

The sun had finally risen from yesterday's embrace, and the gentle blue hue of the sky entertained birds of different feathers, mainly a flock of excited sparrows that flew and dove for the sight of morning food. A pair landed on a house's window, chirping and singing a celebration song. It was the day he so desperately waited for.

Caysyn awoke as his ears caught the morning ring. The sparrows had successfully pulled the kid to his feet; he bolted out of bed to the window. His eyes and ear-reaching smile gave out his excitement.

"Yes, today is the day!"

Pulling his hand to his chest, he could feel the rhythm of anticipation. His parents had promised an eventful evening to him, one he would remember for ages. It was his fifth birthday.

I can't wait to see what they have planned for me.

Caysyn felt giddy as he hurriedly put on his clothes, leaving no time for a breath in between. Skipping in haste, he bounded down the stairs. His tiny feet barely made a sound on the cold wooden floor.

His heart was brimming with joy, and he couldn't wait for the exciting day to unfold. Finally, weeks of daydreaming were about to turn concrete. The moment was here, and he couldn't be happier. He thought about the fun activities he and his closest friends would partake in. Jumping from the last step to the ground, he stood frozen, his mouth agape.

"Wow..." he walked forward, entirely entranced by the beauty of his decorated living room. Colorful balloons were everywhere, from ceilings to walls, floor to the foyer area from where the guests would enter. He couldn't believe how, in such a short amount of time, his parents could pull through such a fantastic setup.

On the side table, he could see different decoration ornaments, party hats, party poppers, and different games scattered over the living room table. Looking up at the ceiling, he saw how beautifully a pattern was crafted from vibrant, colorful streamers. The ribbons were first attached to the walls and then brought together in the ceiling, resulting in a giant paper-made flower. He wheeled around like a yoyo to glance at his vibrantly decorated surroundings.

Pausing, he went to the dining table, where delicious snacks and treats were spread. The cake, made by Caysyn and his parents, was beautifully decorated with frosting and sprinkles and had five candles ready to be lit. He could smell the buttercream frosting from where he stood; licking his lips, he smiled.

It seemed like a perfect dream, way better than what he had daydreamed about for weeks. The doorbell grabbed his attention, and he rushed to welcome his friends. He met his father on the way, who patted his head as he leaped for the door. Greeting everyone in merry, he called everyone inside. Caysyn's best friend jumped forward to hug him, and then a series of exclamations rose as the guests took in the well-decorated view. On the side stood Caysyn's mom with a tray of party hats. Each kid picked up their hat and entered the living room one by one.

Caysyn had set up a large pile of toys and games for them to enjoy. They spent the morning engaged in various activities, such as truck racing, building towers out of colorful blocks, and coloring pictures in their favorite books. The house echoed with the sound of laughter, chatter, and the occasional outburst of excitement as the children relished in on the fun and celebrated the special occasion with pure happiness.

After lunch, Caysyn's dad took the group outside to the spacious backyard, where they played tag, hide-and-seek, and even had a relay race. Caysyn's mom surprised them with water balloons, which the children happily threw at one another. Laughing and dodging the splashes, they ran and played to their heart's content. Caysyn and his friends decided to play as teams to make the game more interesting as they wanted to see who could be the best 'balloon master,' a name they had artistically crafted at that very moment. Caysyn and Alan were in the same team, while others settled in the other three pairs.

Once the winner was selected, it was time for the grand finale of Caysyn's birthday celebration, the cake-cutting ceremony. Caysyn's parents led everyone back inside the house, gathering around the beautifully decorated cake, and the group sang the happy birthday song for Caysyn. Laughing, he closed his eyes and made a wish before blowing out the candles. Amidst applause and cheering, Caysyn and his parents sliced the cake and handed out slices to everyone.

The rest of the afternoon was spent playing more games and opening presents. Caysyn was thrilled with all the toys and books he had received, and he couldn't stop thanking his friends for coming to his birthday party.

Once his guests left, Caysyn rushed to his parents to hug them tight. Taking them in his small embrace, he shared words of affection, making his mother teary-eyed, and his father smile with a sense of accomplishment. There is nothing more special than seeing a child smile for a parent, and that day, they felt as if they had conquered all heights.

Talking about the memorial event, they passed a few hours in the company of one another and then called it a night. Caysyn slept in peace, holding onto the presents he had gotten today for his birthday.

The morning after his 5th birthday party, Caysyn woke up, rubbed his eyes, and yawned to shake off the sleepiness. He got off the bed and walked to the kitchen, where he saw his mom and dad chatting near the kitchen counter. Caysyn hugged them both one after another, feeling his father's hand resting on his head.

