

The Boy Who Grew Too Fast

A story told in 60 tweets



One evening, a baby cried in the forest. Wolf followed the sound to an old oak tree. Looking up, he saw a basket in the branches. A long piece of rope, tied to the basket, lay tangled in the tree. The crying came from inside the basket. Wolf licked his teeth. “Mmmmm,” he growled.

“That’s my mmmmm,” said a low voice. Wolf turned and saw Bear lumbering through the trees. “And unlike you, I can reach the basket.” Bear stood on his hind legs. His head almost touched the branch. He stretched his shaggy arms. “Mmm-mmm-mmm,” he said.

“That’s my mmm-mmm-mmm,” said a growly voice. Wolf and Bear turned and saw Tiger slip out of the shadows. “And unlike both of you, I can jump into the tree.” She ran, jumped ten feet high, and landed on the branch. The baby stopped crying and stared into Tiger’s golden eyes.

Thunk! Thunk think think! “Ow!” Tiger yelped. “Ow ow ow!” She jumped to the ground and rubbed her head. “Someone pecked me!” Wolf, Bear, and Tiger looked up in surprise. On one side of the basket stood Crow. On the other side stood Crow’s big cousin, Raven.

“This baby isn’t for you,” Crow said. Her voice always sounded like she was laughing. “This baby,” Raven said, “is under our protection.” His deeper voice always sounded like he was grumbling. They couldn’t help it. That was how crows and ravens talked.

“I can jump,” Tiger said, “and take the basket!” She crouched, and the stripes on her orange legs looked like springs. “I can stand,” Bear said, “and swipe the basket.” He stood even taller, and his claws looked like hooks. “And I,” Wolf said, “I can... um... never mind.”

Crow laughed. Caw, caw-caw, caw! “Yes!” she said. “You can take and you can swipe.” “But,” Raven barked, “you’ll be sorry.” Tiger, who was about to pounce, froze. Bear, who was about to swipe, lowered his paws. Wolf tucked his tail between his legs.

Everyone knew Crow and Raven were the smartest animals in the forest. When they got mad, they dropped rocks on your head, scared away tasty rabbits, ate all the berries near your cave, and cawed all night so you couldn’t sleep. Tiger, Bear, and Wolf turned and walked away.

“Who,” Crow said, “would tie a basket in a tree?” “People,” Raven said. “You never know what they’ll do.” The two birds learned over the basket. The baby boy’s hair was as black as their wings, his skin as brown as their eyes. He opened his mouth. Crow laughed. “He’s hungry!”

“I’ll get some worms,” Raven said. But the baby spat the worms out. “Try a beetle,” said Crow. But the baby cried as the bug crawled on his face. Crow asked Mockingbird to sing a bedtime song. “We’ll get food in the morning,” Crow said. Mockingbird sang and they all fell asleep.

At dawn, Crow woke and laughed. “Look!” she said. “The baby grew bigger!” Raven shook his head. “That’s impossible.” They knew humans were the slowest growing animals in the land. And yet, the baby had doubled in size! His arms and legs hung over the edge of the basket.

“More,” the baby said, touching his mouth. “Uh oh,” Crow chuckled. “He got bigger and he’s talking.” “That’s two impossibles,” Raven said. Crow nodded. “One impossible is as natural as lightning. But two? That’s like two bolts of lightning hitting the same tree.”

“Magic,” Raven said. “This baby is cursed.” Crow laughed. “I agree it’s magic. But let’s not jump to curses just yet.” Raven flew to a nearby village and came back with bread. Crow filled a dry leaf at the stream. The baby ate and drank and fell back asleep.

The next morning, the baby had grown again. “I think,” Crow said, “this baby grows a year older every day. Should we take him to the village?” “Ha,” said Raven. “Where do you think he came from? They didn’t want him.” “True,” Crow said. “They did tie his basket in the tree.”

By the end of the week, the baby was seven years old and climbing around the tree like a naked bird. Raven stole pants and a shirt from town. “Those are too big,” Crow said. “He’ll grow into them,” Raven said. Crow laughed, “Good point!” “I’m hungry,” said the boy. Raven sighed.

A week passed. Crow said, “Let’s find a way to break the curse.” “That sounds like a quest,” Raven said. “Quests are a lot of work.” Crow shrugged. “So is taking care of him!” The boy, who was now 14 day-years old, said, “I’m hungry.” “See?” Crow said. “All we do is feed him!”

“I’m cursed?” the boy said when Crow explained the quest. “Well,” she said. “Cursed is a strong word. You’re... what’s the word I’m looking for?” “Cursed,” said Raven. “You grow a year older every day. If we don’t break the curse, you’ll be dead by fall.”

The boy grinned. Death meant nothing to him. He was too young. “So? Everything dies.” “That’s a good way of looking at it,” Crow said. “Here’s another way,” Raven said. “Most humans get as many days as leaves on this tree. You’ll only get one branch of leaves.”

The boy looked from the tree to a branch. "That's not fair," he cried. "That's why it's called a curse," Raven said. Crow nudged Raven's shoulder. "We can break the curse," she said. "But," Raven said, "you already lost 14 years of—" Crow nudged Raven again. "What?" Raven said.

