

FIN

When my foot hit pavement, I wavered. I clutched the car door before walking around to get Fin out of the back seat. Fin collected a plastic shark and picture book on ocean animals from the seat, stuffing the items into a backpack. My brother always told Fin not to take toys to school.

"I can see your insides," Fin said, pointing at the veins in my forearm. "Ask me ask me ask me!"

"Honey, why do we have bodies?" I asked as I helped Fin step down to the ground.

"To run and play!"

Fin threw an arm around my legs and squeezed before running towards the school building. Fin's approach to *both-and-neither* was one of excess: pants and a skirt, a scarf and a baseball hat, a superhero lunchbox and a princess backpack. It was too hot for all those clothes, unusually hot for late September, the last gasp of summer.

I didn't linger in the drop-off line. When I was having a bad day, the moms and teachers seemed to sense it, strolling over to me and touching my shoulder lightly and wanting to chat. The more I wanted to just leave, the more likely it always seemed that well-meaning parents would ask me about my brother's genderqueer child. I didn't mind answering honest questions, but theirs all seemed crafted to to prove to me their allyship, insist their comfort with Fin's existence.



After dropping Fin off, I drove home and got back into bed. I could barely keep my eyes open. My insomnia had been getting worse.

When my phone buzzed, I picked it up and put it to my ear before I was really awake.

"Kevin?" I said my brother's name.

"Are you okay? You sound weird. Where are you?"

"I'm at work," I lied.

“Can you pick up Fin, too? I have to cover this event for my boss and Sarah’s working.”

I said sure, and we hung up. There were texts from my manager that I didn’t want to read, probably sympathetic to the food poisoning I didn’t have. To calm myself, I checked my food tracking app, looked through the long streak of calorie deficit days. I looked again at the weight I’d recorded that morning. I thought I would feel elated but I didn’t. I felt afraid.



After napping, I ran. When I ran I felt powerful, even when I was dizzy or breathing ragged. I looked at the yards as I passed them, perfectly put together.

I liked living a block away from my brother and sister-in-law and Fin, but I missed my old neighborhood. The house I’d lived in with her. Half a decade gone. She had used the word “incompatible”: her feminism and my despair about my femaleness. When I ran my fingertips from the flanks of her shoulders to the indent of her waist, she closed her eyes and stretched like a cat, laughing because it felt so good. The v where her ribs met was soft, the hair on the small of her back was downy. She had been so angry at my body. In therapy, she shook as she talked about the way I was changing.

“I know it’s not fair of me to miss their old body, but I feel like I’m with a different person now,” she had said, then turned to me. “I want you to have your own vision of our future. I can’t hold us both together on my own.”

“I don’t need you to hold me together,” I had said.

I walked the last half-mile, sweating, breathing hard.



When I went to pick up Fin, I parked instead of pulling into the pickup line. The school community mattered to Kevin and Sarah. They sent Fin to a liberal school in a conservative state, so I thought at best we were breaking even. I would make an appearance, make some conversation. It would be atonement for skipping work.

The school said that it embraced difference, but I always felt like a freak walking through its spotless, colorful hallways. Whenever I picked up

Fin, I was an anomaly among the adults: nannies, babysitters, personal assistants, stay-at-home moms, work-from-home moms, yoga moms, power moms, faculty parents, rich dads, flex-schedule dads, non-breadwinner dads, and just-came-from-the gym dads.

When Fin started in kindergarten I was hyper-aware of my vague status. I was related to Fin but I didn't pay the bills, so there was a little jostling as teachers got to know me and figured out if they were going to be deferential or chummy. Now that Fin was in first grade most adults knew who I was, but I never forgot how an unfamiliar person who looked like me would be treated if they wandered onto campus. The Black parents and the Latinx parents and the hijab-wearing parents still signed into the visitors' log every time they picked up their kids. After a few awkward interactions, I'd fallen into that routine as well.

Once, when Sarah thought I wasn't listening, I heard her tell my brother I looked 'like a malnourished teenage boy.' What is it, exactly, that makes a person look like they belong in a place of privilege?