Caysyn stopped smiling as he felt a strange feeling settling within him. He saw that his parents were talking about waking him up, which confused him greatly as he stood behind them and hugged them.

He said, "Mom, Dad, I am right here; look." But they were oblivious to his presence. They did not respond or look his way, which made him feel weird. Waving his hands, he jumped a few times. "Mom! Dad! Hey, look!" No response came his way.

Exhausted by all the failed attention-grabbing techniques he knew of, he tried to touch them. His hand reached to touch his father's jeans but passed through as if he was the wind. He gasped and came back to his senses.

Gulping, he pulled his hands before his face, trying to see and feel the shape of his face in his grip. He thought perhaps it was a dream, but dreams require sleep to come up. He still couldn't get it out of his head, how it felt so real and, at the same time, felt like a construct of his mind.

Was he there? Were they real? Was it the buttercream frosting? Did it even happen?

"Aren't you too quiet for a recent birthday boy?"

"I feel weird."

"Weird, in what sense, honey," she said, flipping an egg.

"I feel like you were waking me up for my birthday again..."

"Somebody is still in the celebration spirits." She chuckled, heading for the table.

"Mom, I just had a weird, alive dream; it seemed like I was in a movie or something like right now when I walked into the kitchen."

"Oh really, that is nice. Did you fight some bad guys or ride a dragon?" she said, ruffling her hair.

"No! It was a real dream-like experience."

"Dreams aren't real."

"Well, this one was. I just dreamed or just saw that I saw you and Dad talking about waking me up, but you couldn't see me. It was like I was invisible or something."

"You know what else is invisible? My savings," said Dad, eyeing a slim pile of bills. His wife smiled as she buttered the toast near the kitchen counter.

"Dad... I am not lying."

"Who said anything about lying? We were talking about inflation, weren't we?" He looked up at his wife nonchalantly.

"No, Dad. We were discussing a more important thing. Please listen to me."

"Alright, Caysyn, come here. I am all ears." He patted the seat beside his.

Caysyn opened his mouth to speak but paused as he saw his father focusing on the bill. "MOM!"

"Alright, I am listening. Yes, speak oh chosen one." His dad bowed his head before him.

"This is not funny."

"But you are our chosen one, right honey? I mean, we couldn't replace you in time." Mom smacked his shoulder as she put the pancakes before Caysyn, who glared at his father.

"Caysyn, your father seems to be in a good mood today. That is why he is acting not like himself." She passed him a known glance, and he shrugged.

"Did you read a joke on one of the bills, Dad," Caysyn retorted, sipping his juice.

His father laughed out loud. "That is my boy! Alright, now you got my full attention. Junior Hotshot. Tell me everything from the start."

"You are going to drift off again."

"I promise I am not." He expectantly looked at Caysyn while chewing a bite of his pancakes.

"I saw a dream or something where I saw you both."

"Okay, pretty normal to see your old people." He smiled.

"It wasn't like a normal dream; I don't know... different. It was like I was standing beside you, but you couldn't see me."

"That's a strange dream, buddy," he said with a chuckle. "Maybe it means you're worried about not being seen or heard."

"But..." Caysyn paused and thought about that momentarily, but it didn't seem like a digestible answer. He felt uneasy like there was something more to his dream that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Honey, you shouldn't worry much about it. Sometimes, we feel weird, but it is normal for us to do so. Sometimes, we think it is weird because it is unusual. We also zone out sometimes and go deeper into our heads to think about things that might or might not have occurred."

"Your mother is right, Caysyn. Once you get older, you will witness things you will never understand, like this increasing government tax. Who designs these algorithms or whatever they are called," groaned his father, again eyeing the bill.

Caysyn looked at his ever-amused mother, who seemed unbothered by her husband's quickly flickering attention span. Caysyn sighed, pulling his plate closer to dig in.

The day slipped on as usual, with Caysyn playing with his toys and spending time with his family. He couldn't shake the weird feeling off his chest despite his willful distractions. It felt too real to be forgotten like that.

A part of him wanted to witness it again, only to make sense of it, but on the other side, a part of him didn't want to enter the forbidden imaginary realm in fear of another layer of

incomprehension. At the back of his mind remained a gentle thought. He believed his dream had a more profound connotation that he needed to understand.

As the evening approached, Caysyn decided to ask his parents if they had any ideas about what his dream could mean. They sat down together on the couch, and Caysyn narrated the dream again in detail.

His parents could see that Caysyn was still quite invested in the dream. Passing each other a look of understanding, they decided to hear him out again, this time with a fresh mind. Listening patiently till the very end, his mother said, "Sometimes dreams or dream-like situations can be a way of processing our emotions and thoughts. Maybe your feeling tells you you want to be seen and heard. You want to be noticed."

