

## **How to disappear completely**

By Halimat Farayola

When Gavin returned from school, he found his house lit up like it was Christmas eve. It was an inordinately warm April evening, but there were streams of light— red, yellow and blue— dancing against the wooden panels of his house. They came from the mounts that sat atop two police cars parked on his front lawn.

That morning, for the first time since he could remember, his parents let him take the bus. Usually, they drove him to and from school, a routine that gained derision from his fellow 5<sup>th</sup> graders who had been taking the bus since they were six. Gavin had been so pleased with their flexibility that he did not notice the tense atmosphere and pallor of his parents' faces that morning at breakfast. Odder still, his father's Camaro was still parked in the driveway, and it seemed like he hadn't taken it to work that day. He wove his way through the parked cars with an odd sense of déjà vu, and rushed into the living room, still wearing his dirty sneakers.

The first thing he saw when he entered the room were the police officers on the two-seat sofa. The one closest to him took up three quarters of the couch, and his round cheeks were flushed with effort as he leaned forward to address the people sitting before him. The second, almost completely obscured by her partner's frame, was a pretty blond with kind eyes. On the other sofa, the large one, Gavin saw the backs of three heads. On either end of the couch were the familiar silhouettes of his mom's blond bob, streaked with grey, and his dad's wispy brown head of hair with an increasingly obvious bald patch in its center. Sandwiched between them was a boy with a familiar mop of brown hair. At the sound of Gavin's footsteps, all heads turned to regard him, and he got his first view of the boy's face.

It was like looking into a mirror. The boy looked like Gavin wanted to when he'd finally escaped the clutches of adolescence. His full brown hair swooped effortlessly around his thin face in a way that shamed Gavin's unruly curls, and his skin had a light brown hue unlike Gavin's porcelain skin dotted with red acne spots. Feeling hot under their eyes, Gavin let his backpack fall to the ground as his knees

buckled. Slowly, a sense of familiarity washed over him until he was sure he knew who the strange boy was.

. “Oh Gavin”. His mom approached him with outstretched arms, enveloping him in a hug, and her already red eyes began to well with tears. He felt the wetness of her tears land on his scalp. “Gavin, it’s Jake. He’s back. Your brother is back. They finally found him.” She turned to look at her other son, “It’s your little brother, it’s Gavin. He’s missed you so much.” She led him to the seated boy, with gangly legs clad in dirty, torn up jeans, “Say hello.”

Gavin gave his brother a stiff side hug, and Jake flinched. After standing confused for a few minutes, he mumbled under his breath, “I’ve got homework”. With that, he trundled off to his room.

He felt numb as he mechanically took off his school clothes, leaving them in a pile at the foot of his bed. He knew he should have felt something—a lot of somethings. He should have cried. And run to hug his brother who he had not seen for five years. His brother who he had been told was probably dead. Whose memorial service was held two years ago. He should have been overjoyed and fixed at his side—instead he ran away.

Gavin pulled out his geometry homework and sat at his desk, hoping to quell his restless thoughts. Through the window before him, he could see the sun setting behind the McDermotts’ house. The waning light hit the trees in his garden, casting their shadow against the walls behind him. The branches etched an eerie pattern on the movie posters plastered on his walls. The largest one, a poster of the animated Disney movie ‘Joseph: King of Dreams’, was transformed in the shadows, the ‘branches’ crawling on Joseph’s coat like poison ivy. To Gavin, it seemed like they were reaching up to pull him into the earth. He shuddered and quickly switched on his desk lamp. The shadows melted back into the dark.

He tried to focus on his homework, squinting at the shapes on the page, but the isosceles and scalene triangles began to morph. The trapezoid became the swing set he had soared on the day his brother went missing. Jake had stood behind him, palms open, gently propelling him forward. He flew higher and higher. When he reached the peak of his arc, he would free one of the hands that tightly clutched the swing’s rope and reach for the pretty clouds. He was sure that if Jake pushed with more

gusto, he would have their wispy form in his clutches. Jake had another idea. “Hey, you’ve had enough time on there. It’s my turn!” he protested

“Wait,” whined the 5-year old, “I’m almost there”.

It slowly dawned on Gavin that his brother had ignored his plea as he stopped accelerating towards the sky. The arcs swept by the swing became smaller with each oscillation until he came to a jerking halt. The ropes twisted together with Gavin tangled between them.

“Get up! It’s my turn,” Jake commanded.

“No use another one.”

“They’re all taken.”

“I don’t care,” Gavin said, clutching the ropes so tightly that he could feel their fibers digging into his palms. “I’m gonna tell Mum,” Jake mumbled.

