

Presents



Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to five, abracadabra. Before that I was three, then two, then one, then zero. "Was I minus numbers?"

"Hmm?" Ma does a big stretch.

"Up in Heaven. Was I minus one, minus two, minus three—?"

"Nah, the numbers didn't start till you zoomed down."

"Through Skylight. You were all sad till I happened in your tummy."

"You said it." Ma leans out of Bed to switch on Lamp, he makes everything light up *whoosh*.

I shut my eyes just in time, then open one a crack, then both.

"I cried till I didn't have any tears left," she tells me. "I just lay here counting the seconds."

"How many seconds?" I ask her.

"Millions and millions of them."

"No, but how many exactly?"

"I lost count," says Ma.

"Then you wished and wished on your egg till you got fat."

She grins. "I could feel you kicking."

"What was I kicking?"

“Me, of course.”

I always laugh at that bit.

“From the inside, *boom boom*.” Ma lifts her sleep T-shirt and makes her tummy jump. “I thought, *Jack’s on his way*. First thing in the morning, you slid out onto the rug with your eyes wide open.”

I look down at Rug with her red and brown and black all zigging around each other. There’s the stain I spilled by mistake getting born. “You cutted the cord and I was free,” I tell Ma. “Then I turned into a boy.”

“Actually, you were a boy already.” She gets out of Bed and goes to Thermostat to hot the air.

I don’t think he came last night after nine, the air’s always different if he came. I don’t ask because she doesn’t like saying about him.

“Tell me, Mr. Five, would you like your present now or after breakfast?”

“What is it, what is it?”

“I know you’re excited,” she says, “but remember not to nibble your finger, germs could sneak in the hole.”

“To sick me like when I was three with throw-up and diarrhea?”

“Even worse than that,” says Ma, “germs could make you die.”

“And go back to Heaven early?”

“You’re still biting it.” She pulls my hand away.

“Sorry.” I sit on the bad hand. “Call me Mr. Five again.”

“So, Mr. Five,” she says, “now or later?”

I jump onto Rocker to look at Watch, he says 07:14. I can skateboard on Rocker without holding on to her, then I *whew* back onto Duvet and I’m snowboarding instead. “When are presents meant to open?”

“Either way would be fun. Will I choose for you?” asks Ma.

“Now I’m five, I have to choose.” My finger’s in my mouth again, I put it in my armpit and lock shut. “I choose—now.”

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She pulls a something out from under her pillow, I think it was hiding all night invisibly. It's a tube of ruled paper, with the purple ribbon all around from the thousand chocolates we got the time Christmas happened. "Open it up," she tells me. "Gently."

I figure out to do off the knot, I make the paper flat, it's a drawing, just pencil, no colors. I don't know what it's about, then I turn it. "Me!" Like in Mirror but more, my head and arm and shoulder in my sleep T-shirt. "Why are the eyes of the me shut?"

"You were asleep," says Ma.

"How you did a picture asleep?"

"No, I was awake. Yesterday morning and the day before and the day before that, I put the lamp on and drew you." She stops smiling. "What's up, Jack? You don't like it?"

"Not—when you're on at the same time I'm off."

"Well, I couldn't draw you while you were awake, or it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" Ma waits. "I thought you'd like a surprise."

"I prefer a surprise and me knowing."

She kind of laughs.

I get on Rocker to take a pin from Kit on Shelf, minus one means now there'll be zero left of the five. There used to be six but one disappeared. One is holding up *Great Masterpieces of Western Art No. 3: The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist* behind Rocker, and one is holding up *Great Masterpieces of Western Art No. 8: Impression: Sunrise* beside Bath, and one is holding up the blue octopus, and one the crazy horse picture called *Great Masterpieces of Western Art No. 11: Guernica*. The masterpieces came with the oatmeal but I did the octopus, that's my best of March, he's going a bit curly from the steamy air over Bath. I pin Ma's surprise drawing on the very middle cork tile over Bed.

She shakes her head. "Not there."

She doesn't want Old Nick to see. "Maybe in Wardrobe, on the back?" I ask.

“Good idea.”

Wardrobe is wood, so I have to push the pin an extra lot. I shut her silly doors, they always squeak, even after we put corn oil on the hinges. I look through the slats but it’s too dark. I open her a bit to peek, the secret drawing is white except the little lines of gray. Ma’s blue dress is hanging over a bit of my sleeping eye, I mean the eye in the picture but the dress for real in Wardrobe.

I can smell Ma beside me, I’ve got the best nose in the family. “Oh, I forgot to have some when I woke up.”

“That’s OK. Maybe we could skip it once in a while, now you’re five?”

“No way Jose.”

So she lies down on the white of Duvet and me too and I have lots.

. . .

I count one hundred cereal and waterfall the milk that’s nearly the same white as the bowls, no splashing, we thank Baby Jesus. I choose Meltedy Spoon with the white all blobby on his handle when he leaned on the pan of boiling pasta by accident. Ma doesn’t like Meltedy Spoon but he’s my favorite because he’s not the same.

I stroke Table’s scratches to make them better, she’s a circle all white except gray in the scratches from chopping foods. While we’re eating we play Hum because that doesn’t need mouths. I guess “Macarena” and “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” but that’s actually “Stormy Weather.” So my score is two, I get two kisses.

