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**Gavin and the Slide of Terrifying Terror!**

“It’s high time your Mother and I had *the talk* with you,” Mr. Geraldson said as he tied his son’s blindingly white shoelaces.

“Rick, we agreed to wait until he’s in the second grade!” Mrs. Geraldson insisted as she handed Gavin his *Encanto* lunch bag. The little guy was so excited, he kept wiggling his feet all over the place.

“Gavin, sit still. I can’t tie your damn shoes while you’re moving around.”

“Rick! Stop teaching him swear words. He’s only six.”

“He’s probably read enough swear words in all those books we give him!” Mr. Geraldson replied, pulling the laces as tight as a sailor’s knot.

Any kid would’ve been perturbed by seeing their parents argue first thing in the morning, but not Gavin. Gavin was far too distracted by the promise of the first day of grade one to even register his parents’ marital squabble. He heard rumblings that in the first grade *you* could select the books *you* wanted to read, nap time was a relic of the past and the teachers treated you like little, mature adults. He was on the verge of entering an educational paradise, free from the perpetual ageism of kindergarten. Grade one was sure to be Gavin’s year. He felt it in his tight shoelaces.

“Gavin, sweetie, are all the books you want for today in here?” Mrs. Geraldson held up his backpack.

“Do you have *Peter Rabbit* and *The Magic Finger* in there?” Gavin double checked. Gavin read more books in a year than his parents combined. And they both had English degrees.

“Yes sweetie,” Mrs. Geraldson assured him.

“I think I got everything,” Gavin smiled looking up at his parents.

Mrs. Geraldson smiled back at him. But Mr. Geraldson didn’t smile. Looking like a stern patriarch, he exhaled a laborious sigh:

“Gavin, you know you’ll be playing in a new recess area now that you’re in the first grade, right?”

Gavin nodded, still with a beaming smile on his face.

“In kindergarten, you remember all you had to play with was the swing set? While the bigger kids had a whole playground set?”

Gavin nodded, his smile still there but slowly fading.

“Rick, are you sure…” Mrs. Geraldson interjected.

“Don’t you think we should tell him before he sees it?” Mr. Geraldson raised his eyebrows, furrowing his forehead into deep lines.

Gavin wondered where this conversation was heading.

“Today at recess, you may see a *slide*, Gavin.”

“A…a…slide?” Gavin hated the very word. He sometimes had to cease reading a book if the word was used more than once.

That’s right. Gavin Geraldson, the six-year-old avid reader all set for his first day of school with a clip-on tie, child sized khakis and a light purple dress shirt, had a phobia of slides. All slides. Water park slides, slip n’ slides, helter skelters, curved slides, plastic slides, metal slides and especially component slides!

When Gavin was four, his parents took him to the Pringlewood Playground. Gavin had the misfortune of having his first experience on a slide tainted by an accident. Mrs. and Mr. Geraldson were in an argument over whether or not Gavin’s reading material was age appropriate, when he began climbing the plastic steps leading up to that very slide. It was a yellow, component slide, meaning it was attached to additional playground equipment. Unremarkable looking to most children but Gavin was awestruck. He had never seen nor used one of these contraptions before! Parents typically wait at the bottom of the slide to make certain their kids enjoyed the ride, but the Geraldsons were too busy talking about him to even *notice* him. They didn’t notice when an older boy grew impatient with Gavin’s hesitation and pushed him down the slide without his consent! Gavin shot like a bullet straight down and landed hard and fast onto the ground. When the Geraldsons rushed over to him, his arms and legs were locked in a fetal position. Gavin’s back ached for only a few minutes, but his fear set in. It took hold of him like a deadly snake wrapping itself around his tiny neck, not letting go. Gavin hadn’t gone near a slide since that afternoon.