And that was the last time Gavin ever saw his brother. Jake set off to find their mother, who was in a long line, waiting to get rocky road ice cream and candy floss for her boys. Gavin tried to resume his swinging, digging his toes into the ground like he’d seen the older kids do, but he could never get enough momentum to launch him off. After a few failed attempts, he decided to sit in a nearby sand pit. His mom returned after what seemed like eons, bearing sweet treats in her hands. Gavin rushed to her and claimed his share of the spoils.

“Where’s your brother?”

Gavin shrugged and continued the assault on his ice cream cone. It was uncertain when his mother’s weary irritation rose to frenzied desperation as she searched for her absent son. The whole thing was a daze to Gavin. He only remembered being carted around the park as his mother called out for Jake. Parents instinctively clutched their children as they realized what was happening, staring at the unfolding scene with a mix of relief and pity. Someone called the cops. She called her husband, then her sister.

His aunt showed up with her four kids in tow and took Gavin to her house. They had hamburgers and shakes for dinner. He found that weird since they were a vegetarian household. Later that night, she drove him home, glancing at him occasionally through the mirror with sad eyes. He found his house

covered with pretty lights and filled with cops wearing dirty boots and sipping coffee. Someone wrapped him up in his favorite quilt blanket and he was ushered to the dining room. The lead detective, a gaunt fellow with light blue eyes, light hair and a general translucence about him, sat waiting for the boy. He questioned Gavin thoroughly, but as gently as he could.

Did he notice anyone watching them? Did he see anyone following Jake? How long did his mom leave them alone for? How long was Jake gone before his mom returned?

Gavin had no clue, plus he wasn't that good at telling time.

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Gavin grew tired of pretending to do his homework. Since he didn't feel like interacting with the people congregated in the living room, he settled for eavesdropping on their conversation. The part of him that wondered what had happened to his brother, the part that wondered if it was his fault, reared its head.

"Normally, we would keep young Jake here under observation at the hospital for another week." boomed the male cop with his distinctly mid-Atlantic accent, "He's doing great though and I can tell he just wants to get back to normal, don't you boy?"

*Silence*

"We'll have an officer posted outside twenty-four seven until everyone responsible is locked up. Mr. Bartsch, I have some updates on that. In the meantime, Julie here will wait behind until she's relieved by the next shift." Gavin heard shuffling and the sound of approaching feet. He quickly scuttled back to his room, anxious to avoid meeting the two in the hallway. He could still vaguely hear their conversation.

The officer began, "You expressed your concern about Jake having to testify. As I said before, the Schulers, the couple who kept him, have already confessed and are cutting a plea deal with the D.A.-"

Mr. Bartsch interjected, his voice rising sharply, but Gavin was unable to make out his words.

"Yes, I understand your frustration, but we need to look at the bigger picture. The people who actually took your son, the trafficking ring that sells child labor are a national operation. We need help bringing them down"

“Yes, there will be a sentence hearing, and some of the other children will make a victim impact statement but Jake does not have to participate. Let’s not worry about that right now, that’s several months away, and your boy may very well be ready to face them by then”

Gavin’s father spoke again, and Gavin caught the words “hospital” and “shrink”, before the policeman continued, “The doctor spoke to you about some deficits in his diet, and uh... everything has been transferred to your primary care doctor. You saw him two weeks ago when we found him, and he’s looking a lot better now”

Gavin’s heart stopped for a second, and the world lost focus. He could still hear the voices in the hallway, but the words took on a strange quality, as though they were spoken underwater.

“Our department’s psychiatrist assures me that with the therapist he referred you to and a lot of patience you’re going to see a lot of progress. Of course he will-“

Gavin laid in his bed staring at the ceiling in a daze until he heard a soft rap on his door.

“Gavin are you there?” his mom’s voice called faintly. Gavin grunted in assent, and she cracked the door open and poked her head through the gap. Her face had aged five years within the last twenty-four hours. The blood-shot whites of her eyes were highlighted by the ring of messed up mascara that circled them. The lines on her face that were usually softened by expensive creams and expertly applied make up stood out more than ever before, and a blue vein throbbed on her forehead. Despite all this, her green eyes sparkled like a Christmas ornament. There was so much hope radiating from them; so much light.

“Dinner is ready. Your aunt Karen brought over Jake’s favorite—lamb roast and potatoes. Come down soon okay?” She didn’t ask him how his homework was going, or how after school bible study had been, or what he’d bought for lunch.

“Can’t I just eat later? I’m not really hungry,” he said petulantly.

“Oh honey,” she said entering his room and taking a seat on the edge of his bed, “I want us to eat dinner together as a family. To be one happy front. For Jake. That’s what he needs right now. He’s been through so much.”