I hum “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” Ma guesses that right away. Then I do “Tubthumping,” she makes a face and says, “Argh, I know it, it’s the one about getting knocked down and getting up again, what’s it called?” In the very end she remembers right. For my third turn I do “Can’t Get You out of My Head,” Ma has no idea. “You’ve chosen such a tricky one. . . . Did you hear it on TV?”

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“No, on you.” I burst out singing the chorus, Ma says she’s a dumbo.

“Numbskull.” I give her her two kisses.

I move my chair to Sink to wash up, with bowls I have to do gently but spoons I can *cling clang clong*. I stick out my tongue in Mirror. Ma’s behind me, I can see my face stuck over hers like a mask we made when Halloween happened. “I wish the drawing was better,” she says, “but at least it shows what you’re like.”

“What am I like?”

She taps Mirror where’s my forehead, her finger leaves a circle. “The dead spit of me.”

“Why I’m your dead spit?” The circle’s disappearing.

“It just means you look like me. I guess because you’re made of me, like my spit is. Same brown eyes, same big mouth, same pointy chin...”

I’m staring at us at the same time and the us in Mirror are staring back. “Not same nose.”

“Well, you’ve got a kid nose right now.”

I hold it. “Will it fall off and an adult nose grow?”

“No, no, it’ll just get bigger. Same brown hair—”

“But mine goes all the way down to my middle and yours just goes on your shoulders.”

“That’s true,” says Ma, reaching for Toothpaste. “All your cells are twice as alive as mine.”

I didn’t know things could be just half alive. I look again in Mirror. Our sleep T-shirts are different as well and our underwear, hers has no bears.

When she spits the second time it’s my go with Toothbrush, I scrub each my teeth all the way around. Ma’s spit in Sink doesn’t look a bit like me, mine doesn’t either. I wash them away and make a vampire smile.

“Argh.” Ma covers her eyes. “Your teeth are so clean, they’re dazzling me.”

Her ones are pretty rotted because she forgot to brush them, she's sorry and she doesn't forget anymore but they're still rotted.

I flat the chairs and put them beside Door against Clothes Horse. He always grumbles and says there's no room but there's plenty if he stands up really straight. I can fold up flat too but not quite as flat because of my muscles, from being alive. Door's made of shiny magic metal, he goes *beep beep* after nine when I'm meant to be switched off in Wardrobe.

God's yellow face isn't coming in today, Ma says he's having trouble squeezing through the snow.

"What snow?"

"See," she says, pointing up.

There's a little bit of light at Skylight's top, the rest of her is all dark. TV snow's white but the real isn't, that's weird. "Why it doesn't fall on us?"

"Because it's on the outside."

"In Outer Space? I wish it was inside so I can play with it."

"Ah, but then it would melt, because it's nice and warm in here." She starts humming, I guess right away it's "Let It Snow." I sing the second verse. Then I do "Winter Wonderland" and Ma joins in higher.

We have thousands of things to do every morning, like give Plant a cup of water in Sink for no spilling, then put her back on her saucer on Dresser. Plant used to live on Table but God's face burned a leaf of her off. She has nine left, they're the wide of my hand with furriness all over, like Ma says dogs are. But dogs are only TV. I don't like nine. I find a tiny leaf coming, that counts as ten.

Spider's real. I've seen her two times. I look for her now but there's only a web between Table's leg and her flat. Table balances good, that's pretty tricky, when I go on one leg I can do it for ages but then I always fall over. I don't tell Ma about Spider. She brushes webs away, she says they're dirty but they look like extra-thin silver to me. Ma likes the animals that run around eating each other on the wildlife

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planet, but not real ones. When I was four I was watching ants walking up Stove and she ran and splatted them all so they wouldn't eat our food. One minute they were alive and the next minute they were dirt. I cried so my eyes nearly melted off. Also another time there was a thing in the night *nnnnng nnnng nnnng* biting me and Ma banged him against Door Wall below Shelf, he was a mosquito. The mark is still there on the cork even though she scrubbed, it was my blood the mosquito was stealing, like a teeny vampire. That's the only time my blood ever came out of me.

Ma takes her pill from the silver pack that has twenty-eight little spaceships and I take a vitamin from the bottle with the boy doing a handstand and she takes one from the big bottle with a picture of a woman doing Tennis. Vitamins are medicine for not getting sick and going back to Heaven yet. I never want to go, I don't like dying but Ma says it might be OK when we're a hundred and tired of playing. Also she takes a killer. Sometimes she takes two, never more than two, because some things are good for us but too much is suddenly bad.

"Is it Bad Tooth?" I ask. He's on the top near the back of her mouth, he's the worst.

Ma nods.

"Why you don't take two killers all the bits of every day?"

She makes a face. "Then I'd be hooked."

"What's—?"

"Like stuck on a hook, because I'd need them all the time. Actually I might need more and more."

"What's wrong with needing?"

"It's hard to explain."

Ma knows everything except the things she doesn't remember right, or sometimes she says I'm too young for her to explain a thing.

"My teeth feel a bit better if I stop thinking about them," she tells me.

“How come?”