Caysyn looked at her face blankly. "I don't think it means that, Mom."

"Can you tell us what you feel like it means?"

"It feels real to me... I am not sure."

"Why does it feel so real to you."

"Umm, because I can clearly remember every single detail. I jumped and shouted to get your attention. You didn't listen because you couldn't see me. Then I tried to touch you, and then..." Caysyn furrowed his brows in thought.

He felt a hand on his cheek; his mom had slipped closer. "Then what happened?"

"Mom, I... tried to touch Dad's pants, and then my hand passed through. Like he was air."

He saw his mother raising an eyebrow at her husband. "Perhaps it is because your father doesn't listen to you closely."

"That is not true," he tried to defend himself.

"Your son just felt that he couldn't touch YOU. I know enough psychology to tell that it signals the distance between you and him."

His father turned white, looking at Caysyn's troubled face. He said, "I am sorry if I made you feel this way, buddy. I know. I agree with your mother. I sometimes get carried away with life and responsibilities, and because of that, I sometimes don't pay attention to the things or people that matter to me the most."

He came closer and sat on the table in front of his son. "I am extremely sorry, Caysyn. You deserve my full attention and love. Am I forgiven?"

Caysyn nodded softly as he was pulled into a solid hug. His mom smiled at him. Still, it wasn't enough; he needed elaboration to satisfy him. What his mother had pointed out made sense, but it wasn't it, at least to Caysyn.

"I think you should call your Grammy. She has lots of experience with dreams. Perhaps she can help you out." She knowingly smiled.

His father looked at him. "Do you still want us to talk about it?"

"No, I think I understand it a little bit."

"You don't have to say thank you for that. You can come to us whenever you want to talk, okay buddy." Caysyn nodded with a smile.

Once in his room, he thought about everything his parents had said to him, and he felt much better. Maybe his surreal experience was trying to tell him that he wanted to be recognized and appreciated more and feel like he belonged and mattered.

Caysyn felt a sense of peace wash over him as he lay down to bed that night. He had learned something important about himself that he would carry with him for a long time. And he knew he would never forget this strange dream-like experience he had the morning after his 5th birthday party.

He felt grateful to have parents who listened to him and allowed him to let his thoughts out in the open. Contented, he closed his eyes and drifted into a peaceful slumber.

From that day on, Caysyn had always felt different from other children. He felt disassociated standing amidst a crowd of kids. They would laugh and flutter like free beings, yet Caysyn, even after trying, couldn't completely let himself go. He felt an inward restriction gripping him in place.

Soon, he decided that crowds weren't his thing. He drifted knowingly to more secluded activities like throwing a rock in a lake or feeding the ducks in the park while his mom talked to a next-door neighbor.

Caysyn spent hours with himself, morphing day by day into a more introverted soul. The one who would look at people but would feel beyond their existence. After his fifth birthday, he began to have strange experiences where he started seeing people, but they could not see or hear him. At first, he thought he was dreaming whenever something like this would unfold, but it kept happening. He could see people around him, but they couldn't see him.

It had, with time, become a usual part of his life, and Caysyn realized what his parents had said wasn't what he was dealing with. It was something different, something his parents nor the people around him could understand. It was his discovery of which he had to uncover the answer.

As he grew older, the experiences became more frequent and vivid. He would find himself in different places, watching people go about their lives, but they were oblivious to his presence. He could hear their conversations and see their expressions, but he could not interact with them in any way. He had accepted that it was just him who could live through such experiences. He was the spectator, while the people he saw in his dream-like state were the specimens under his critical lens.

One day, during an attempt to socialize with his old friends. Caysyn witnessed an unusual moment. Six boys were in the group; four lived near his house, whereas the other two had two biked their way to the park for a meetup.

Caysyn stood listening to their goofy banter about things they liked, trying to participate through mild smiles and soft nods. Only when asked would he partake in the conversation, and that too, in a close-ended, yes-and-no manner.

The boys were okay with his little participation as they were pretty invested in the topic. A gentle smile played on Caysyn's lips. He enjoyed the feeling of being included, as it signaled a more typical approach to life. For him, at the moment, it was enough to stand among a group he could label as his friends, even though he rarely showed up at these play gatherings.

Tuning in, he heard. "So, my dad got the tickets for the latest basketball game," said Grayson in a flex.

"Who else is going with you?" Tommy asked from his bike.

"Just me and my old man. Guess where are we going after?"

"Where?" Tristen chirped.

"Al's. They got the best pizzas in town."

