and slowly turned around. Mr. Welch scrutinized her carefully. "What was that all about?"

She shrugged. "It wasn't nothin'. Just a little misunderstanding."

"I don't associate you with rowdy behavior," he said.

She shrugged again and stared at her shoes. She was very aware of the tall stranger but hadn't once glanced at him.

"Are you signed up for the school spelling bee today?" Mr. Welch went on.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"That's hardly an answer."

"Well, it's the only one I've got." She raised her eyes to his and managed not to flinch.

Mr. Welch said gravely, "Please come to my office. There are a few things we need to discuss."

The two men and Akeelah, who was fighting hard to maintain her composure, walked down the hall in silence. As Akeelah stood in front of the principal's desk, leaning first on one leg, then the other, Dr. Larabee studied some class pictures on the wall. Mr. Welch was poring over Akeelah's file.

"Well," he said, looking up finally, "Ms. Cross has an interesting record on you. According to her, you've never missed a word on your spelling tests."

Akeelah was aware that the tall man had turned to look at her. She could feel his gaze.

Mr. Welch cleared his throat and tried to catch her eye. "Your attendance record, however, leaves a little to be desired." He cleared his throat again. "More than a little,

as a matter of fact." He studied her, waiting for a response, but she said nothing. "You're only eleven, according to your records. Did you skip a grade?"

Speaking to the edge of the desk, Akeelah said reluctantly, "The second."

"Why was that?"

"The work was too easy. That's what they told my mother." After a moment she added: "I wanted to stay with my class."

She glanced at Dr. Larabee for the first time as he took a seat beside the principal's desk. There was something in his eyes—an intensity, a depth, an intelligence—that reminded her of her father. He looked at her and then quickly away. He seemed bored with the whole affair, and jiggled his left leg, crossed over his right, impatiently.

"Akeelah," Mr. Welch said, "have you ever heard of the Scripps National Spelling Bee?"

Akeelah gave him a sudden intent look. "Uh...yeah....I saw some of it on TV last night."

"ESPN shows it every year," Mr. Welch said, leaning forward in his chair, a note of excitement in his voice. "Middle-schoolers from all over the country compete in school, district, and regional spelling bees, trying to make it to the National Bee. That's the goal, and the competition is keen." He paused until Akeelah felt compelled to look at him. He then continued, saying, "I have a dream for this school. That one of our students will be there. Whoever wins our school bee today will represent Crenshaw at the District Bee next month."

Akeelah stared at him but said nothing.

"Well? What do you have to say?" He smiled tentatively. "Have I made a convincing case?"

"Why would anyone wanna represent a school that can't even put doors on the toilet stalls?"

Dr. Larabee looked at her sharply, revealing the ghost of a grin for just an instant.

"You have to learn to take pride in what you have," Mr. Welch said, trying to cover his embarrassment. "Look, Akeelah...if we can't show that our students know how to perform and perform well, there might not be money for books, let alone bathroom doors. Do you understand me?"

Akeelah slowly nodded.

"Now I want you to do that spelling bee today. I can't order you to, but I really *want* you to. Will you do that for the school?"

Akeelah drew in a deep breath, sneaked a look at Dr. Larabee, and said, "Why should I? So everybody can call me 'freak' and 'brainiac' and attack me in the hall or on the way home?" She shook her head. "Naw, Mr. Welch. I ain't down for no spelling bee."

The principal glowered at her.

"Well, then, maybe you'd be 'down' for spending the rest of the semester in detention for all your absences." Akeelah and Mr. Welch locked stares. Dr. Larabee studied them both, his eyes suddenly alive with interest.

"Let me think about it," she said finally. "I'll come back here at lunchtime." She turned and marched stiffly out of the office.

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The Crenshaw Middle School Spelling Bee took place that afternoon. The auditorium was sparsely filled, but nonetheless resounded with noisy, rowdy students. Akeelah, one of twenty contestants onstage, stared at the floor, her hand tapping nervously on her leg. Georgia waved to her from the first row and Akeelah grinned before looking away. Ms. Cross sat at a table on the side of the stage, and two other teachers served as assistant judges.