“It’s called mind over matter. If we don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

When a bit of me hurts, I always mind. Ma’s rubbing my shoulder but my shoulder’s not hurting, I like it anyway.

I still don’t tell her about the web. It’s weird to have something that’s mine-not-Ma’s. Everything else is both of ours. I guess my body is mine and the ideas that happen in my head. But my cells are made out of her cells so I’m kind of hers. Also when I tell her what I’m thinking and she tells me what she’s thinking, our each ideas jump into our other’s head, like coloring blue crayon on top of yellow that makes green.

At 08:30 I press the button on TV and try between the three. I find *Dora the Explorer*, yippee. Ma moves Bunny around real slow to better the picture with his ears and head. One day when I was four TV died and I cried, but in the night Old Nick brung a magic converter box to make TV back to life. The other channels after the three are totally fuzzy so we don’t watch them because of hurting our eyes, only if there’s music we put Blanket over and just listen through the gray of her and shake our booties.

Today I put my fingers on Dora’s head for a hug and tell her about my superpowers now I’m five, she smiles. She has the most huge hair that’s like a really brown helmet with pointy bits cutted out, it’s as big as the rest of her. I sit back on Bed in Ma’s lap to watch, I wriggle till I’m not on her pointy bones. She doesn’t have many soft bits but they’re super soft.

Dora says bits that aren’t in real language, they’re Spanish, like *lo hicimos*. She always wears Backpack who’s more inside than out, with everything Dora needs like ladders and space suits, for her dancing and playing soccer and flute and having adventures with Boots her best friend monkey. Dora always says she’s going to need *my* help, like can I find a magic thing, she waits for me to say, “Yeah.” I shout out, “Behind the palm tree,” and the blue arrow clicks right

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behind the palm tree, she says, "Thank you." Every TV person else doesn't listen. The Map shows three places every time, we have to go to the first to get to the second to get to the third. I walk with Dora and Boots, holding their hands, I join in all the songs especially with somersaults or high-fives or the Silly Chicken Dance. We have to watch out for that sneaky Swiper, we shout, "Swiper, no swiping," three times so he gets all mad and says, "Oh man!" and runs away. One time Swiper made a remote-controlled robot butterfly, but it went wrong, it swiped his mask and gloves instead, that was hilarious. Sometimes we catch the stars and put them in Backpack's pocket, I'd choose the Noisy Star that wakes up anything and the Switchy Star that can transform to all shapes.

On the other planets it's mostly persons that hundreds can fit into the screen, except often one gets all big and near. They have clothes instead of skin, their faces are pink or yellow or brown or patchy or hairy, with very red mouths and big eyes with black edges. They laugh and shout a lot. I'd love to watch TV all the time, but it rots our brains. Before I came down from Heaven Ma left it on all day long and got turned into a zombie that's like a ghost but walks *thump thump*. So now she always switches off after one show, then the cells multiply again in the day and we can watch another show after dinner and grow more brains in our sleep.

"Just one more, because it's my birthday? Please?"

Ma opens her mouth, then shuts it. Then she says, "Why not?" She mutes the commercials because they mush our brains even faster so they'd drip out our ears.

I watch the toys, there's an excellent truck and a trampoline and Bionicles. Two boys are fighting with Transformers in their hands but they're friendly not like bad guys.

Then the show comes, it's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. I run over to touch him and Patrick the starfish, but not Squidward, he's creepy. It's a spooky story about a giant pencil, I watch through Ma's fingers that are all twice longer than mine.

Nothing makes Ma scared. Except Old Nick maybe. Mostly she calls him just *him*, I didn't even know the name for him till I saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night called Old Nick. I call the real one that because he comes in the night, but he doesn't look like the TV guy with a beard and horns and stuff. I asked Ma once is he old, and she said he's nearly double her which is pretty old.

She gets up to switch TV off as soon as it's the credits.

My pee's yellow from the vitamins. I sit to poo, I tell it, "Bye-bye, off to the sea." After I flush I watch the tank filling up going *bubble gurgle wurble*. Then I scrub my hands till it feels like my skin's going to come off, that's how to know I've washed enough.

"There's a web under Table," I say, I didn't know I was going to. "It's of Spider, she's real. I've seen her two times."

Ma smiles but not really.

"Will you not brush it away, please? Because she isn't even there even, but she might come back."

Ma's down on her knees looking under Table. I can't see her face till she pushes her hair behind her ear. "Tell you what, I'll leave it till we clean, OK?"

That's Tuesday, that's three days. "OK."

"You know what?" She stands up. "We've got to mark how tall you are, now you're five."

I jump way in the air.

Usually I'm not allowed draw on any bits of Room or furnitures. When I was two I scribbled on the leg of Bed, her one near Wardrobe, so whenever we're cleaning Ma taps the scribble and says, "Look, we have to live with that forever." But my birthday tall is different, it's tiny numbers beside Door, a black 4, and a black 3 underneath, and a red 2 that was the color our old Pen was till he ran out, and at the bottom a red 1.

"Stand up straight," says Ma. Pen tickles the top of my head.

When I step away there's a black 5 a little bit over the 4. I love five the best of every number, I have five fingers each hand and the same

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of toes and so does Ma, we're our dead spits. Nine is my worst favorite number. "What's my tall?"

