

## What's Wrong with Mike?

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“Oh, noooooo.” As soon as Mike opens his eyes, he knows he'll have a Bad Day. His bed is cold, wet, smelly. Again.

He strips off his pajamas and rolls himself in his Cookie Monster bedspread, then lies on the floor and waits for his mother. Since his day is already bad and he's already bad, he decides not to be Mike for the rest of the day, so nothing and no one can hurt him. *Humph!*

Mike's five-year-old body is cold, but *he* isn't. Mike's body is hungry, but *he* isn't. Finally, his mother walks in, wrapped in her long, white bathrobe. “Oh, Mike, not again.” She sighs and strips his bed, then picks up his damp pajamas and leaves him alone.

In the kitchen, his father glares at him over his chipped coffee mug. “You wet the bed again? What's wrong with you?”

“Sorry,” he mumbles. *I don't know what's wrong with Mike. I'm Mark. I'm fine.*

He sits perfectly still and watches a mosquito land on the back of his hand and jab him. He pulls his skin tight around the little sucker so it can't pull out, then *splat* —flattens it.

“Ha. Gotcha,” he says as he spreads their mixed, bright-red blood on his skin. He reaches for his glass of orange juice, dribbles it on his hand, washing the mashed mosquito and blood into his cereal.

“What are you doing? What’s wrong with you?” his mother says. She grabs his bowl and empties it into the sink.

“Control yourself, Michael,” his father warns with his angry voice.

Mark flinches. *But I am controlling myself.*

He decides to try to control his surroundings, so he peers at the back of his mother’s head until she turns to look at him. He stares into her eyes until she sighs again and looks away.

In the bathroom, he runs hot water over his hand. It turns pink, then red, with steam rising from it. He wants to cry, but controls himself, then marches upstairs to his room and disappears into the darkness of his closet.

A few minutes later, Mark sneaks into his parents’ room to play with his mother’s old wooden dollhouse she had when she was little. Boys aren’t supposed to play with dolls or doll houses, but . . .

The little boy doll pushes the father out the upstairs window then jumps up and down on the mother. He lines them up on the dollhouse roof and flicks each one onto the floor. “Ooooooh,” they cry, then, *thump*. Holding the boy doll by the legs, he pounds the parent dolls over and over, then pulls all the furniture out of all the rooms and onto the floor on top of them. He throws the boy doll against the bedroom wall, shoves the house over. *Crash*.

*Maybe Mommy will think I’m hurt. Maybe I should pretend to be hurt so she’ll hug me.*

When he hears her footsteps on the stairs, he hides behind the door.

“Michael! Where are you? Are you all right?”

The monster jumps from behind the door with its arms raised and hands curled like claws. “Rooaarr!”

His mother gasps and jumps back, her hand on her chest.

“Ha. I scared you.”

“Go to your room and don’t come out until you can control yourself!” she yells, then starts to clean up his mess. Back in his room, his closet is full of scary shadows, so he sits on his bare mattress and breaks apart his old red truck. He runs a sharp, plastic edge up the inside of his right arm. But it doesn’t hurt. He’s not his body today. Lying down, he curls into a ball and sticks his thumb in his mouth like when he was little. He gazes at his best friend, Teddy, the one with the ragged ear.

*You’re a bad boy,* Teddy snarls.

Mark closes his eyes. His stomach growls like a mean dog. He holds himself tighter, then holds his breath so Mike will die. But no matter how hard he tries, Mike always gasps for air. He takes a pillow and holds it over Mike’s face, but hands always lift the pillow away. Finally, he just lies there, tears wetting his pillow until he falls asleep.

In a dream, a tall angel dressed in a flowing white robe flies toward him, kneels, circles him with her soft wings. She’s warm and smells like soap. “You’re a good boy,” she says. “You’re smart and funny and lovable.” Then she flutters her wings and disappears, leaving feathers swirling around him like snowflakes.

When he wakes, he runs downstairs to look for his mother. She’s folding laundry by the window. Sun beams glow behind her and shine through her hair.

He stands in front of her and stares at the faded rug. “I’m sorry I’m bad,” he whispers. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

She sits on the floor in front of him and opens her arms. He sits on her lap. She holds him close. “Oh, honey, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not bad. You’re smart and funny and lovable.” He takes a deep breath and wraps his arms around her, snuggles into her neck and breathes in her warm, soapy smell.

*Are you talking to Mike or me?*

He holds on tighter.

*Maybe if I don’t move, I won’t be bad again. And nothing will be wrong with me.*