

Falling and Flying

The grey gravel rolls in waves before Tommy's eyes and he can feel his balance faltering. There's a brief moment of respite after each push; he tries to savour it and collect himself. But it's too late.

He closes his eyes. He can see something swirling beneath his eyelids and he knows that he's going to fall.

I wish I hadn't worn shorts today, is his next thought.

He puts his arms out in front to brace himself, but he's too disoriented to fall straight.

He tumbles sideways, and his right elbow is the first thing to hit the ground. The pain comes on fast and sharp – you would think it would help to know it's coming, but it doesn't. He doesn't need to see his leg to know that the gravel has cross-stitched a patchwork of cuts onto his shin. He keeps his eyes closed and his head rested against the small stones of the school's outdoor basketball court.

"Hey faggot! Faggot, get up," taunts one of the kids in the circle, standing over him.

"Why are you so fucking weird?" asks another voice.

"Just like your fucking brother, retard," chuckles the last one.

They are kids from the year above, his brother's year. Bigger, stronger kids, bullies. Everyone in year eight picks on his brother – they've been doing it since he was in kindergarten. Something about him just seems to annoy people, that he's freakishly tall and thin doesn't seem to help either.

And now it's Tommy's turn. Not for being himself though, not for annoying people, just for being related to his brother.

How fucking stupid, he thinks.

He brings his knees to his chest and covers his head with his arms, trying to make himself as small as possible, as if he could disappear, but he can't.

The bell rings, Tommy stays on the ground.

"Hey spastic, you're going to be late for class, you might get in trouble if you're not careful," one of them mocks.

"I guess the fag loves the ground more than he does school." The biggest one chortles.

One of the boys runs at Tommy and feigns to kick him in the side, lifting his foot at the last second.

Tommy flinches and holds himself tighter.

The boys laugh and shove one another, as they slowly head back towards the school buildings.

On the ground Tommy unfurls himself, responding to the departing shadows like a flower to the sun.

He opens his eyes, and stares at the clean, blue afternoon sky. A seagull hovers overhead, and lets out a hungry squall. Tommy finds himself wishing that he could switch his consciousness with that of the seagull – *If I could be up there, he thinks to himself, I'd be free from those arseholes forever.*

Free from my stupid brother.

Free from being me.

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Tommy winces as he walks home – the torn skin on his leg pulls apart with each step that he takes. He can't stop replaying the day over and over in his head, reimagining what things could have been like had he known what was coming – maybe he'd have dodged their attempts to grab him and taken the older guys to the ground with a few deft blows.

Yeah.

Or maybe he could have responded to their taunts with a cutting retort and embarrassed one of them in front of the others, earning their respect.

Just like your brother. He mouths the words as he walks.

None of this would have happened if not for him, he thinks. His stupid, fucking, brother.

Why couldn't he just fit in? Why did he have to make everyone hate him?

Tommy arrives home, and slams the front door.

"Hi sweetie," calls his mum. "How was your day?"

"I'm not hungry," he mutters before running upstairs and barricading himself in his room.

He jumps onto his bed and tries to forget the day, but it's a video clip stuck on repeat.

He had talked about it with his mum once – “How do they know who to pick on? How did they figure out that Daniel is weak and pathetic?” he had asked.

And she had slapped him, it was the only time she had ever done that.

“Don’t ever say that. It’s not your brother’s fault.” She had responded “There’s nothing wrong with Daniel - it’s those other children, the ones that bully your brother. It’s like they were born wanting to hurt others.” Her hands were shaking.

Lying on his bed, Tommy touches the place on his cheek where his mum had hit him, her words echo in his head. He gets up and opens his bedroom door. He walks to the entrance of his parents’ room, where his mum is watching TV, he hesitates. She glances up at him, and without a word he walks up to her and hugs her tightly – imbedding his face into her cotton bathrobe.

She seems to know not to say anything.

He holds on tighter and lets out all of his hate and rage in raw, guttural wails, and lengthy heaving sobs.

Exhausted, he breathes deeply, and shudders silently as his mum gently strokes the back of his head.

He feels a lightness that he hasn’t felt before...and though it’s not quite flying, it’s close.