Fin was scowling as they walked across the playground towards me.

"Hi, you," I said. "What's going on?"

"Miss Janet wants to talk to you."

"Can I get a hug first?" I asked.

Fin nodded, and clung to me. When I started to pull away, they clung tighter.

"Let's go," I said. Fin pouted and I sighed. Fin was too big to be picked up, but still insisted on it from time to time. They hopped and I lifted at the same time. When I stood, the playground narrowed and flashed with dots of white, so I stood perfectly still for a few seconds until the feeling passed.

We made our way inside and over to the teacher's desk. Miss Janet gave a warm smile and wave to one of Fin's classmates, called the nanny by name as she said goodbye. Janet was nearly child-sized herself, and wore clothes that seemed meant to remind everyone of her adult status, even though she was one of the younger teachers at the school. Today she was wearing a dark blue short-sleeved sweater, chinos, and clogs.

While we waited, I whispered, "I'm going to put you down."

Once on the ground, Fin spent some time adjusting their scarf and hat, making sure bracelets were perfectly positioned on their wrists. Janet turned to face us, and she and I said “How are you?” at the same time. She laughed awkwardly, and said, “Doing fine.”

I turned to Fin.

“Do you want to stay here while we talk?”

“Yeah, I asked Miss Janet to tell you something that happened today.”

I looked at Janet, suddenly wishing I had pushed my hair back or worn tighter pants, or anything to look less like we, the gender-unclear, were bringing it on ourselves.

“Well, okay, so to get right to it,” Janet said. “We met with our fifth grade buddies today, and when Fin introduced—when they got into pairs and Fin did introductions, uh, the fifth grade student asked if Fin is a girls’ name or a boys’ name.”

She twisted her wedding ring around and around on her finger and smiled as she stuttered through the story. I wondered if she was as nervous when she passed these kinds of stories along to my Sarah or Kevin, with their straight relationship and clear-cut gender presentations.

Looking down at Fin, I said, “We’ve talked about that question before, and we’ve done a bunch of prep around that one, haven’t we?”

“I know but he kept asking questions,” Fin whispered.

“Yeah, no, Fin’s been doing really well with inquisitive questions that assume the gender binary. It seems that this, uh, student, went on and asked more questions.” She glanced at Fin. “We aren’t quite sure what happened before a teacher realized what was going on, but by the time we intervened, this student was suggesting that Fin, uh, had to choose.”

“Had to choose?” I said.

“Had to choose to be a boy or a girl.”

“Fin, can you go grab your backpack?” When their face started to crumple, I added, “You can come right back. I’ll be right here.”

Once Fin was gone, I said, “How did the teacher intervene?”

“Well, it was me,” Janet said. “I separated them. Fin was upset, so I sent—so I sent—so Fin went back to the classroom.”

I thought of Fin's kindergarten teacher, so different from Janet, who had taken seminars and read books until by the end of the year she was teaching me about trans children.

"You isolated Fin?" I said. "Okay." I waved my hands to signal that I wasn't going to fight this, not right now. "Will you put it in writing and email it to Kevin and Sarah, please?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "Of course." She paused. "There's one more thing."

Her gaze landed on Fin, who was lingering by the row of hooks, arms full of accessories, talking to a classmate. "After the incident with the fifth grader, Fin wouldn't eat lunch."

"Oh." I looked away. "I'll make sure Fin gets a good snack."

"Great! We try to emphasize how good nutrition helps their brains work and is an important part of being in school."

Fin arrived back at my side. We held hands and I squeezed their fingers. "Thanks, Janet. Thank you for working with our family."

"Of course," she repeated. "Thank you for—I'm glad Fin has you."



When we got to the car, I took a long look at Fin before I buckled them into the booster seat.

"You are the bravest person I know," I said. "I'm so proud of you." I felt out of place at Fin's school, but Fin had to spend all day there, every day.

It wasn't until we were a few blocks from the school that they spoke up, their voice shaky, and asked, "Why do we have a body?"

I said, "We have a body because otherwise we couldn't go places."

