

Tonsils¹

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James is eight, his throat is on fire, and he can't sleep. Tomorrow he's getting his tonsils removed and although his mom promised him it won't hurt, his sister, Linda, said that sometimes kids become mute after the procedure. These kids go on normally with their lives, she explained, but since they can't speak, they start thinking less and less, so time passes and they grow but they still have the mind of a kid, you see. They turn into children trapped in adult bodies. That's how we have Charles Chaplin, she said matter-of-factly.

James is unsure about that. He doesn't talk much but he is certain he can still use his brains. Besides, would an adult James think very differently from present James? He can't see how that's possible; he is a reasonable person, he tells himself. He likes puzzles and machines and numbers. What's more, he already knows he can go silent for a while; last year he spent one whole month without uttering a word just because, but he had to stop because his mom said he was getting on her nerves so much that she'd have a psychotic episode. How do you know, James asked, if you've never had one before? And that put an end to his month-long silent trial. It was getting boring, anyway.

Still, a tiny part of him wonders: what if it's true? James doesn't want to lose his voice forever. He needs it to play pretend with his animal figurines. Without him, how would they communicate? Some of them aren't even the same species.

James is also worried about the surgery itself. On his visit to the doctor last week, he overheard something that chilled him to the marrow. James and his mom were in the waiting room when a boy and his mother came out of the examination room. They were followed by Deborah, the nice nurse, who always smiles and gives James a cherry sour. But that day she was frowning, and while the other boy was looking at the book covers

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on the bookshelf of the waiting room, she leaned over and whispered something to the woman. Now, James prides himself on being a very perceptive person, thank you very much, which is why he knows how to read lips. It is because of this ability that he was able to understand the terrible words Deborah said. 'For the surgery, bring two sheets. One for tying him to the chair, and another one for the blood.' Was Deborah joking? Was she secretly a macabre woman, amused by children suffering? But if she was, why would she always give James candy? That certainly didn't cause him agony.

Either way, it definitely alarmed James. He asked the doctor if the surgery actually hurt, but he denied it, said it only felt like a tiny little prick. He should've probed further, he knows that now, should've asked about the sheets. But did he really want to know the answer? If what Deborah said is true, if some bloody sheets are waiting for him tomorrow, then there's nothing he can do about it. After all, he's only eight. He's only granted awareness, not free will. He can't choose what to have for dinner, he simply has to accept that there's boiled broccoli and that's it. This, he tells himself, is the same. There is no getting out of this, so what good would do him to be conscious of his future suffering? Knowing the outcome makes it real, which is why he'd rather stay blissfully ignorant.

Yet lying in bed, he keeps picturing his yellowed bedding turned red, blood pooling on the floor. He decides he's had enough and gets out of bed. On the bunk opposite his, Linda is sleeping on her back, mouth open. How lucky she is, James thinks, that her throat doesn't hurt from simply snoring. He tip-toes to the door of their room, careful not to step on his trucks, and crosses the hallway to his parents' bedroom. The light is on, coming from under the door, and James breaths out, relieved. His father never minds it, but his mom always gets cranky when he wakes them up. He opens the door and smells the faint scent of his father's shaving cream and his mother's cologne. His dad is fast asleep facing the ceiling, soft snores coming from his open mouth, while his mom is doing her nightly crossword. He nears the bed carefully and she looks up at him slowly. Suddenly it seems ridiculous, childish even, to ask his mom about the sheets. But it's now or never, right?

‘Mommy, last week,’ he fidgets, clenching his little fists, ‘Deborah told another boy’s mom to bring some sheets. For the surgery.’ He realizes he cannot state out loud what the sheets are for, or else his voice will break. ‘Is it true? Did she say that to you?’

Mom blinks her blue eyes slowly, lowers down the paper. ‘No’. She speaks so softly James almost doesn’t hear it. Thank goodness he can read lips. ‘No, it’s not true. You don’t have to worry at all, dear.’

He sighs and loosens his grip on his pajamas, relieved. But out of the blue another doubt arises in him, something he hasn’t stopped to consider before. Hesitantly, he speaks again, ‘And mommy...will they miss me? Will they...will they feel lonely?’

‘Who, darling?’, she frowns.

‘My tonsils. Will they feel lonely without me?’ She tightens her lips, exhales through her nose, and stays quiet for so long that James thinks she mustn’t have heard him.

‘No, they won’t, dear,’ she finally answers, although her voice sounds strange, wet almost. Maybe she’s coming down with a cold, James reasons, and she’ll get her tonsils removed, too. Maybe his tonsils and hers can stay together, and then they surely won’t feel lonely.

‘Okay. Goodnight, Mommy.’ He quietly leaves the room and gets on his bed, relieved. He’s going to be okay. Sleep comes quickly, and he dreams of two pink, gooey, formless shapes, holding hands.

When they arrive at the doctor’s office the next morning James is at ease. Deborah has already given him a cherry sour and Mom has brought her big handbag, which means they are going toy shopping afterwards. In the operating room, the doctor is fiddling with his tools, his back to them. Deborah points him to the chair in the middle of the room. It looks funny, James notices, like a hairdresser’s chair. He sits down on it, his mom on his side, and watches the doctor prepare his equipment. It resembles a mechanic’s, which makes him squirm in his seat. All of a sudden, he realizes he forgot to ask about the risk of becoming mute. He tries to stand, but Deborah pushes him back to the chair. His mom stands on his side, her white knuckles gripping her bag.

‘No’, he cries. ‘No, please, wait. I don’t want to be Charles Chaplin.’

Deborah seems amused, and in her usually sweet voice now turned morbid, asks
‘Whatever do you mean, darling?’

‘I don’t want to be an actor. I want to keep my voice!’, James shouts. Will this be
the last time he screams?

‘Oh, you won’t lose your voice! You don’t have to worry about that.’ Deborah nods
at his mother, who, staring at James with her clear blue eyes, opens her bag and takes
out two clean, white sheets.

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