Ms. Cross approached the front of the stage as the audience began to settle down. She said, "Hello, and welcome to Crenshaw's first schoolwide spelling bee. We have some very special students competing today, so let's give them a big round of applause."

The clapping was scattered, and there were some sarcastic hoots and raspberries mixed in. Elaine and Myrna made faces at Akeelah, and Myrna shook her fist at her, mouthing some threatening words. A few rows back from the stage Mr. Welch sat with Dr. Larabee, talking earnestly into his ear. Dr. Larabee didn't look thrilled to be there.

"We drew numbers to see who'd go first," Ms. Cross went on, "and that would be Chuckie Johnson from the eighth grade. Chuckie—will you come up here to the mike?"

A plump boy strolled slowly up to the microphone. His buddies shouted out to him from the audience, and he waved to them and grinned. He then turned to Ms.

Cross and said, in a voice verging wildly between soprano and baritone, "Hey, what up?" His buddies broke into mucous laughter and Chuckie did a low comic bow.

"Now, Chuckie, you're going to start things off with 'grovel.' Okay? 'Grovel.'"

"'Grovel?'" Chuckie said. "Like, ya know—little rocks?"

"No," Ms. Cross said. "'Grovel.' Like get down on your knees and beg for mercy."

"Get down on my *knees*?" Chuckie said, completely confused. "Say what?"

"Just spell the word," the teacher said, trying to hide her growing impatience.

"Okay," Chuckie said. "Uh.. .g-r-a-v-e-l?"

Akeelah rolled her eyes and then looked out at Dr. Larabee, whose gaze was fastened on her.

"Actually," Ms. Cross said, "it's *g-r-a-v-e-l*. Sorry, Chuckie. Better luck next time."

"Who cares? I didn't want to do this in the first place."

He rushed off the stage and joined his buddies.

"Okay, moving right along," Ms. Cross said, trying for a smooth and cheerful approach to a difficult job, "next up is Akeelah Anderson. Akeelah—would you step forward?"

She slinked up to the mike, her eyes fastened on the floor. She tried to ignore Georgia's whistles of encouragement and a few scattered catcalls.

Ms. Cross said, "Okay, Akeelah. Your word is 'doubt.' Doubt."

In a barely audible voice, Akeelah said, "'Doubt.' D-o-u-b-t."

"I'm sorry? You have to speak up. Talk directly into the mike."

Akeelah nodded, cleared her throat, and said, "D-o-u-b-t," her voice trembling but louder.

"Uh...very good."

Akeelah returned to her seat, her eyes cast down.

Mr. Welch nervously turned to glance at Dr. Larabee, who was watching the proceedings without expression.

"The words are pretty basic," the principal said.

Dr. Larabee nodded but said nothing.

"Next up, Regina Baker," Ms. Cross said.

Twenty minutes later, the competition had been reduced to two girls—Akeelah and Cheryl Banks, an eighth-grader, Cheryl was a rotund 200 pounds of intelligence and good cheer, picked on unmercifully by the girls in her class.

"Cheryl," Ms. Cross said, "your word is 'placid.'"

"'Placid.' That mean like remainin' calm? Take things as they come?"

"Exactly," she said. "An excellent definition."

"'Placid,'" she said. "Ah...p-l-a-s-i-d. 'Placid'?"

Akeelah shook her head as though to say, These words are just too easy.

"I'm sorry," Ms. Cross said. "It's p-l-a-c-i-d. Okay, Akeelah, if you get this next word you'll be the winner of the Crenshaw School Bee."

Moving to the microphone, she muttered under her breath, "Let's get this farce over with."

"The word is 'fanciful,'" she said. "Fan—"

Akeelah interrupted her and said quickly, "F-a-n-c-i-f-u-l. 'Fanciful.'"