"Your height. Well, I don't know exactly," she says. "Maybe we could ask for a measuring tape sometime, for Sunday treat."

I thought measuring tapes were just TV. "Nah, let's ask for chocolates." I put my finger on the 4 and stand with my face against it, my finger's on my hair. "I didn't get taller much this time."

"That's normal."

"What's normal?"

"It's—" Ma chews her mouth. "It means it's OK. *No hay problema.*"

"Look how big my muscles, though." I bounce on Bed, I'm Jack the Giant Killer in his seven-league boots.

"Vast," says Ma.

"Gigantic."

"Massive."

"Huge."

"Enormous," says Ma.

"Hugeormous." That's word sandwich when we squish two together.

"Good one."

"You know what?" I tell her. "When I'm ten I'll be growed up."

"Oh yeah?"

"I'll get bigger and bigger and bigger till I turn into a human."

"Actually, you're human already," says Ma. "Human's what we both are."

I thought the word for us was real. The persons in TV are made just of colors.

"Did you mean a woman, with a *w*?"

"Yeah," I say, "a woman with a boy in an egg in my tummy and he'll be a real one too. Or I'm going to grow to a giant, but a nice one, up to here." I jump to touch Bed Wall way high, nearly where Roof starts slanting up.

“Sounds great,” says Ma.

Her face is gone flat, that means I said a wrong thing but I don’t know which.

“I’ll burst through Skylight into Outer Space and go *boing boing* between each the planets,” I tell her. “I’ll visit Dora and SpongeBob and all my friends, I’ll have a dog called Lucky.”

Ma’s put a smile on. She’s tidying Pen back on Shelf.

I ask her, “How old are you going to be on your birthday?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Wow.”

I don’t think that cheered her up.

While Bath is running, Ma gets Labyrinth and Fort down from on top of Wardrobe. We’ve been making Labyrinth since I was two, she’s all toilet roll insides taped together in tunnels that twist lots of ways. Bouncy Ball loves to get lost in Labyrinth and hide, I have to call out to him and shake her and turn her sideways and upside down before he rolls out, whew. Then I send other things into Labyrinth like a peanut and a broken bit of Blue Crayon and a short spaghetti not cooked. They chase each other in the tunnels and sneak up and shout *Boo*, I can’t see them but I listen against the cardboard and I can figure out where they are. Toothbrush wants a turn but I tell him sorry, he’s too long. He jumps in Fort instead to guard a tower. Fort’s made of cans and vitamin bottles, we build him bigger every time we have an empty. Fort can see all ways, he squirts out boiling oil at the enemies, they don’t know about his secret knife-slits, ha ha. I’d like to bring him into Bath to be an island but Ma says the water would make his tape unsticky.

We undo our ponytails and let our hair swim. I lie on Ma not even talking, I like the bang of her heart. When she breathes we go up and down a little bit. Penis floats.

Because of my birthday I get to choose what we wear both. Ma’s live in the higher drawer of Dresser and mine in the lower. I choose

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her favorite blue jeans with the red stitches that she only puts on for special occasions because they're getting strings at the knees. For me I choose my yellow hoody, I'm careful of the drawer but the right edge still comes out and Ma has to bang it back in. We pull down on my hoody together and it chews my face but then pop it's on.

"What if I cut it just a little in the middle of the V?" says Ma.

"No way Jose."

For Phys Ed we leave our socks off because bare feet are grippier. Today I choose Track first, we lift Table upside down onto Bed and Rocker on her with Rug over the both. Track goes around Bed from Wardrobe to Lamp, the shape on Floor is a black C. "Hey, look, I can do a there-and-back in sixteen steps."

"Wow. When you were four it was eighteen steps, wasn't it?" says Ma. "How many there-and-backs do you think you can run today?"

"Five."

"What about five times five? That would be your favorite squared."

We times it on our fingers, I get twenty-six but Ma says twenty-five so I do it again and get twenty-five too. She counts me on Watch. "Twelve," she shouts out. "Seventeen. You're doing great."

I'm breathing *whoo whoo whoo*.

"Faster—"

I go even fasterer like Superman flying.

When it's Ma's turn to run, I have to write down on the College Ruled Pad the number at the start and the number when she's finished, then we take them apart to see how fast she went. Today hers is nine seconds bigger than mine, that means I wonned, so I jump up and down and blow raspberries. "Let's do a race at the same time."

"Sounds like fun, doesn't it," she says, "but remember once we tried it and I banged my shoulder on the dresser?"

Sometimes when I forget things, Ma tells me and I remember them after that.

We take down all the furnitures from Bed and put Rug back where she was to cover Track so Old Nick won't see the dirty C.

Ma chooses Trampoline, it's just me that bounces on Bed because Ma might break her. She does the commentary: "A daring midair twist from the young U.S. champion..."

My next pick is Simon Says, then Ma says to put our socks back on for Corpse, that's lying like starfish with floppy toenails, floppy belly button, floppy tongue, floppy brain even. Ma gets an itch behind her knee and moves, I win again.

