

THE CHILD

Boy or girl?" They keep asking. Every day. Over and over. Once I counted six times. Six different people in one day. Always asking about the least interesting part of me.

"Girls have long hair, dear. Are you a girl?"

"You're dressed like a boy, but your face is a girl's. What are you?"

"Today you're a princess, yesterday you were a fireman. Which is it?"

"I would love lips like yours. Aren't you a pretty boy?"

"Well, which are you? Answer me!"

I used to answer to everyone, as Mama taught me to always answer a grown-up's questions, and also to be polite to people. So I'd look up at their asking eyes and work out which answer they wanted. I'd repeat it back to them, agreeing with what they think they saw. I've gotten very good at this.

Mama also used to start talking over me, sometimes telling them to mind their own business. But I wanted to speak, so I asked her to let me and now she always does.

I can see that sometimes she has to work hard not to start talking over me.

But now I'm more clever and I only talk to some of the grown-ups on the bus because I can work out which ones are likely to give me sweeties or a few coins.

I may as well make something out of their annoying questions, and it makes the time on the bus go by faster. I've played this game

for a long time, so I mostly know what they're going to say to this before they do.

Once I even had a kind man give me his lovely red-and-blue hanky from the pocket in his suit jacket. We hadn't talked for long, but it must have been for long enough because when I asked if I could touch the shiny material, he said it was silk and that I could keep it as he never used them and didn't really know why he put them in his pocket every day.

The man and I had obviously checked with Mama first and she knew him from her school days, so she said it was fine. I love that soft hanky and often have it in my pocket.

Mama doesn't care what I wear when we go out, she just cares that I take so long getting to the back door and that she has to ask me a gazillion times if I've remembered to clean my teeth and have I got a jumper 'cos it's cold outside and have I got something to keep me busy on the bus.

She says it's as if this all comes as a surprise to me every day. I'm ready to go most of the time, but often I get started reading a book or building some toy world and forget that she's tapping her foot at the door waiting to go, until she starts shouting up the stairs at me. Her face never changes when she sees me coming down the stairs in whatever I'm wearing. She's too busy hurrying me out of the door.

I'll tell you how I get free stuff off people on the bus. As we get on, I'll look around at the people and sit us down by someone who I think looks like the right sort of grown-up.

Mama lets me lead us to our seats. As the bus moves off I'll usually start playing a war game with my plastic dinosaurs if I'm in my princess dress, or else I'll get my two babies out of my bag if I'm in my army clothes. I'll play quite loudly near them and smile and smile at them. If I'm in my princess dress they will look over and say,

"What a fun game! Does your brother know you've borrowed his toys?"

I make sure that I laugh back louder than needed at their funny comment and they'll smile and think we're friends, and before long they'll start joining in with my game.

Then the other questions will start, always beginning with the one that they think will tell them the answer,

"What's your name?"

"Kit." This isn't my real name. I chose it. I love it because it lets me be who I want to be, every day of the week. They hate it 'cos it doesn't tell them anything about me.

"Is that short for anything, dear?" Eyes searching my face, hoping for clues.

"Nope, that's all there is."

"Oh. What about a middle name, you got one of those?"

"Yup. Sam." Another lie.

"Oh, okay."

Here there's always a pause. Mama says they're looking me up and down to look for clues, but when I look in the mirror and look at myself up and down, I can't always tell, so how would a stranger be able to? Sometimes I hear a "confusing" muttered under their breath, before they glance over at Mama in the hope of her giving them an answer,

I love it because it lets me be who I want to be, every day.

but Mama lets me have my fun and has always turned away by now, looking out the window at something really interesting outside. I can usually see a small smile dancing across her beautiful face looking back at me in the glass. I love my Mama.

"And which do you prefer, Kit – princesses or dinosaurs?"

"I dunno," I say, and I throw in a big shrug and I move my face into its saddest shape that I learnt by practising in front of my mirror. "It changes every day. I can't decide. I want to play with both."

I count the seconds for their faces to move through the stages as they take the full situation of me in. Mama says this is "the penny dropping". I watch these faces settle into sympathy, even when it's a fight for them to hold it there. Mama says she often sees something different when they look at her, but I don't really understand what she means. The most I've waited is 27 seconds. That was a long wait.