"Outstanding, Akeelah! You have won Crenshaw's inaugural spelling bee. Good job!"

Georgia cheered, as did Mr. Welch. Dr. Larabee, however, sat stony-faced, clearly not impressed.

Akeelah grabbed her blue ribbon and started to exit the stage when a high-pitched whistle suddenly cut through the room. All eyes in the auditorium swung toward Dr. Larabee, who stopped whistling and, to Mr. Welch's amazement, stood up.

"She's not done yet," Dr. Larabee said, staring at Akeelah intently. He leaned on the chair in front of him, took a deep breath, and speaking very slowly, said, "'Prestidigitation.'"

Laughter erupted at the size and complexity of the word. Akeelah stayed rooted in one spot, her hand beginning to beat against her thigh, her lips moving, as she stared suspiciously at the tall stranger.

"I'm sorry, sir...whoever you are," Ms. Cross said. "This girl is only eleven years old...and she's already won—"

"'Presridigisation,'" Dr. Larabee repeated, cutting the teacher off. "Can you spell it?"

Akeelah's eyes stayed fixed on Dr. Larabee's; he looked steadily back at her. It was almost as though this middle-aged man and eleven-year-old girl were involved in a contest of wills.

Akeelah's hand continued to beat against her thigh. Sharply and suddenly she said, "P-r-e-s-t-i-d-i-g-i-t-a-t-i-o-n. 'Prestidigitation.'"

A stunned hush fell over the room. Even Chuckie Johnson and his rowdy friends were silent. Did she get it right? Even Ms. Cross, staring hard at Dr. Larabee, wasn't certain.

"That's correct," Dr. Larabee said, his voice neutral and quiet.

Georgia stood on her chair and let out a war whoop.

"Ambidextrous," Dr. Larabee said, his eyes continuing to bore into Akeelah.

"Sir, these words are not appropriate for—" Ms. Cross began.

Akeelah cut in, saying, "A-m-b-i-d-e-x-t-r-o-u-s. 'Ambidextrous.'"

Her nervous hand tapped in rhythm as she spoke each letter. A hush had fallen over the room. The students had a hard time accepting that mousy little Akeelah Anderson could handle the words that Dr. Larabee machine-gunned at her. They were reduced nearly to silence, heads turning first to Dr. Larabee, then to Akeelah, as though they were watching a tennis match.

"Pterodactyl," Dr. Larabee said next.

"P-t-e-r-o-d-a-c-t-y-l," Akeelah responded promptly.

Dr. Larabee nodded just perceptibly. "Pulchritude," he said.

"P-u-l-c..."

Akeelah hesitated and looked down at her hand,

which had stopped tapping on her thigh and had begun to shake.

"Uh...r-i-t-u-d-e. 'Pulchritude'?"

A moment passed before Dr. Larabee said, "That's incorrect. It's from the latin root 'pulcher,' meaning beautiful. There's an 'h' after the 'c.'"

A painful pause filled the audience, followed by a faint collective sigh, as though the air had been sucked out of the room.

"See? She ain't so damn smart," Myrna said. That caused some of the students to laugh, partly as a relief from tension, partly to cover their embarrassment for Akeelah, who stood at the microphone looking mortified. She then bolted from the stage and out the side door of the auditorium, close to tears. Mr. Welch took the same exit and caught up with her halfway down the block.

"Akeelah," he shouted. "Wait! Where are you going? You did absolutely *great*. You were spelling words I can't even spell."

She pushed forward, half running. "Mr. Welch, I told you I didn't want to do this. They're all laughing at me now."

"They laugh because you intimidate them...They don't know what else to do."

"They laugh because they take me for a freak."

"I don't think so."

Mr. Welch and Akeelah turned to see Dr. Larabee taking long strides to catch up with them. He fell in step beside them. He stared hard at Akeelah, then turned to

Mr. Welch. "I'll give some consideration to what you've asked." With that, he spun on his heel and walked away.