“What... What happened to him?” he asked. He turned his head away so she wouldn’t see the lone tear that escaped from his eye.

It was his mom’s turn to stutter. “He was taken to work on a farm. In...in Hudson Valley,” she said struggling to cough out the words, “All this time he was so close to us.” Gavin remembered the conversation between his father and the police officer and realized the couple that had taken Jake were the farmers his mother was referring to. He’d never imagined that farmers were anything but sweet and wholesome. He thought to himself that it wouldn’t be so bad to work on a farm with fresh milk and newly laid eggs for a breakfast.

“Some bad people took little kids from their families and sent them to work on farms. But thank god, the police have been working so hard to find Jake and all the other poor kids,” she continued. In truth, the police stopped looking for her son long ago. All the tv shows said that if a child wasn’t found after 72 hours there were probably dead, and it seemed that the Bergen county police subscribed to this belief. As weeks passed after Jake’s disappearance, their efforts to find him slowed down until they screeched to a halt after five months. No more tip lines, no more posters, no more progress reports, just radio silence. And there were no more free baked goods, or trays of mac and cheese or fruit baskets. And Gavin’s teacher stopped giving him extra help. And his classmates stopped offering to share their KitKat at lunch. He became just another morose dork.

The elder Bartschs pored over newspaper clippings and scoured the dark net looking for child trafficking rings and molesters. As they dove deeper into this world, their grief was transformed into paranoia. They put parental guidance filters on their computer, and still didn’t let Gavin on it without supervision. They started walking him to the bus stop but realized that his bus could get hijacked by terrorists or he could be lured away from the school’s compounds by a pedophile ‘searching’ for a lost puppy. Driving him everywhere was the only recourse. And could they really let him visit with friends? One never knows which kid is a budding sociopath.

When their search failed to produce any results, they hired a private investigator and drained their savings on the fruitless hunt. Nine hundred and sixty-seven days after Jake’s disappearance, he finally

died in his mother's heart. Then in his father's. They held a memorial service in church with a photo he had taken on his third-grade picture day on display. He'd had on the green bowtie he'd insisted on wearing every day that week, and a black tuxedo that his parents had bought for a wedding a few months before. The gap where his lower teeth used to be was displayed proudly. The church was filled with mourners despite the unorthodox nature of the service. Gavin gave a speech. His words were scrawled roughly on a piece of paper he had ripped out of his schoolbook. He stood on the podium, head barely visible over the lectern, in his hand-me-down tux. It was the one Jake had been wearing in the picture. However, it was much too big for Gavin and the cuffs of the trousers draped over his shiny black shoes. He straightened the piece of paper, which was damp with sweat, and stammered over his speech. It wasn't very good but the little figure he cut brought tears to his audience's eyes.

That evening, they went home to an empty house, their belongings and memories packed up in cardboard boxes. It was as though once they'd given up on finding Jake, they tried to get as far away as possible from every reminder of his life. Their house, which was marked with indelible signs of Jake's presence – the chart in the kitchen on which they had monitored all his growth spurts, the peeling paint on the bathroom wall from the time he had let the bath run over and scrawls of crayon all over the living room walls– was put on the market and they moved to a two-bedroom bungalow several districts away.

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Gavin eventually agreed to come down to dinner. He was the last person to arrive at the table and he took a seat between his parents. Afraid to look into the eyes of the boy who sat opposite him, he noticed from his periphery that his brother hadn't touch his food save for a single potato whose flesh he burrowed into. On the table sat a tray with an impressive row of roasted and Frenched lamb chops. Around the meat, were bowls of vegetables– brussels sprouts, fingerling potatoes and carrots– pots of sauces and an apple pie. The spread shamed anything they'd ever had for Christmas or Thanksgiving. He wondered how his mom had found time to prepare this feast.

His mother piled his plate high with food, and despite his initial protests Gavin scarfed it down without blinking. Once all that was left on his plate were bones of his lamb chop and unwanted vegetables, Gavin took a second look at Jake. He was still brandishing the fork like a weapon, prodding the contents of his plate, without any of the food actually making its way into his mouth. Their mother noticed too.

“What’s wrong with your food, dear?” she said, “Has it gone cold? I know you can’t eat too much fiber but try some of that lamb. Would you like some pizza instead? What about cookies and warm milk?”

Mrs. Bartsch’s brows knitted as her son stared blankly while she rattled off suggestions. At the mention of warm milk and cookies, she detected the slightest bob of his head. His eyes came up to meet hers, but he quickly looked away.

She let out a sigh. “Okay we’re going to get you some milk and chocolate chip cookies.” She dragged her chair back, and stood up hurriedly, bumping her knee against the dining table. Jake’s plastic cup of water toppled to its side, spilling its contents onto the cherry wood surface.