It's no good trying this with young people and teenagers, because all they do is shrug back at me and say, "Whatever, kid", and we carry on playing. They give me no trouble, but also nothing like lollipops or treats.

Old ladies, with their white-grey hair and funny

smells, react the same but are my favourites as they have the nicest words for me:

"Now, Kit, what you choose to be is your business and no-one else's" or "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something if you want to do it."

Or "When you're as old as me, you'll not care what anyone thinks. You'll just be glad to be alive."

Mama says these ladies were alive in the war and saw stuff so horrible we can't even dream it up and that's why they accept things better. I like the way their foreheads have funny creases and how their clothes have animal fur on them, and because they give me stuff.

They reach into large bags and rustle around and come out with something for me, often sweeties. I think they pack their bags with sweets on purpose, waiting for a chance to chat to kids. Sometimes there's a lollipop, sometimes a few coins, or on a bad day for me, it's just a nice pat on the head. But always with a smile.

The ones I don't talk to any more are those who seem to need to know which one I am and they keep asking until everyone's embarrassed. It's mostly the people the age of Mama, the ones who are older than young people, but not as old as the old ladies.

Mama says this means people who are old enough to be having their own babies. They keep asking and asking, and if they don't work it out, they just ask me or Mama directly. It's rude, but it doesn't bother me now.

Mama and I are going into school today early for a special talk with Miss Honey. So early, in fact, that I had to eat my toast in the car, not at the kitchen table like always. Mama hasn't told me anything else, but she has had a big smile on her face since she checked her email last night and there's been humming.

I've never seen the car park empty like this – it's a bit spooky. Some of the lights aren't even on in the hallway of the school building. We walk to Miss

Honey's office and the door is open so we go straight in. No knocking. Miss Honey is in there and she's old enough to have white hair, but not as old as the ladies on the bus.

She smiles and tells us to sit down. There are three others at the table who I know are school people, but I don't know their names. Everyone is smiling so much they all look a bit mad. Miss Honey looks at Mama and says, "We did it, Mary. They've voted for it and it's been passed."

I look at Mama and she starts proper crying, tears coming out fast like I've only seen once before when Joey, our dog, died. But this time she's smiling as well. Miss Honey comes over to Mama and bends down to give her a hug. Miss Honey. Hugging Mama. What's going on? I look around at them all and I'm surprised to see all of them crying, although Mama is the one really going for it.

Then the door opens and it's my Dada. I've already kissed him goodbye this morning as he left for work and I don't know why he's here now, but he must know because he looks around at the people's faces and grabs me right out of my chair and spins me around and around, saying "We did it, munchkin, we bloody did it."

There's clapping and cheering, and I'm smiling too, but I don't know why, so I lean back from Dada and ask, "What? What did we do, Dada?"

The room goes silent as Dada puts me down on the floor. "Kit, bear, we wanted you to be free to wear whatever parts of

the uniform you want to wear, so we took our request to the board of governors and they've approved it. So now you can wear a skirt or trousers on whatever days you like. It's not allowed to matter any more."

I hear a big gulp from Mama as he says this, but I'm too busy hugging my Dada really hard to see her face just then. I think I'll love school from now on.

I think I'll love getting dressed after breakfast and not crying and shouting and having a tantrum about having to wear what I was supposed to and not what I felt was right.

I didn't know Mama and Dada were fighting for this until right now. Miss Honey squats down to my height, her big necklace bouncing around until she grabs it with one hand and my shoulder with the other. She looks at me.

"Kit, I wanted to thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. We have all learnt so much from you. Take the morning off and go with your parents and celebrate. When you come into school this afternoon, you can wear whatever bits of our uniform you want.

No-one will be allowed to tell you off. You are a trailblazer. Today you have helped to change the world for the better. You're truly extraordinary."

That day, I wore trousers; the day after, a skirt. Now there are three others in school like me. 

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AUTHOR SUSIE CORBETT

Susie Corbett made a permanent move to Auckland recently after five years on Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands and her childhood home. Before that, she spent eight years in Sydney. She's enjoyed a diverse career in property renovations, web design and small-business branding/management, but is never happier than when immersed in the development of a manuscript and its characters. Her dream is to find a home for her two completed novels. She has a master's degree in e-publishing and has lived in 10 houses in 14 years.



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