It's 12:13, so it can be lunch. My favorite bit of the prayer is the daily bread. I'm the boss of play but Ma's the boss of meals, like she doesn't let us have cereal for breakfast and lunch and dinner in case we'd get sick and anyway that would use it up too fast. When I was zero and one, Ma used to chop and chew up my food for me, but then I got all my twenty teeth and I can gnash up anything. This lunch is tuna on crackers, my job is to roll back the lid of the can because Ma's wrist can't manage it.

I'm a bit jiggly so Ma says let's play Orchestra, where we run around seeing what noises we can bang out of things. I drum on Table and Ma goes *knock knock* on the legs of Bed, then *floomf floomf* on the pillows, I use a fork and spoon on Door *ding ding* and our toes go *bam* on Stove, but my favorite is stomping on the pedal of Trash because that pops his lid open with a *bing*. My best instrument is Twang that's a cereal box I collaged with all different colored legs and shoes and coats and heads from the old catalog, then I stretched three rubber bands across his middle. Old Nick doesn't bring catalogs anymore for us to pick our own clothes, Ma says he's getting meaner.

I climb on Rocker to get the books from Shelf and I make a ten-story skyscraper on Rug. "Ten stories," says Ma and laughs, that wasn't very funny.

We used to have nine books but only four with pictures inside—

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My Big Book of Nursery Rhymes
Dylan the Digger
The Runaway Bunny
Pop-Up Airport

Also five with pictures only on the front—

The Shack
Twilight
The Guardian
Bittersweet Love
The Da Vinci Code

Ma hardly ever reads the no-pictures ones except if she's desperate. When I was four we asked for one more with pictures for Sundaytreat and *Alice in Wonderland* came, I like her but she's got too many words and lots of them are old.

Today I choose *Dylan the Digger*, he's near the bottom so he does a demolition on the skyscraper *crashhhhhh*.

"Dylan again." Ma makes a face, then she puts on her biggest voice:

"Heeeeeeeere's Dylan, the sturdy digger!
The loads he shovels get bigger and bigger.
Watch his long arm delve into the earth,
No excavator so loves to munch dirt.
This mega-hoe rolls and pivots round the site,
Scooping and grading by day and night."

There's a cat in the second picture, in the third it's on the pile of rocks. Rocks are stones, that means heavy like ceramic that Bath and Sink and Toilet are of, but not so smooth. Cats and rocks are

only TV. In the fifth picture the cat falls down, but cats have nine lives, not like me and Ma with just one each.

Ma nearly always chooses *The Runaway Bunny* because of how the mother bunny catches the baby bunny in the end and says, "Have a carrot." Bunnies are TV but carrots are real, I like their loudness. My favorite picture is the baby bunny turned into a rock on the mountain and the mother bunny has to climb up up up to find him. Mountains are too big to be real, I saw one in TV that has a woman hanging on it by ropes. Women aren't real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either. Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with a *beep beep* and the air changes. I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer.

I wriggle around on her lap now to look at my favorite painting of Baby Jesus playing with John the Baptist that's his friend and big cousin at the same time. Mary's there too, she's cuddled in her Ma's lap that's Baby Jesus's Grandma, like Dora's *abuela*. It's a weird picture with no colors and some of the hands and feet aren't there, Ma says it's not finished. What started Baby Jesus growing in Mary's tummy was an angel zoomed down, like a ghost but a really cool one with feathers. Mary was all surprised, she said, "How can this be?" and then, "OK let it be." When Baby Jesus popped out of her vagina on Christmas she put him in a manger but not for the cows to chew, only warm him up with their blowing because he was magic.

Ma switches Lamp off now and we lie down, first we say the shepherd prayer about green pastures, I think they're like Duvet but fluffy and green instead of white and flat. (The cup overflowing must make an awful mess.) I have some now, the right because the left hasn't much in it. When I was three I still had lots anytime, but since I was four I'm so busy doing stuff I only have some a few times in the

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day and the night. I wish I could talk and have some at the same time but I only have one mouth.

I nearly switch off but not actually. I think Ma does because of her breath.

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After nap Ma says she's figured out that we don't need to ask for a measuring tape, we can make a ruler ourselves.

We recycle the cereal box from Ancient Egyptian Pyramid, Ma shows me to cut a strip that's as big as her foot, that's why it's called a foot, then she puts twelve little lines. I measure her nose that's two inches long. My nose is one inch and a quarter, I write it down. Ma makes Ruler flip slo-mo somersaults up Door Wall where my talls are, she says I'm three feet three inches.

"Hey," I say, "let's measure Room."

"What, all of it?"

"Do we have something else to do?"

She looks at me strange. "I guess not."

I write down all the numbers, like the tall of Door Wall to the line where Roof starts equals six feet seven inches. "Guess what," I tell Ma, "every cork tile is nearly a bit bigger than Ruler."

"Doh," she says, slapping her head, "I guess they're a foot square, I must have made the ruler a little too short. Let's just count the tiles, then, that's easier."

I start counting the tall of Bed Wall, but Ma says all the walls are the same. Another rule is, the wide of the walls is the same as the wide of Floor, I count eleven feet going both ways, that means Floor is a square. Table is a circle so I'm confused, but Ma measures her across the middle where she's the very widest, that's three feet nine inches. My chair is three feet two inches tall and Ma's is the exact same, that's one less than me. Then Ma's a bit sick of measuring so we stop.

