

"Freedom is..." She stammered with the title of her paper. The truth was, she only had four lines on an otherwise empty sheet of paper.

She was told to stand and read her essay aloud, part of the course of study this summer. Had she had paid attention, stopped talking with her friends, and left the chewing gum at home, she would not have failed the fifth grade and would not have had to go to summer school.

Summer school. She HATED the term. A bunch of losers all taking classes for the same reason she was here: because class, school itself, was not challenging enough for them.

She did not pay attention because she already knew the material. She talked with her friends because the teacher did not make clear the instructions, leaving it to the class to interpret her directions.

The gum was another matter.

"Freedom is a concept with no boundaries," she stammered as she attempted to read her own writing.

The gum. She stuttered, but only her family and her closest friend Loni knew this for fact. Everyone else did not notice it, because Pauline always had a stick of gum in her mouth. When she caught herself starting to stutter, she would smack and chew that piece of gum until the emotion left and she could continue to speak normally.

It was her crutch. Steve Moore would not kiss her until she removed the gum. She never did, and Steve started calling her "Pauline Putout."

She had never been intimate with anyone. She was too young, and besides, that was the way boys were back then. Make up names for the girls who would not conform.

He could go straight to hell. No passing Go, no collecting \$200. Straight to Hell, she thought. I would not kiss him if he was the last boy on Earth!

"Our nation's founders wanted us to enjoy living, so the idea of the four freedoms came forth." The Four Freedoms came much later, Pauline realized, but she could not think of anything which did not sound like a book, or which did not sound so hokey.

Gum. It did not matter to her what flavor it was. As long as she could chew it. She would give an arm and a leg for a stick of gum right now.

"Pauline. You did not complete the assignment, did you?" The teacher stood up from behind her seat.

Pauline looked at her teacher and then back to the class and answered, "I didn't know what to write."

"What do YOU think freedom is?"

Pauline looked at her classmates. She started to say something, but her mouth was stuck. She looked up and then down to her feet. She then looked straight ahead.

She then knew what to say.

"Freedom is being able to have a piece of gum. To be able to share it with someone. Freedom is being able to go anywhere, to see anything, and to be anyone they want to be. Like me, I wanna be a writer someday. I want to write everything I can't say. I want to read my words and have other people to read my words. Not in the dark, not in a special place in the library."

She then looked at her teacher.

"Freedom is being able to be taught anything I want to know. To be able to choose my school, the way I go home and the things I do when I get home. Freedom is me choosing which clothes I want to wear. Not my mom. Not Meema Allen." She then looked at the room.

"Not the school."

"Freedom is talking about anything I want to talk about. And freedom is..." She just realized something.

She did not stutter one syllable in the last few minutes. Not once.

"And freedom is not having to have to have gum to be able to speak clearly!"

She felt like a light which flashed through the night time sky...like fireworks! She looked at her teacher. She smiled as her teacher smiled at her.

"B for content. D for not completing the assignment."