In spite of his parents’ warning, Gavin enjoyed his first few hours of the school day. But that was probably because he hadn’t set foot on the playground. Recess was slowly approaching, but he was very absorbed in Mrs. Harper’s reading of E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. Gavin was sitting on the blue carpet with the other first graders. He periodically looked around and noticed all their eyes were focused on the cover of the book held in front of Mrs. Harper’s face. But one student looked as uninterested as a university student in a compulsory medieval literature course. In Jungian terms, this student was Gavin’s shadow. Complete with dry skin, a black t shirt with a hole along the neckline, fiery, red hair and a permanent look of deviance. Mrs. Harper had each of the students wear a name tag on this first day. Although the name tag was half in, half out of the neckline hole, Gavin could still make it out. It read: **MOSS**, in huge, dark lettering. Reading it, Gavin thought: *that’s a silly name.*

Recess came. Gavin sat on the grass reading with his back turned away from the colourful playground right behind him. A little way away from the main playground was a single, tubed metallic slide with one massive loop in the middle. Gavin had taken one look at it and immediately cemented a home on the grass with Roald Dahl’s *The Magic Finger*. Gavin was so engrossed in his book, he didn’t hear the heavy, formidable footsteps of Moss approaching. Imagine his surprise when Moss rudely snatched the pages out of his hands:

“What are you doing with this?” Moss demanded.

“I am reading it,” Gavin responded.

Moss frowned. “Reeaddding?! Why do you read at recess?!”

“Because I like reading.”

Moss kicked a clump of grassy dirt towards the metallic slide.

“Do you think you’re coooool cause you have a book?”

“I just like books.”

Moss continued to kick grass in the direction of the slide.

“Why do you do that?” Gavin inquired. Always so curious about *everything*.

“I’m a moss kicker. It’s in my name,” Moss responded pridefully.

“But that’s not moss. It’s grass.”

“It is *moss*,” he said towering over him. “You don’t know everything just cause you reeeaad.”

“But moss grows…” Gavin began.

“Moss and grass are the same thing!” Moss stamped his feet.

What Gavin didn’t know was Moss’ full name was Mosby. The bully didn’t quite care for it so he shortened it to Moss, thinking it made him sound cooler and scarier (it didn’t). What Gavin also didn’t know was that he detested being told he was wrong, hence the sensitivity about the difference between grass and moss. Another thing Gavin didn’t realize was that this dislike of his name coupled with his lack of humility triggered what can be referred to as a *bully response*. Moss wanted to punish Gavin for his disagreement. The same way he punished and bullied every other child.

“Hey bookworm! You wanna know something secret?”

Gavin nodded his head quickly.

“You see that thing?” Moss pointed at the tubed, metallic slide behind them. “You see how no one is playing on it?”

Gavin nodded again, more quickly this time.

“That’s because every kid is scared of the *Slide of Terrifying Terror*!” Moss exclaimed raising his hands in a ghoulish manner. “There once was a kid named Billy Bob Jr. He was in our grade and one day he wanted to play on the slide. Billy Bob Jr. slid down it…but he never made it to the bottom.”

“Why didn’t he make it to the bottom?” Gavin asked as he closed his book.

Moss took a long glance at the Slide of Terrifying Terror. Obviously improvising this tall tale.

“Because the slide eats all the little kiddies up with its ginormous fangs! The fangs of a vampire! And after it eats the kiddies, it lets out a wolf howl!”

Gavin took a reluctant but concentrated look at that slide, his stomach forming into knots even tighter than his shoelaces. He could imagine the jagged fangs at the bottom opening of the slide, glistening in the sunlight like a vampire’s fangs. But this vampire wasn’t about to wither away from sun exposure. Staring back at Gavin, the slide appeared to utter a powerful, werewolf howl. It occurred to Gavin that slides were more than dangerous, they were cold blooded killers! Cold blooded child killers at that!

“You know what I wanna do with this?” Moss dangled *The Magic Finger* in front of Gavin’s face. His attention so consumed by the slide he didn’t notice his book was no longer next to him.

With the book in his hand, Moss climbed up the six rungs on the slide ladder and laid the book cover down at the very top.

“Hopefully no wind pushes the book down the slide, cause then it will be eaten!” Moss cackled as he climbed back down. “Go and get it, fraidy-cat!”

Utter hopelessness, that’s how Gavin felt for the rest of the day. Hopeless at the prospect of getting *The Magic Finger* back. He couldn’t conceive of any possible way for him to finish reading the story. He thought the best course of action would be for Mr. or Mrs. Geraldson to obtain the book for him. Until he realized the Slide of Terrifying Terror may have no qualm about eating the parents of children!