Mr. Welch brought his hands together and grinned. "Akeelah, do you know who that was? Dr. Joshua Larabee. He used to chair the English Department at UCLA. He and I went to college together. And get this—when he was a kid he went all the way to the National Spelling Bee. And now he's considering personally training you for the District Bee."

Looking straight ahead, Akeelah said, "Well, he better find somebody else 'cause I ain't doin' no more spelling bees. I'm sick of people lookin' at me like I'm some kind of bug. I just wanna be left alone."

"Akeelah..." Mr. Welch protested, but she stormed off, running down the street and around the corner.

Georgia joined her on the stoop of her house a few minutes later, dropped her book bag at her feet, and sat down with a sigh.

'Girl, you kicked some major booty on that stage today. I knew you was good, but *that* good?" She shook her head and whistled.

"Are you kidding? I couldn't spell 'pulchritude.'"

"Who can? Nobody I know."

"The really good spellers can. Believe me."

"But you knocked the other words right back at that dude."

"They were just trick words, Georgia. Everybody knows 'pterodactyl' starts with a 'p.' Don't be givin' me too much credit."

"Girl, if I could spell like you, I *know* I could be a flight attendant."

Akeelah gave her friend an odd look. "You can be whatever you set your mind to."

Georgia punched Akeelah softly on the shoulder. "That's advice maybe you should take your own self," she said.

*

Akeelah was nearly asleep when she heard "Keelie?" whispered in her ear. Through her drowsiness she recognized Devon's voice. She opened her eyes and stared up at him, blinking the tiredness from her eyes. Devon had a knapsack slung over one shoulder and wore USAF regalia. He knelt down beside her. She rubbed her eyes.

"Devon...you leavin'? You just got here."

"Gotta get back to the base. I think we're bein' transferred, and all leaves got cut short." He ruffled her hair. "Hey, your principal called Mama. He said you did real good in a spelling bee. Knocked the ball out of the park."

"I messed a word up."

"Everybody messes up once in a while."

"You only got one chance in a spelling bee."

"He also said you got an opportunity to go to a bigger contest next week."

"I don't wanna do it."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. It's just dumb, you know? Everybody's gonna be lookin' at me, the weirdo who spells words."

This black girl from Crenshaw thinkin' she can spell with those rich white brainiacs. And the worst thing is, there's gonna be tons of words I don't know."

Devon squeezed her cheek and looked into her eyes. "So you're scared, huh, baby sister? Well, how do you think I felt the first time I jumped from an airplane? My whole body said, Don't do it—you *can't* do it, Devon. No way, man. But sometimes your brain's gotta be smarter than your body."

"But I don't like my school, Devon. The truth is, I *bate* it. I don't see why I gotta do anything for them. All they've given me is a crummy education."

"Then do it for Dad," Devon said. "You know how he was about words. He'd have loved to see you do something like this."

Akeelah looked over at the picture of her father, her expression thoughtful.

"What'd Mama say about it?"

"Ah, you know how Mama is. She's got a million things to worry about and she worries about every one of them." He reached for Akeelah's face with two hands and tilted it up so that she was looking directly into his eyes. "Tell you what. Just do this contest—and if you make it all the way to D.C., I'll parachute down to see you."

She smiled as Devon kissed her good night. When he softly closed the door, Akeelah crept out of bed and sat down at her computer. She turned it on and brought up the Web site for the Scripps National Spelling Bee, with a picture of the victorious red-haired girl. Akeelah looked up from the screen and studied the photograph of her

father, whose warm, intelligent eyes seemed to be staring back at her, encouraging her.

"You want me to do this, Daddy? You think I can do it? Part of me wants to, another part of me is afraid to, and I just don't know what to do. I know you're in heaven so pray for me. Pray that I make the right decision...."

Akeelah looked back at the red-haired girl, inhaled (deeply, and slowly shook her head up and down, her lips pressed together in determination.