We have bodies so that the world can put us into categories and then hurt us for it. I moved differently from the parents at the school, walked softer. I'd spent my life trying to be invisible. If we didn't have bodies no one could pin us against walls or push us down onto the sidewalk. No one could hurt us.

After sucking down the final watery end of my morning's coffee, I wiped my hand dry and reached behind me. All I could get to was their foot, which I held as we drove home.

I made a plate of carrots and crackers, some string cheese, and a small tub of ranch. I put the snack on the coffee table in front of Fin. They ignored it.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked.

Fin didn't look up from the tablet in their lap. The tinny music from their under-the-ocean game was my only answer. I sat down, reached over, and turned down the volume.

"Hey! Don't do that!" Fin said.

"It hurts my head, honey," I said. "You need to eat a snack." I remembered what Janet said. "It's good for your brain."

Fin took the cracker and cheese that I offered and asked for water. I got the cup of water for them, sat back down.

"Why didn't you eat lunch today?"

Fin shrugged. They held out a cracker to me. "You eat it."

"In a minute," I said. "Were you hungry at lunchtime?"

"Yeah, but we were in the classroom all afternoon."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Miss Janet says I have to use the bathrooms in the library or the nurse's office," Fin said.

"You didn't eat lunch so that you wouldn't have to pee?"

Fin nodded. "I don't like using the bathroom at school." We both looked at the cracker in Fin's hand for a while.

"I'm ready," I said.

Trembling, I opened my mouth. Fin fed me.



When Kevin got home, he sat down next to Fin, dwarfing both of us. He lived comfortably in his maleness, which in this part of the country included a layer of softness over muscle. I'd texted him and Sarah to brief them, and we'd all gotten Janet's email about an hour ago. Fin crawled onto my lap and pressed one of my hands into their face, putting pressure on each of my fingers to feel their eye sockets, their forehead, their hairline.

It wasn't so long ago that Fin had a toddler body with plump fingers and pudgy arms, before they grew into their kid body, lanky and androgynous. Last weekend as I watched Fin swim with neighbor kids in a wading pool, grinning, it was easy to see all of them as genderless or every gender.

Kevin said, "What a pair. What happened today, kiddo?" Fin kept playing with my hand and didn't look at their dad.

I moved my hand and nudged Fin. Kevin asked again, "What happened today?"

My blood seemed to whoosh inside my skull every time I turned my head. Fin adjusted on my lap, bony butt hurting my thighs.

"I said mynameisFinit'snotagirlsnameoraboysnameI'mnotaboyoragirl."

"Okay, good for you. What happened to make you say that?" He glanced at me for help. I shrugged.

"Daddy, I don't want this anymore," Fin said, holding out their arms, gesturing to their knees and belly.

"You're okay, kiddo," he said reflexively. Then he paused. "Of course you want to be you."

I didn't speak up, I was exhausted. There's a solution if you wish you didn't have a body and I didn't want Fin to ever come to that conclusion.

"Daddy," Fin said. "If I didn't have this one, I could have one that is both boy and girl, right?"

"What do you mean?" I said. I was taken aback and guilty, as I'd recently taught Fin about the existence of people who were physically *both-and-neither*.

"The big kid told me I have to choose, my body already chose."

"You don't have to listen to that kid," Kevin said. "What's it—'your gender is you'?"

I nodded, happy that Kevin remembered the mantra I'd taught Fin. "Whoever you are today, whoever you are tomorrow," I added, imagining Fin as a teenager, as a young adult, living their truth and being embraced for it. There *were* hopeful futures, I reminded myself. The world was changing so fast.

We all sat there in silence. Miss Janet had left a lot out when she told me the story and in her email. In Kevin's jumping jaw muscle I could see him trying to think of what to say next.

"Go play, we'll talk more when your mom gets home."

Fin squirmed around until they were facing me, grabbed me around the neck and whispered, "Carry me outside."

I could smell Fin's breath, like carrots. With the additional pounds, I struggled to stand.

I swayed, the space inside my head still down by the throw pillows.

My body rudderless. I crumpled.