Mr. Bartsch let out a soft cuss.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of that.” Mrs. Bartsch said flitting into the kitchen’s doorway. Seconds later, she emerged with a roll of paper towels. All eyes on the table were fixed on her small frame as she wiped up the mess. After she disappeared back into the kitchen, her husband yawned loudly, and shot an apologetic smile to both his sons.

“Man, am I tired. It’s been a long, stressful day. I bet you boys can’t wait to get a good night’s rest?” He paused. “Jake, I guess you’ll be staying in Gavin’s room.” Jake didn’t acknowledge the sound of his name, but continued to stare at his uneaten food.

They didn’t notice Mrs. Bartsch standing in the kitchen doorway until she said, “No. Remember what the doctor said? He needs us to give him space. He’s not even comfortable with being touched.” Her voice broke a little.

The oven timer went off and she hurried back into the kitchen. The aroma of melted chocolate chips wafted into the dining room.

“Gavin can stay in our room.”

“Hey,” Gavin yelled, “No way.” He reflected in horror on how mercilessly he would be teased if anyone at school found out he’d slept in his parents’ room. *No way*, he repeated in his head.

“Gavin,” his mom cautioned, returning to the room with a mug of milk and a plate of cookies which she placed in front of Jake, “We need you to be understanding.”

He racked his brain to find a way out of the predicament, and suggested, “I can sleep here in the living room.”

“No,” “Are you sure,” said his parents simultaneously.

He ignored the first sentiment. “I’m sure” he said, beginning to feel excited, “It’ll be fun. I can get snacks from the fridge whenever I want and watch tv the whole night.”

“You have school tomorrow”, his mom said without meeting his gaze.

“Fine, only for like an hour.”

And so, it was settled. Around 10pm, Gavin went into the bathroom to wash up for bed. He tiptoed into his room, aware that his brother lay in the bed. He held his breath hoping with all his might that his brother was asleep. Jake did not twitch as he opened his closet doors, and Gavin felt his muscles unstiffen. He quickly pulled on fleece pajamas and tiptoed out of the room.

When he returned to the living room, he found the large sofa fitted with fluffy pillows and a comforter. He turned the tv back on and nestled into the couch to watch reruns of iCarly. Minutes later, his mum came in to say good night. She kissed his forehead and told him to go to sleep soon.

Gavin wasn’t exactly sure when he fell asleep, but he suddenly found himself, not on his living room couch but, on a vast plane surrounded by tall, golden dunes. It was a freezing night and the sand swirled around him, hitting his skin like shards of glass. He bit down on grains of sand that had found their way into his mouth. He was wearing a billowing, brown cloak with a hood that shielded his head. He pulled its collar up to protect the lower half of his face from the storm and continued his laborious trek.

Ahead of him were three figures, barely visible through the swirling sand. He knew, somehow, that the cloaked shapes were his parents and his brother. By the light of the moon, he could see that they were dressed identically. All except Jake who wore a once beautiful cloak, striped with every color of the rainbow. It was now coated with dust and grime from the journey.

They had been walking for days, searching for signs of life. Their lantern had long been extinguished and they were down to their last drops of water. Gavin's mother had fallen in the dark and was now limping, with Jake and her husband supporting her on either side. On the seventh day, they came across a distant figure, and as they approached it their hearts leapt for joy. It was a well! Like a wind-up toy, Jake used his last vestige of energy to sprint to the structure. He lowered the bucket in, but instead of a splash, he heard the clang of metal hitting rock. He fell to his knees and wailed. Tears streamed down their faces as their last hope of getting water dissolved before their eyes.

They decided to rest for a while, sitting on the bare sand. Gavin finished off the water in the goat skin bottle and laid on his back to gaze at the stars. The rest of his family were in a hushed but heated discussion. Then, everything went quiet and he saw them towering over his lying body. He didn't become alarmed until he felt them grab his limbs and hoist him up.

"Wait, what are you doing?" he shrieked, but their faces were set in conviction. "I'm sorry" was the last thing he heard before he fell. He hit the well's bottom with a dull thud.

"Wait, don't leave me here!" he yelled, his voice echoing in response.

"Please!" he begged as the well slowly filled with sand.

He began to scream on the couch in his living room still submerged in the terrible nightmare. He only woke up when he heard anguished screams coming from someone else. He opened his eyes. The tv was still on but its sounds were drowned by the bloodcurdling shrieks coming from another room in the house. He heard a door slam and the shuffle of his parents' feet as they raced out of their room. But they never came to him. He heard the faint squeak of his room door opening and his mother's voice ask, "Are you okay?"