I color behind the numbers all different with our five crayons that are blue, orange, green, red, brown, when I'm all done the page looks like Rug but crazier, Ma says why don't I use it as my place mat for dinner.

I choose spaghetti tonight, there's a fresh broccoli as well that I don't choose, it's just good for us. I chop the broccoli into pieces with Zigzag Knife, sometimes I swallow some when Ma's not looking and she says, "Oh, no, where's that big bit gone?" but she isn't really mad because raw things make us extra alive.

Ma does the hotting up on the two rings of Stove that go red, I'm not allowed touch the knobs because it's Ma's job to make sure there's never a fire like in TV. If the rings ever go against something like a dish towel or our clothes even, flames would run all over with orange tongues and burn Room to ashes with us coughing and choking and screaming with the worst pain ever.

I don't like the smell of broccoli cooking, but it's not as bad as green beans. Vegetables are all real but ice cream is TV, I wish it was real too. "Is Plant a raw thing?"

"Well, yeah, but not the kind to eat."

"Why she doesn't have flowers anymore?"

Ma shrugs and stirs the spaghetti. "She got tired."

"She should go to sleep."

"She's still tired when she wakes up. Maybe the soil in her pot doesn't have enough food left in it."

"She could have my broccoli."

Ma laughs. "Not that kind of food, plant food."

"We could ask for it, for Sundaytreat."

"I've got a long list of things to ask for already."

"Where?"

"Just in my head," she says. She pulls out a worm of spaghetti and bites it. "I think they like fish."

"Who do?"

"Plants, they like rotten fish. Or is it fish bones?"

R O O M

“Yuck.”

“Maybe next time we have fish fingers, we can bury a bit under Plant.”

“Not one of my ones.”

“OK, a bit of one of mine.”

The why I like spaghetti best is the song of the meatball, I sing it when Ma fills our plates.

After dinner something amazing, we make a birthday cake. I bet it’s going to be *delicioso* with candles the same number as me and on fire like I’ve never seen for real.

I’m the best egg blower, I make the goo spill out nonstop. I have to blow three for the cake, I use the pin from the *Impression: Sunrise* picture because I think the crazy horse would get mad if I took down *Guernica*, even though I always put the pin back right after. Ma thinks *Guernica* is the best masterpiece because it’s realest, but actually it’s all mixed up, the horse is screaming with lots of teeth because there’s a spear stabbed in him, plus a bull and a woman holding a floppy kid with his head upside down and a lamp like an eye, and the worst is the big bulgy foot in the corner, I always think it’s going to stamp on me.

I get to lick the spoon, then Ma puts the cake into Stove’s hot tummy. I try juggling with the eggshells all up at the same time. Ma catches one. “Little Jacks with faces?”

“Nah,” I say.

“Will we make them a nest of flour dough? If we defrost those beets tomorrow, we could use the juice to make it purple...”

I shake my head. “Let’s add them to Eggsnake.”

Eggsnake is more longer than all around Room, we’ve been making him since I was three, he lives in Under Bed all coiled up keeping us safe. Most of his eggs are brown but sometimes there’s a white, some have patterns on from pencils or crayons or Pen or bits stuck on with flour glue, a foil crown and a yellow ribbon belt and threads and bits of tissue for hairs. His tongue is a needle, that keeps the red

thread going right through him. We don't bring Eggsnake out much anymore because sometimes he tangles and his eggs get cracked around the holes or even fall off, and we have to use the bits for mosaics. Today I put his needle in one of the holes of the new eggs, I have to dangle it till it comes out the other hole all sharp, it's pretty tricky. Now he's three eggs longer, I extra gently wind him up again so all of him fits in Under Bed.

Waiting for my cake takes hours and hours, we breathe in the lovely air. Then when it's cooling we make stuff called icing but not cold like ice, it's sugar melted with water. Ma spreads it all over the cake. "Now you can put on the chocolates while I'm washing up."

"But there aren't any."

"Aha," she says, holding up the little bag and shaking it *shickety shick*, "I saved a few from Sunday treat three weeks ago."

"You sneaky Ma. Where?"

She zips her mouth shut. "What if I need a hiding place another time?"

"Tell me!"

Ma's not smiling anymore. "Shouting hurts my ears."

"Tell me the hidey place."

"Jack—"

"I don't like there to be hidey places."

"What's the big deal?"

"Zombies."

"Ah."

"Or ogres or vampires—"

She opens Cabinet and takes out the box of rice. She points in the dark hole. "It was just in with the rice that I hid them. OK?"

"OK."

"Nothing scary would fit in here. You can check anytime."

There's five chocolates in the bag, pink, blue, green, and two reds. Some of the color comes off on my fingers when I'm putting them on, I get icing on me and suck it every bit.

R O O M

Then it's time for the candles but there aren't any.

"You're shouting again," says Ma, covering her ears.

"But you said a birthday cake, it's not a birthday cake if there's no five candles on fire."

She puffs her breath. "I should have explained better. That's what the five chocolates say, they say you're five."

"I don't want this cake." I hate it when Ma waits all quiet. "Stinky cake."

"Calm down, Jack."

"You should have asked for candles for Sundaytreat."

"Well, last week we needed painkillers."

"I didn't need any, just you," I shout.