When my brother's kid refused to go into either bathroom in public, at three, he asked why. Fin told him that they weren't either, shaking their head and crying. "Not boy, not girl." Kevin called me that night. I told him everything I knew about the words he could teach his child, about the infinite options that Fin had. Kevin told me that Sarah blamed me for Fin's gender fluidity. He asked me if Fin would grow out of it.

I had been moving towards androgyny as Fin was learning about gender. I told toddler them, "Sometimes I don't feel like a girl, but I don't really feel like a boy either." I taught Fin to call me both Aunt and Uncle and sometimes, Uncle Auntie.

I told Kevin the truth: I had no idea if Fin was imitating me, if they would eventually decide to go with the sex on their birth certificate.

My brother still gives his kid choices all the time: this or that. When people look at me I don't want them to see any clear answers. I want to be flat like a boy, I want clothes to hang off of me. I want to live in between.

Once, during a fight, she told me, "To live in between, first you have to want to live." She was both relieved and disturbed that I didn't want surgery, didn't want to take testosterone. "Why can't I just have this body and be who I am?" I said.

"Why can't you just treat your body like you care about it?" she replied.

I am convinced that Fin got lucky, found the words for who they are earlier than most.

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Fin was crying. I was on the ground with the still-sinking sensation of regaining consciousness. I opened my eyes. I tried to stand, and couldn't. I was angry suddenly, so full of rage that there was no room left for falling or sinking or weakness.

I stood up, I said, "Finny, I'm so sorry." My anger was massive energy so strong my skin tingled.

"Why did you fall?" Fin gulped.

"Have you eaten anything today?" Kevin asked sharply.

"Of course I have," I said. Everything I'd eaten that day appeared in my mind on a platter, like I sometimes pictured it to soothe myself at night. A coffee with a splash of cream next to the two crackers and cheese I'd eaten with Fin.

He glared at me, immune to my lies. "You need help."

I touched my hipbone—its sharpness a salve. Kevin saw what I was doing, sighed. "Don't pick up my kid again until you're getting help." He carried Fin out of the room.

My rage dissolved and I was left with a hot guilt that felt just like hunger.

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Leaning my shoulder against the doorjamb of the kitchen, I watched my brother take chicken breasts out of the refrigerator.

He noticed me and asked, "Are you eating dinner with us?" I shook my head, no.

"Of course you're not," he said. "You know, I'll call a place for you, I'll set up your appointment."

"Fin's teacher makes them go all the way to the library to pee," I said. He stared at me.

"That's why Fin didn't eat lunch," I said.

"You know how you two ask each other that question? That why we have bodies question?"

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I thought it helped. But you’re the only person I know who’s like Fin, and it’s killing you.”

“What are you saying?”

“We’ve been talking to the therapist about it and after everything that happened today, we can’t have you in Fin’s life anymore. Until you’re healthy.”

I had Fin’s plastic shark figurine in my pocket, wrapped my fingers around it. My hands were cold. I should have said yes when he asked about dinner.

“Sarah agrees. You love that kid. You know that if they’re around your—disorder it puts them at risk too.”

These words were the family therapist’s words. I wondered what he had said about me in sessions.

What he didn’t know was that I was afraid too. I wished the anger would come back. “

Don’t make Fin choose,” I said.

“That world doesn’t exist,” Kevin said.



In my apartment, I watched the light of the day fade to darkness. With the plastic shark on the table next to my plate, I ate a microwaved dinner and recorded the calories on my phone. Even in salt water my body would sink.

Why *do* we have a body? Why couldn’t I be the mist of the morning, her shower at night, a beam of light? I could feel my bones from the inside out. My irrefutable shape.

My phone rang and I picked up. Fin’s voice. “Are you there?”

I stood from the table and walked to the window, facing the direction of my brother’s house. “I’m here, baby. Does your daddy know you’re calling?”

“Yeah. Just want to say goodnight.”

"Goodnight, Fin," I said. I closed my eyes.

"Ask me."

"Fin, why do we have bodies?"

"To sleep, and to wake up."

I swayed at the window, so I opened my eyes and steadied myself.