

# The First Prison

*Written by William Gillis for HumanIterations.net.*

Adult supremacy claims its legitimacy from the notion that age grants critical experience and wisdom. We all know exceptions to this, adults we would classify as unwise, but the ideology persists because it is true that choice in the absence of knowledge is not real choice. Someone has to understand the context of their actions, they have to have an accurate map of the world in order to be able to trace the consequences. This much is true. And so defenders of adult supremacy always want to get into a fine grained fight over how informed a child is or can be.

But picture yourself today ripped from your modern adult body back into that of a child – all of your knowledge, experience, and wisdom transmitted intact. Try to imagine how you might try to regain the autonomy and standing of your adult self. You simply wouldn't be able to. All your knowledge, all your insight and experience would be meaningless. It would make no difference. No matter how advanced your knowledge of mathematics, philosophy, psychology, history, politics, etc, these would merely make you “precocious.” Arrogant, to be more honest. You would never be able to win standing at the table as an equal human being worthy of respect. Your consent would not matter. Nothing you could conceivably do would get you free from your prison, your status as a slave or emotional prop to the adults who own you.

No matter how much wiser or more intelligent you might be than the adults holding your chain, it would change nothing besides getting you some distinct treats if you performed well as a pet.

Adult supremacy paints itself as a kind of meritocracy, you are only denied political agency because you don't yet have mental agency. But there is no mechanism – not a single one – under adult supremacy whereby a six year old might prove qualifications to obtain their freedom and equal status. And even if the state were to create some absurdly intense exam that you might pass, there would be countless barriers to you even getting in the door. No parent would ever surrender their property like that. Teenagers are given rights not because they have crested some cognitive hill but because that's when some of them start to be able to beat up their parents. When they can band together for resistance and physically overwhelm their masters. It is only the physical threat posed that has ever won an age group their autonomy. Intelligence and the infinitely mutable concept of “wisdom” are but the thinnest of drapes over this. Rhetorical excuses with never an ounce of sincerity to their use.

Seriously try to imagine, try to strategize how you might secure your autonomy, secure any

manner of existence that wasn't a grueling prison, merely by being an adult mind in a child's body. Unless you lucked out with the most abnormally enlightened anarchist parents, there's just no means. At best your parents might allow you to attend university, accumulate books of some interest, get paraded around as a prodigy, but you would not be free. You would not be able to make almost any real choices about where you live, who you associate with, how you work, eat, etc. And those limitations are deeply structural. Not just laws, not just the cultural norms and background ideologies that shape your parents' sense of the possible, but a vast panoply of expressions of power.

Today with the internet you might be able to eek out some manner of a double life. But the limits of that mask are nevertheless intense.

Imagine being a six year old and realizing you face a twelve year jail sentence, a horizon twice your lifespan ahead. A level of extreme insertion and control by a totalitarian arrangement that doesn't just feel entitled to condition you physically but mentally, emotionally - an apparatus of domination that sees its very success as your total consumption by it. No prison in the world is as attentive and absolute as "parents."

What we fear when we fear prison is a partial return to the social status of "child" - but itself only an afterimage, an echo of what childhood is actually to those who refuse to forget. We as a society have a normalized suppression, a ritualistic forgetting of the trauma that bludgeons us into being. The entire apparatus of our society is a conditioning of submission far more extreme than any political institution can even be bothered to attempt. Every single person summoned into this world is given their own cop, their own master. At least one, sometimes two. It's a level of totalitarian attentiveness the CIA and NSA spooks can never manage - look like a laughable shadow of. Big brother and the panopticon have to rely on smoke and mirrors to try to give the *impression* of being as present in your life as a parent.

Now there are the occasional traitors to adulthood. Individuals who might try to break their conditioning, the every imperative of our society, and relate to you as an actual person despite your child body. That might come to you as a truly sincere ally and friend. But these people are never parents. Both because of what that framework inextricably means, and what our society will allow an adult to get away with. Most of what you find are the timid half-traitors. Those that would assure you they'd help if only they could. That they're actually on your side. That they'll do what's possible.

If the chief characteristic of the parental relationship is an expectation of a performance from you to scratch a psychological need, a wound, a hunger on their part, these half-traitors are just parents in disguise. The performance they ask from you is different, but it is still a request laced with knives. The half-traitor telling you that they totally respect you, that they want to be your friend, is just demanding a different dance - one to assuage their

guilt. They remember enough to know their position over you is inherently abusive, but their chief concern is removing that stab of guilt and remembered trauma, that dissonance, that conflict in their conscience. They hold their power over you just as frantically when push comes to shove, or they hold it with the calloused air of someone who can leave just as easily as they came. The cool aunt, the preschool teacher, functioning as an aid relief worker come to briefly take selfies with you as a prop.

They are not co-conspirators. They are the incomplete flotsam, the corpses of children who tried to make it over the finish line intact. Incomplete insurgents into adulthood who were worn down and forgot their mission. They are not undercover children, but the warped remains. Poorly formed adults, perhaps, but adults still.

No. Chances are no one is coming to free you. There are no true allies among the prison guards. You are stuck, not just “in a six-year-old’s body” but made synonymous with. You ARE six-years-old. Your identity is subsumed in your status in the age hierarchy. A ladder of mutilation to a distant promised escape. If there is even anything left of you to be free by then. You are forced to fixate on each arbitrary rung of the ladder, “six and three quarters”, a survivalists’ monomania because it is the only thread to meaningful agency available to you. But no one cares. No one actually gives a shit. They smile and applaud in the cruelest of thin performances. It’s meaningless to them, because it is actually meaningless. You have no more agency today than you had a year ago. You are no more free.

Your thoughts and aspirations die on the vine. Every single thing you do is without consequence. Every insight and experience you have is thrown into the void. They say that adulthood is a matter of accumulated experience and insight – what a cruel joke. Until you are released from bondage those experiences and insights are continually thrown into the wastebin. No where to go. You can preserve some tiny subset of them. Lock them up, build a giant ark around them in your brain. Hope they survive the eons, preserved enough to carry some desperate final partial journal, existential howl to some later you. This is all you are given. A tiny journal hidden beneath the floorboards. What survives the holocaust of ideas and dreams unlistened to, not yet allowed to pursue in any meaningful, consequential way. Bottled up in your prison cell they wilt and die around you.

This is the machinery that makes adults. That reproduces adult society.

Every hierarchy, every abuse, every act of domination that seeks to justify or excuse itself appeals through analogy to the rule of adults over children. We are all indoctrinated from birth in ways of “because I said so.” The flags of supposed experience, benevolence, and familial obligation are the first of many paraded through our lives to celebrate the suppression of our agency, the dismissal of our desires, the reduction of our personhood. Our whole world is caught in a cycle of abuse, largely unexamined and unnamed. And at its root lies our dehumanization of children.

This is the societal role that the “child” plays. Not a new person assisted and helped by sincere friends and allies in a race to explore and spread your unique agency into the world, but a subhuman to be tamed, a commodified thing, a representational externalized nerve-cluster for adults to prod at their own mutilated remains. A puppet they can wear to talk to themselves.

It is not that children are ignorant, it is that adults want them to be ignorant.

No, they would not help you. No one in the world would ever countenance a six year old with the wisdom and knowledge of someone much older, it's not that they would not have the mechanisms to recognize it, it's that the entire apparatus of adult supremacy is about suppressing it. If you were whisked back into the body of a child you would not have a leg up on life so much as a prison cell to slowly atrophy in.

This is what childhood is: the systematic unmaking of agents.