The next day, the boy climbed down from the tree for the first time in his life. It took a while to get used to walking. Soon he was running and laughing, following Crow and Raven who flew from branch to branch. "He's growing on me," Crow said. "Yeah," Raven sighed. "Poor kid."

They reached a stony hill. The trees grew thinner and the sun brighter. Up ahead they saw a big cave. "This is where Fox lives," said Crow. "He's the only animal in the forest who wants to be human." "Wants to be?" said Raven. "He thinks he is human."

"I don't understand," the boy said. "Well," Crow chuckled. "Fox thinks he was once human, but a witch turned him into a fox. Now he spends all his time trying to invent a potion to turn him back." Raven shook his head. "He's crazy. We knew him as a pup. He was always a fox."

"He's a dreamer," Crow said. Raven rolled his eyes. "What's the point of dreams that can't come true?" Crow shrugged. "Dreams don't have to come true." "Then what's the point of dreaming them?" Raven asked. "Maybe," Crow said, "dreaming is the point." Raven rolled his eyes again.

Fox was excited to have visitors. He walked a little awkwardly on his hind legs and wore clothes that didn't quite fit. "Hello, Crow!" he said. "Raven, you old grouch! Come in, come in! And who is this? A boy! I was a boy once! Ah," Fox sighed, "those were the days!"

Crow gave the boy a wink. The boy smiled. "This boy is cursed," Raven said. "He grows a year older every day." Fox took the boy's hands in his paws. "Cursed? You too? Oh! Witches and wizards, am I right? Grrrrr. Well, my potions haven't helped me—yet! But they might help you!"

"Potions!" Raven said. "Berry and bark, hummingbird tongues and beetle wings. You're a fox! All your potions do is give you a stomach ache—" Crow jumped in. "What he means is, your potions are designed to make you more human. This boy already suffers from that condition."

Fox looked so sad that the boy put a hand on his furry shoulder. "I don't think the witch's spell worked all the way," he said. "What do you mean?" Fox asked. The boy leaned closer. "You have human eyes," he said. Fox smiled. "I do? I mean, I do, don't I?"

For the first time, Crow realized that she loved the boy. She felt more determined than ever to break the curse. "You know most of the witches and wizards around here," Crow said to Fox. "Who could cast such a powerful curse?" "And who," Raven added, "would curse a baby?"

Fox tried to fold his arms over his chest the way he had seen people do when deep in thought, but only managed to make an X shape. "Do you get older" he asked the boy, "on the outside and the inside?" The boy looked at Crow. "I don't know. Do I?"

"Of course you do," Raven said. "He talks on his own," Crow explained. "And he knows what things are without us naming them." "So!" Fox said. "His brain stretches with his bones. Only one witch has such powerful magic. The same witch who turned me into a fox."

“I’ll wait outside,” Raven said, hopping away before Fox could see him roll his eyes. “Can you remind me,” Crow asked quickly, “who is the witch who...?” Fox shuddered. “Aldusa.” Now Crow shivered too. “The one who lives in the floating castle?” Fox grinned. “I’ve been there.”

“No offense,” Crow said, “but how’d you get up to a floating castle without wings.” Fox bounced his eyebrows and at that moment, Crow thought his eyes did look human. Fox retreated into the cave and came back with an enormous pair of wings. “I made my own,” he said.

Crow and the boy stared in awe. “For years,” Fox said, “I collected every feather that fell. Sparrow and dove, eagle and crane. I studied how birds fly, stole wire and rope from town, and here we are! It took some adjusting. Broke a bone or two,” he chuckled. “But it works!”

“Can I try it?” the boy asked. “Just put your arms through these straps,” said Fox. “Tie these ropes around your chest, and... instant wings!” The boy flapped his arms and rose so fast that he bumped his head on the cave ceiling. He landed hard on his bottom. “Ouch,” he laughed.

They spent five days with Fox, teaching the boy—who was now a young man of nineteen—to fly. “Be careful,” Fox said. “Aldusa doesn’t like visitors.” “You made it back safely,” said Crow. “Not quite,” Fox said, and turned around. Only then did they notice his tail was missing.

They said goodbye to Fox and traveled over the hill, down into a wooded valley, until they reached a lake. The young man was 21 now but Crow still thought of him as a boy. “Fox said Aldusa comes here for water,” Crow said. “We just have to wait.” “Wait,” Raven said, “and worry.”

On the third day, when the young man was 24, a castle appeared in the sky. From below, all they could see were high stone walls. The castle spun, and the water in the lake spun into a waterspout, rising up to the castle. “Ready?” Crow asked. “Yes,” said the man. “No,” said Raven.

The man flapped his strong arms and flew. Crow and Raven followed. The waterspout was like a tornado made of water. They flew through the wet air. The castle stopped spinning and the waterspout collapsed, crashing down with a thundering splash. “Hurry!” Crow shouted.

They flew over the wall and landed on a ledge overlooking—not a courtyard, not a garden—but a small lake. The high walls enclosed a lake! The castle, made of shimmering stones, lay underwater. Anemones grew around it like flowers and gold light ebbed out through the windows.