Ma looks at me like I have a new face she's never seen. Then she says, "Anyway, remember, we have to choose things he can get easily."

"But he can get anything."

"Well, yeah," she says, "if he went to the trouble—"

"Why he went to trouble?"

"I just mean, he might have to go to two or three stores, and that would make him cranky. And what if he didn't find the impossible thing, then we probably wouldn't get Sunday treat at all."

"But Ma." I laugh. "He doesn't go in stores. Stores are in TV."

She's chewing her lip. Then she looks at the cake. "Well, anyway, I'm sorry, I thought the chocolates would do instead."

"Silly Ma."

"Dumbo." She slaps her head.

"Numbskull," I say, but not in a nasty way. "Next week when I'll be six you better get candles."

"Next year," says Ma, "you mean next year." Her eyes are shut. They always do that sometimes and she doesn't say anything for a minute. When I was small I thought her battery was used up like happened to Watch one time, we had to ask a new battery for him for Sundaytreat.

“Promise?”

“Promise,” she says, opening her eyes.

She cuts me a humongous piece and I swipe all the five onto mine when she’s not looking, the two reds, the pink, the green, the blue, and she says, “Oh, no, another one’s been swiped, how did that happen?”

“You’ll never find it now, ha ha ha,” I say like Swiper when he swipes a thing from Dora. I pick up one of the reds and zoom it in Ma’s mouth, she moves it to her front teeth that are less rotted and she nibbles it smiling.

“Look,” I show her, “there’s holes in my cake where the chocolates were till just now.”

“Like craters,” she says. She puts her fingertop in one.

“What’s craters?”

“Holes where something happened. Like a volcano or an explosion or something.”

I put the green chocolate back in its crater and do ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, boom. It flies up into Outer Space and around into my mouth. My birthday cake is the best thing I ever ate.

Ma isn’t hungry for any right now. Skylight’s sucking all the light away, she’s nearly black. “It’s the spring equinox,” says Ma, “I remember it said on TV, the morning you were born. There was still snow that year too.”

“What’s equinox?”

“It means equal, when there’s the same amount of dark and light.”

It’s too late for any TV because of the cake, Watch says 08:33. My yellow hoody nearly rips my head off when Ma’s pulling it. I get into my sleep T-shirt and brush my teeth while Ma ties up the trash bag and puts it beside Door with our list that I wrote, tonight it says *Please, Pasta, Lentils, Tuna, Cheese (if not too \$), O.J., Thanks.*

“Can we ask for grapes? They’re good for us.”

R O O M

At the bottom Ma puts *Grapes if poss (or any fresh fruit or canned)*.

“Can I have a story?”

“Just a quick one. What about . . . *GingerJack?*”

She does it really fast and funny, Gingerjack jumps out of the stove and runs and rolls and rolls and runs so nobody can catch him, not the old lady or the old man or the threshers or the plowers. But at the end he’s an idiot, he lets the fox carry him across the river and gets eat up snap.

If I was made of cake I’d eat myself before somebody else could.

We do a quick quick prayer that’s hands clicked together, eyes shut. I pray for John the Baptist and Baby Jesus to come around for a playdate with Dora and Boots. Ma prays for sunshine to melt the snow off Skylight.

“Can I have some?”

“First thing tomorrow,” says Ma, pulling her T-shirt back down.

“No, tonight.”

She points up at Watch that says 08:57, that’s only three minutes before nine. So I run into Wardrobe and lie down on my pillow and wrap up in Blanket that’s all gray and fleecy with the red piping. I’m just under the drawing of me I forgot was there. Ma puts her head in. “Three kisses?”

“No, five for Mr. Five.”

She gives me five then squeaks the doors shut.

There’s still light coming in the slats so I can see some of me in the drawing, the bits like Ma and the nose that’s only like me. I stroke the paper, it’s all silky. I go straight so my head is pressing on Wardrobe and so are my feet. I listen to Ma getting into her sleep T-shirt and taking the killers, always two at night because she says pain is like water, it spreads out as soon as she lies down. She spits toothpaste. “Our friend Zack has an itch on his back,” she says.

I think of one. “Our friend Zah says blah blah blah.”

“Our friend Ebenezer lives in a freezer.”

“Our friend Dora went to the store-a.”

“That’s a cheat rhyme,” says Ma.

“Oh, man!” I groan like Swiper. “Our friend Baby Jesus . . . likes to eat cheeses.”

“Our friend Spoon sang a song to the moon.”

The moon is God’s silver face that only comes on special occasions.

I sit and put my face up against the slats, I can see slices of TV that’s off, Toilet, Bath, my blue octopus picture going curly, Ma putting our clothes back in Dresser. “Ma?”

“Mmm?”

“Why am I hidid away like the chocolates?”

I think she’s sitting on Bed. She talks quiet so I can hardly hear. “I just don’t want him looking at you. Even when you were a baby, I always wrapped you up in Blanket before he came in.”

“Would it hurt?”

“Would what hurt?”

“If he saw me.”

“No, no. Go to sleep now,” Ma tells me.

“Do the Bugs.”

“Night-night, sleep tight, don’t let the bugs bite.”