"I went there with my cousins a few days back. It is overhyped." Carson rolled his eyes as he kicked a pebble with his shoe.

"Personal preferences, I believe." Grayson didn't take the bait and continued to boast about the game to his other friends. From a distance, they saw a boy similar to their age approach them. Caysyn thought he looked familiar but couldn't remember where he saw him.

He was a skinny little guy standing at the age of nine. "Hello."

"Guys, this is Billy; he lives beside my home. He wants to play with us today."

"Nice. What are you good at, Billy?"

"At the moment... running." He panted, holding his knees.

They chuckled. "Why were you running?" Freddie asked.

"I am practicing for Marathons."

"Are you serious?" Eric looked at him in interest.

"Of course not. Am I crazy or something?" He scrunched his eyes at the sky.

"Then..." Tommy asked.

"Some weirdo stole my bike when I went to get ice cream," Billy said, slapping his hand in everyone's hands as a player does on a field.

Caysyn grew white as a flashback tumbled in his mind, where he saw two kids running away with a bike outside a shop. The dream was hazy; he could not see the kids' faces at the moment. He tried to zone in, but they existed as mere silhouettes.

"Caysyn, let's go. We are playing on the field," said Tommy.

"Umm, okay."

"You have grown into a bizarre person. I can't believe you are the same kid whose team won the balloon challenge at your birthday party. You were dope back then," Eric croaked to his face with a smug look.

"Stop bullying him and choose your partner," Freddie spoke from afar.

"He is with me." Grayson and Eric high-fived each other.

"You freaks are going down!" Eric shouted, looking at his friends.

Walking to the field, Caysyn felt a presence beside him. He looked, and it was the new kid, Billy, walking quietly with him. "Don't mind them; they got no life. You do you." Billy smiled.

"You can be my partner." Billy extended his hand, making Caysyn somewhat awkward.

"I know, not my style, but you look like you are meeting humans after a long time. Do you wanna partner?"

"Yes."

"One-worder, I see."

Caysyn passed an awkward smile. "Good, more words for me. I tell you what. I plan you follow? Deal?"

"Yes."

"Let's beat their asses. I might look like a stick but don't count it as a weakness. I am agile and faster than all of you here. Take my word for it. Plus, I am my school's best runner." He flashed a wide-toothed smile, which made Caysyn smile.

The game started, and surprisingly, the game chosen for today was a race across the field. Caysyn observed Billy as he blended into the crowd while the rules were being laid out. He didn't let his strength cloud his conscience. Acting slightly blank, he gestured Caysyn toward the track.

"Alright, here is the deal. I will take the first round; then you will finish it, okay?"

"Got it."

"And one more thing, don't run without the stick, or it will count as a forfeit even after reaching the finish line."

"Understood."

"Relax, and don't think about winning. Focus on your race rather than the outcome. My coach taught me that."

"So, you are training for a marathon?" Billy gaped at him for a while, then nodded.

"Perhaps I am crazy after all."

"I hope you reach the level you want to reach."

"Thanks, I don't have a level yet. I am just a kid. Let me be, man." He started stretching his legs by standing on his toes, balancing briefly, then relaxing his feet.

"You seem to know things."

"Nah, just a few stretching techniques even kindergartners would know."

"I don't."

"You ain't a kindergartner." They laughed.

The race started, and one of the kids volunteered as a referee. The partners took their places, waiting for the whistle to blow.

Billy nodded Caysyn's way as he got into position. The whistle blew, and off he went like a flash of lightning, leaving others behind in the dust. Caysyn panicked as he saw the bullet-like kid approaching him at full speed.

"WHAT THE HELL? RUN FAST, ERIC." He looked to his side; Grayson was going ballistic. Stomping, clenching his fists. His glare was set on Billy, who wasn't paying him much need.

In a flick of a moment, Grayson turned and grabbed Caysyn's arm in his. "Look! Freak. You better lose, or I will throw you in the trash bin on the way back." Releasing immediately, he kept his stare in sync with his, then focused on the front.

Caysyn got into place, feeling sweat trickling down his spine as he waited for his partner to arrive. His heartbeat increased, and he felt his throat getting clogged up. "Hey!" He zoned in just at the right time.

Taking the stick in his hand, he started his run for life. Constantly thinking about the overarching threat of Grayson, it revolved and toppled in his brain like an avalanche of stress.

What should I do? Should I win? They are bullies. What if they actually come after me? I have to go back home alone. Should I tell Billy?

Running, he felt his insides constricting his breathing. Panting, he kept running. His brain had cut off all sounds of his surroundings. The only thing that rattled in his ears was the beating of his heart.

I have to do it. I have no choice.

