

When I wake up in the morning, I am not quite feeling like myself. It's seven, and I don't have as much time as I need to get ready for school as I would like. I'm nervous, which feels wrong, but I can't do anything about it. At least not now.

My head feels itchy, and I'm not allowed to scratch that itch. Part of me knows why, but mostly I don't. I feel like I am full of contradictions.

Breakfast is fast. Mom looks surprised to see me but she abandons that pretty quickly to wrap me up in her arms and smother me with affection. I want to like it, honestly I do, though I don't make it harder on her. She doesn't deserve that from me.

I feel a headache coming on. I might have cried about it before, but I'm so desperate to be a big boy that I ignore all the unpleasant ringing and static that is trying to force its way in. It goes away for now and I sit and eat and say how excited I am for school.

It's been a long time since I last went. I can't read the numbers and letter on the calendar that hangs up in the kitchen. Mom says it's because I'm not tall enough yet. I want to believe her so I do. That is what a good son does.

She does decide to take me. She keeps telling me how handsome I look. Curly hair just like hers that is still short enough that it looks like a dark cloud above my head. Still so itchy. When I complain about it, Mom just says it's dandruff from not taking my chewable vitamins - the ones that taste like chalk - every day when I wake up.

I didn't take them today either.

She laughs at that and it sounds so funny the way she sometimes snorts that I also laugh while we are in the car. The city is moving by pretty slowly and I try my best to see everything I can. I cover one eye and feel a little less dizzy from the ringing in my ears. Mom asks if I want the radio and I suppose I do.

Fiddling with the knob feels unnatural, like I have one too many fingers. For a brief moment I imagine it disappearing. If I make my vision hazy then it kind of does disappear, but only for a moment. Mom asks me what's wrong and I tell her nothing. Nothing is wrong. Everything is right. It feels like it.

She says I'm almost ten. Okay.

That I should pick something nice out for my birthday. Okay.

Maybe a new outfit or a toy. Okay.

Her voice kind of trails off when we're getting closer to school. I start to get nervous too. I'm afraid my friends would have forgotten what I look like since I was gone for so long. I don't really remember being gone, but it feels like the truth. The school's name is on the building, but maybe it is too far for me to read. Maybe I need glasses. It is so far away.

I don't try too hard. Every time I do, the ringing gets even louder. I almost can't take it and at some point I turned off the radio and Mom didn't say anything about it. I expect her to, and almost as soon as I think that, she gets upset. I shouldn't just be fiddling with the knobs if I don't know what they do and I agree with her but then I'm supposed to be a big boy.

I am a big boy. Nine years old, almost ten. Or maybe eleven.

Would Mom have even pointed that out like that? I'm not sure, so I don't bring it up. Maybe I'll ask when I'm older and can hear her. Really hear her. When she isn't sad and doesn't look like I'm not real.

I feel real.

When I sit in class, nobody says anything to me. The itching is so persistent that I crack a little and reach up to scratch it when a deep part of me flinches and I put my hand down. We're learning math and it is so easy, I want to scream. It's so simple! Why are you treating me like I'm a child? I'm not a child.

I'm a big boy and everybody knows it.

The teacher is a blur. All the other students are a blur. Some of them talk to me, but I am so focused on trying to read the board that I ignore them entirely. I never even met a real child before - not really - so how am I supposed to know how they talk?

Kids like games.

So they talk about games. And comic books. I like those things too, but it doesn't feel right when they say stuff to me. They are just saying the same things I'm saying and it sounds like a record that's skipping to the same words over and over again. The ringing wants to intervene but I can't let it.

If I talk to strangers, I'll get in trouble. That's what Mom said. And that ringing is a stragghers. All of the strangers at once. Who all want to talk to me too. It's so tempting. All I would need to do is stop trying so hard to focus on a board that has nothing useful on it.

I'm on the playground. Everyone looks as if they are made of cardboard. The faces are all unrecognizable except for a couple. I can really only understand them from one angle, like a picture frozen in time. If I focus hard enough, there is some movement. It looks weird and fake, a home movie playing on loop to mimic how a human mouth should be. All of them are like this. The closest approximation of a human that I can get.

I almost convince myself until I am close enough to touch them, where the facade then falls apart. I realize I don't know what they are supposed to sound like and I don't even bother to come up with anything unique.