Later on, it was the end of the school day, Gavin watched all the other kids running into their parents’ arms but the Geraldsons were nowhere to be seen. Usually Gavin relished in any extra time to read, but *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* took him all of fifteen minutes to devour. And he knew where his other reading material was located…

As if Gavin wasn’t already having a testing day, a few raindrops started to beat down from high above. Then the few raindrops turned into dozens and then into hundreds. Gavin raced around the entire Pringlewood Elementary building, trying every door available. All were locked. Not only was there no shelter to shield himself from the pouring rain, but *The Magic Finger* was getting magically soaked laying atop the Slide of Terrifying Terror.

“Gavin….Gavin…Gavin,” the voice sounded like a venomous snake.

He turned around and the bottom of the slide had fully formed into a large mouth, the fangs protruding out like nails sticking out of a wall. Gavin rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his imaginative gaze. But the slide remained in this monstrous form. It let out an ear drum bursting howl. That’s when Gavin dashed under the playground set, just below the monkey bars. The bars didn’t offer amazing protection so he thought of taking the cover of *Peter Rabbit* and placing it over his head. But Gavin just couldn’t bring himself to do this. Then he thought of the damage the rainwater was doing to the book written by one of his favorite authors. He pictured the black, inky font of the words pouring out on all four sides of the book, seeping down the Slide of Terrifying Terror, as if quenching its thirst. For now. Until it got itself a taste of Gavin’s blood!

He started recalling the early chapters of *Charlotte’s Web*: how the spider was brave enough to save Wilbur from being slaughtered. Gavin wondered if anyone would write about him as a bravecharacter. He thought to himself: *am I a brave person? Or am I a fraidy-cat?* That image of his sopping wet book started to haunt his psyche even more than the Slide of Terrifying Terror. No amount of fear was going stop him from saving what he cared about most: literature.

As he slowly approached the slide, it hissed: “That’s it my boy, try the slide. You’ll only find it terrifying for a few short moments and then…you won’t feel a thing.”

The sinister voice of the slide started mixing in with the downpour, to the point where Gavin couldn’t even hear it anymore. He was choosing literature over fear. He climbed the first rung of the ladder. Holding his breath, he raised his foot onto the second rung. Then the third. Before setting foot on the fourth rung, he thought of turning around and calling the whole thing off. But he pushed through that feeling, making the last two effortful steps to the top. His book was nowhere to be seen.

Gavin quickly surmised that the wind from the storm must’ve guided *The Magic Finger* into the inside of the slide or onto the ground below. He was about to turn around when he saw his parents approaching the playground, both running towards him and each with their own umbrella.

“Is he…” Mrs. Geraldson nudged Mr. Geraldson.

“He is, honey. Our boy wants to face his fear. Maybe now we can stop arguing over whether or not he’s normal for his age,” Mr. Geraldson beamed.

Gavin waited for them to come closer. To spare him the terror of the Slide of Terrifying Terror. But they both stood still. Mrs. Geraldson took a step forward, but Mr. Geraldson shook his head.

“Try it Gavin! You can do it sweetheart!” Mrs. Geraldson called out.

“We’re right here if anything goes wrong!” Mr. Geraldson echoed.

Gavin sat down on the shiny metal. He didn’t like that he couldn’t see the ground from this angle, but this time he was grateful his parents were watching. And in three…two…one: he pushed *himself* down. He didn’t shoot down like a bullet or glide so slowly like a tortoise, he slid smoothly at a medium pace. The ideal speed for a boy trying to overcome his fear. As he made it to the loop in the middle, he spotted a familiar object resting against the inside. Taking his feet and placing them against the inside metal to stop his ride, he reached out and triumphantly grabbed *The Magic Finger*. It was only moderately wet, nothing Mrs. Geraldson’s hairdryer couldn’t fix. When he made it to the bottom, he sat on the wet grass with the book is in his hands and thought: *that’s what all the fuss is about?!*

“Gavin! Sweetheart, we’re so sorry we were late!” Mrs. Geraldson exclaimed rushing over with her umbrella.

“I was just trying out the slide.”

Mr. Geraldson came over and scooped him up with his free hand, “How did you like it?”

“Are there any books I can get on slides?” Gavin excitedly asked.

Mrs. Geraldson smiled, “Yes, Gavin. There are many books on slides.”