Caysyn placed his foot on a rock and lost his balance. He tumbled on the ground, skinning his arms and legs. "Oh shit!" Tommy, the referee, shouted at his nasty fall.

Grayson laughed aloud as Caysyn stood up and was harshly pushed to the side by Eric. "Move over, loser!"

Billy caught him from falling. "You alright?" Caysyn's face looked surreal as if his heart had stopped beating a while ago. "You look like you saw a ghost or something."

"I am sorry..." Caysyn muttered.

"It is just a game; some people take it too seriously," said Billy.

On the front, Eric and Grayson rubbed their victories in the other kids' faces. Caysyn gaped at them silently, feeling guilt revolving in his belly. On his left, Billy was having a hearty talk with one of the boys.

As the boys started to walk toward the park exit, Caysyn managed to creep closer to him. His voice had not a single pinch of defeat; he was still as witty as he had arrived, making everyone laugh with his humor.

"Billy!" Caysyn called out.

"Yes." He turned as the group faded from the park and scattered to different routes to their homes.

"Do you want to hang out?" Billy looked at Caysyn quietly, igniting within him a sense of panic.

"I don't mind hanging out, but I am about to shift soon to a new town," said Billy.

"Oh, when?" said Caysyn in a low voice.

"On the weekend, sad we met at the last moment."

"Yes, sad, but it is alright."

They roamed the streets, talking about mundane things. Billy told Caysyn about his school and how he often moved to different cities due to his father's occupation. He could never fully experience the atmosphere of a specific place. When he started feeling at home or made friends, he would pack up and move to another location.

"I don't even remember the last time I had a friend group," said Billy.

"But why?" asked Caysyn.

"Because the hardest part is to open up, let people in, and then get up to leave. Now, I am just tired of feeling like a freaking nomad. I just flow with my life now. Not knitting myself to things or people."

"Do you feel lonely?" asked Caysyn.

"Nah, I see myself as a lone wolf. It is inherited. My father was bred the same way. I guess I will do that to my kid."

"Do you have to do that to your kid?" Caysyn asked as he thought about something.

"I have to. I have been brought up this way. To tell you a secret, a new town starts eating me if I spend a little over the time I am used to being in a specific town. It is what it is."

"It makes me anxious."

"I don't feel anything now."

Caysyn turned a corner as he kept Billy engaged in the conversation. Passing the ice cream parlor, they entered a dirty alley. Crossing it till the end, they headed for a woody field. Billy, lost in the moment, skipped over rocks, moving forward while Caysyn kept his gaze fixed on the way.

Looking for the source of his curiosity, his eyes sparkled at the sight of an abandoned barn.
"Billy."

"Yes."

"Look."

Billy turned to gape at the barn. "Cool. Where are we anyway?"

"It doesn't matter."

Billy stepped a few steps back as he focused his eyes on Caysyn, who had no smile on his face.
"I am about to tell you something you will hate me for. But I like you, and you deserve to know the truth."

"You are not gonna kill me, are you?"

"What? Hell, no... why would I do that?" Caysyn felt offended.

"Then... what is with the spooky place."

"Because it is linked to what I will tell you."

"Okay, I am listening."

Caysyn walked closer to him, gaping at him eye to eye. "I am sorry, but we lost the race because of me."

"Dude, I told you it is cool."

"I fell on my own..."

"I know."

"What?" His mouth stood agape in shock. Billy casually smiled as he fixed his hair. "I knew you tripped on purpose. Grayson was giving you the stare throughout the game. From the start, I knew I would win unless someone pulled a stunt, and that is exactly what they did."

"Grayson said he would beat me up. I was scared."

"It is cool. I know a bully when I see one."

"So, you are not angry?"

"I won't be if you buy me ice cream."

"I got something better. Follow me."

Billy walked behind Caysyn as he made his way to the slightly ajar barn gate. "Don't tell me we are going in there."

"Don't worry. You are too nice to be snuffed out like this." Caysyn chuckled and pulled the gate to the side.

Billy gasped at the sight of his stolen bike. "WHAT, MY BIKE, HOW?" He excitedly pulled it out and scanned for any signs of damage. Looking up at Caysyn, he asked, "How?"

"Let's just say we are even."

"But... Who took it in the first place."

"It doesn't matter. In real life, you pay a hefty price for cheating. Their consequences are due."

Billy's smile subsided at the realization. Caysyn started walking out of the woods. "You still want ice cream, right?" he asked without turning.

"The treat is on me. I got my bike back."

"Okay, but I don't do below two scoops." They laughed.

"Hey."

"Yeah."

"Thanks, you are a different one."

"You bet I am."