They sound like the librarian, a visitor I spoke to once, my Mom and Dad, but in a nice way. Pastor...Judith? The way they sound when they talk to each other when they think I can't hear them. I try not to listen to them, but kids do that all the time. Eavesdrop.

Maybe they are not so interested in why the adults say what they do, but maybe I'm just a weird kid. Mom said my sickness had robbed me of the opportunity to become who I really am.

That made me feel strange when I heard that at first. She was crying.

I push it out of my mind, but not too far so nobody else will hear it.

The kids on the playground all come up to me and start asking me questions about how I feel and if I remember them. I can't. I think saying that will hurt their feelings so I say something else that I don't quite remember and that appeases them because I need it to. They bend to my will so easily that I can tell that they aren't real.

They aren't real and they know that I'm not real. I yell at them with my mind.

I am real! I am real and I can be human just like them! I have human skin and hair and...eyes. Just one but it is human! Humans can have shapes too! They can have thin spines coming out of their head that itch and itch and itch forever that they can't touch!

Why won't they listen to me?

I am Gavin! I am Gavin!

Why can't they see that?

Why can't I? Please?

I'm falling.

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When Gavin wakes up, he is wrapped up in blankets that feel claustrophobic, though it doesn't restrict his breathing. Not that matters because he doesn't need to breathe, no matter the form.

When in private, he doesn't take human form that often, as it is not required of him. His time as a human is done, but, apparently, not in his dreams.

He pushes the thoughts away.

But not too far, for like in his dream, if he pushes the thoughts out too far, they will go to people who are not supposed to have access to them. Or to something he both totally understands and doesn't understand at all.

While he is human, he sweats, and this makes his too small hands clammy. He flexes his fingers and wipes them on his blankets hastily, because he doesn't like the feeling. He wants to shift back into the form that feels most right to but he doesn't just in case his parents come to check on him.

They are easier to soothe when he looks like he did in his human life.

Still, he listens for them. When he knows they are not going to come, he allows his human skin to melt away in favor of the dark blue coat dotted with abstracted petals. He grows a tail, and loses his recognizable human features.

Were those dreams a glimpse of his old life? Was he remembering it? It didn't feel like it. Perhaps in the moment he could pretend it was a memory, but he didn't actually recognize anyone. They were photos plastered over what a human should look like. Their voices weren't their own. The teacher sounded just like the librarian.

A dream was a dream. But sometimes in the books he was allowed to read, dreams were a doorway into what the mind really wanted. Sometimes they could even unlock secret powers buried deep within.

Gavin settles in his bed. He is no longer tired. He is never really tired, but he sleeps anyway because that is what he is supposed to do to pass time when all the other real humans and Gravents are sleeping. If he is left to his own thoughts for too long, temptation settles in.

It is hard to resist temptation, especially for the young. Pastor Judith said that once. To Gavin, it almost sounds like permission. But he does not want to find out what happens if he has to go away for a little bit for extra encouragement.

That scares him so much that he clasps his hands together. To pray, he supposes. To put his mind at ease?

To maybe ask the ringing to stop for just a little bit so he will not get in trouble. He cannot afford to get in trouble. If he gets in trouble, he is not allowed to read the books he wants and that is more devastating than anything else.

Books provide a shelter to him. One he can control, even if he sometimes thinks the stories are childish and understimulating. He can add his own spin on it, and he will. Always.

When the morning comes after an eternity, Gavin waits until he hears his mother calling him down for breakfast. When she asks how he slept as if he is still the sickly and feeble human

boy she lost, Gavin assures her that he slept really well and had a dream about lions and tigers and bears.

Oh my!

And his mother laughs charitably. Gavin feels at ease. This is his normal and he can tell that his mother loves him. He ignores all the twitches in his hands and heart and eats the breakfast laid out for him.

Silver dollar pancakes and eggs. A bacon in the shape of a smile. He makes sure to tell his mother how good it is and how he is excited for the day ahead of him.

Asks if he can check out the library.

Sure, but only if he is good when they go to church. Gavin is always good when they go to church, he has to be. Maybe Pastor Judith will read his mind - not really - and offer advice for him to follow. If she did, it would be a coincidence.

He would still hang on to every word.