“Now what?” said Raven. “Birds can’t swim!” The man took off his wings. “I can,” he said, and dove into the water. “He swims good,” Crow laughed. “Especially,” Raven added, “for someone who never did it before.” The young man held his breath and swam down to the castle.

Now he saw why the castle was shimmering. It wasn’t made of stone. It was made of enormous abalone shells. Silver fish swam past the open windows, gold light rippling on their fins, but they never swam inside. The man kicked his legs and swam through a window—

Thump! He fell onto a thick blue carpet. There was no water inside the castle! He stood up, pushed wet hair out of his eyes, and looked at the window. The water rippled outside like a wall. He stuck his hand through and into the water. Tiny fish nibbled his fingers. He laughed.

The young man turned around. He expected to see a spooky room. Instead, he saw two red velvet armchairs, like a pair of thrones, facing a fire that crackled in a stone fireplace. On the wall above hung a painting of a mermaid... and the fox's orange tail.

As if by magic, a young woman now stood by the fire. At first the man thought she was Aldusa, the witch. Then he realized she had been sitting in one of the armchairs and had simply stood up. Her black hair and brown skin seemed even darker against her long silver dress.

"Who are you?" she said, stepping closer. "I'm looking for Aldusa," the man said. He glanced at the painting. "Is she a mermaid?" "That is her original form," the woman said. "But she can take any shape. She is very powerful and very cruel. Why do you want to see her?"

"I think she cursed me when I was a baby," the man said. "I turn a year older each day. Look at me. I'm only 24 days old!" The young woman stepped back until she bumped into a chair. Her eyes shone with tears. "Can it be?" she said. "Is it you? Is it my Sebastian?"

The man didn't understand. The young woman came closer and searched his face. "It is you," she said. "Do you know me?" The man felt something like a door open in his mind. "Are you... my mother?" he asked. The young woman wrapped her arms around him and wept.

"You were six months old," she said, "when Aldusa stole us from our village. She didn't want to share me with anyone, even my own son. She placed an aging curse on you so you would die when the leaves change." She laughed, wiping her tears. "You're almost as old as I am!"

They sat in the armchairs by the fire. "I held your mouth closed," she said, "pinched your nose, and swam to the surface. When the castle passed over a forest, I put you in a basket and lowered you on a rope." "But why?" the man asked. "Didn't you want me after I was cursed?"

"Of course I wanted you," the woman said. "But your only hope was out there. I prayed someone would find you and help break the curse. Letting you go was the hardest thing I have ever done. These 24 days have felt like 24 years." "They have been," Sebastian said, "to me."

"I'm so happy," the woman said, "and so sad." "Why are you sad?" Sebastian asked. "Because," she said, "you can't stay. Aldusa may be back at any moment." "Then she can remove the curse," Sebastian said. The woman sighed. "She will add to it, but never remove it."

"But I just found you," he said, as she led him to the window. She smiled through her tears. "Yes, sometimes life is so unfair. But today, life is so generous. I never thought I would see you again." She hugged him close. "Now I know you will find a way to break the curse."

For the first time in his 24 days or 24 years, Sebastian cried. He kissed his mother on the cheek and, before he could change his mind, dove through the window into the water. His heart felt like an anchor pulling him back down. It took all his strength to swim to the surface.

"Did you find the witch?" Crow asked. The man climbed onto the ledge. "I found my mother," he said. "What?" said Raven. The man put on the Fox's wings. "My name is Sebastian," he said. "What?" Raven said again. "We have to leave," the man said. "What?" Raven said.

They flew down to the forest where Sebastian explained everything. Filled with renewed hope, they searched everywhere, looking in vain for a way to break the curse. Barely more than a month had passed, but Sebastian now had gray hair and stiff bones. He was 63 years old.

Crow was so sad, she gave up, sat on Sebastian's shoulder, and stroked his hair with her beak. But Raven kept searching, and one day brought news. "I found a witch," he said. "Her name is Christina. She mixes potions. I've overheard people say she can heal any wound."

Christina's house sat in a clearing in the woods. She had white hair and deep wrinkles, and listened patiently to Sebastian's story. "Well," she said. "I'm not a witch and I don't mix potions. So I can't break the curse nor reverse it." Sebastian bowed his head and sighed.

"But I can pause it," Christina grinned. "You won't get your time back, but you can live the rest of your natural life one day—instead of one year—at a time." And that's exactly what happened. Sebastian was 68 years old when Christina, using ancient herbs, paused the curse.

Crow and Raven flew up to the castle and told his mother. They offered to bring Fox's wings so she could escape. "Aldusa would find me," she said, "and punish Sebastian. But it's still a happy ending." "Is it?" Crow asked as they flew back. "Happy?" Raven said. "Of course not."

By fall, Sebastian and Christina fell in love. After living with years as short as days, he now lived so slowly and so gratefully that every day felt as long as a year. "His mom was right," Crow laughed. "It is a happy ending." "Yeah," Raven admitted. "Not bad for a cursed kid."