The Bugs are invisible but I talk to them and sometimes count, last time I got to 347. I hear the snap of the switch and Lamp goes out all at the same second. Sounds of Ma getting under Duvet.

I’ve seen Old Nick through the slats some nights but never all of him close up. His hair has some white and it’s smaller than his ears. Maybe his eyes would turn me to stone. Zombies bite kids to make them undead, vampires suck them till they’re floppy, ogres dangle them by the legs and munch them up. Giants can be just as bad, *be he alive or be he dead I’ll grind his bones to make my bread*, but Jack ran away with the golden hen and he was slithering down the Beanstalk quick quick. The Giant was climbing down after him but

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Jack shouted to his Ma for the ax, that's like our knives but bigger, and his Ma was too scared to chop the Beanstalk on her own but when Jack got to the ground they did it together and the Giant went smash with all his insides coming out, ha ha. Then Jack was Jack the Giant Killer.

I wonder if Ma's switched off already.

In Wardrobe I always try to squeeze my eyes tight and switch off fast so I don't hear Old Nick come, then I'll wake up and it'll be the morning and I'll be in Bed with Ma having some and everything OK. But tonight I'm still on, the cake is fizzing in my tummy. I count my top teeth with my tongue from right to left till ten, then my bottom teeth from left to right, then back the other way, I have to get to ten each time and twice ten equals twenty, that's how many I have.

There's no *beep beep*, it must be a lot after nine. I count my teeth again and get nineteen, I must have done it wrong or else one's disappeared. I nibble my finger just a bit and then another bit. I wait for hours. "Ma?" I whisper. "Is he not coming or yeah?"

"Doesn't look like it. Come on in."

I jump up and shove Wardrobe open, I'm in Bed in two secs. It's extra hot under Duvet, I have to put my feet out so they don't burn. I have lots, the left and then the right. I don't want to be asleep because then it won't be my birthday anymore.

• • •

There's light flashing at me, it stabs my eyes. I look out of Duvet but squinting. Ma standing beside Lamp and everything bright, then *snap* and dark again. Light again, she makes it last three seconds then dark, then light for just a second. Ma's staring up at Skylight. Dark again. She does this in the night, I think it helps her get to sleep again.

I wait till Lamp's off properly. I whisper in the dark, "All done?"

"Sorry I woke you," she says.

“That’s OK.”

She gets back into Bed colder than me, I tie my arms around her middle.

• • •

Now I’m five and one day.

Silly Penis is always standing up in the morning, I push him down.

When we’re scrubbing hands after peeing, I sing “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” then I can’t think of another hands one, but the dickey bird one is about fingers.

“Fly away Peter,
Fly away Paul.”

My two fingers zoom all around Room and nearly have a midair collision.

“Come back Peter,
Come back Paul.”

“I think they’re actually angels,” says Ma.

“Huh?”

“Or no, sorry, saints.”

“What are saints?”

“Extra-holy people. Like angels with no wings.”

I’m confused. “How come they fly off the wall, then?”

“No, that’s the dickey birds, they can fly all right. I just mean they’re named after Saint Peter and Saint Paul, two of Baby Jesus’ friends.”

I didn’t know he has more friends after John the Baptist.

“Actually, Saint Peter was in jail, one time—”

I laugh. “Babies don’t go in jail.”

R O O M

“This happened when they were all grown up.”

I didn’t know Baby Jesus grows up. “Is Saint Peter a bad guy?”

“No, no, he was put in jail by mistake, I mean it was some bad police who put him there. Anyway, he prayed and prayed to get out, and you know what? An angel flew down and smashed the door open.”

“Cool,” I say. But I prefer when they’re babies running around all naked together.

There’s a funny banging sound and a *scrunch scrunch*. Brightness is coming in Skylight, the dark snow’s nearly gone. Ma’s looking up too, she’s got a small smile on, I think the prayer did magic.

“Is it still the equals thing?”

“Oh, the equinox?” she says. “No, the light’s starting to win a little bit.”

She lets me have cake for breakfast, I never did that before. It’s gone crunchy, but it’s still good.

TV is *Wonder Pets!*, pretty fuzzy, Ma keeps moving Bunny but he doesn’t sharpen them up much. I make a bow on his wire ear with the purple ribbon. I wish it was *Backyardigans*, I haven’t met them in ages. Sundaytreat’s not here yet because Old Nick didn’t come last night, actually that was the best bit of my birthday. What we asked is not very exciting anyway, new pants because my black ones have holes instead of knees. I don’t mind the holes but Ma says they make me look homeless, she can’t explain what that is.

After bath I play with the clothes. Ma’s pink skirt is a snake this morning, he’s having a quarrel with my white sock. “I’m Jack’s best friend.”

“No, I’m Jack’s best friend.”

“I banged you.”

“I zapped you.”

“I’m going to pow you with my shooter flyer pump.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a jumbo megatron transformerblaster —”

“Hey,” says Ma, “will we play Catch?”

“We don’t have Beach Ball anymore,” I remember her. He burst by accident when I kicked him against Cabinet super fast. I wanted to ask for another instead of stupid pants.

But Ma says we can make one, we scrunch up all the pages I’ve been practicing my writing on and fill a grocery bag and squeeze it till it’s kind of ball shape, then we draw a scary face on it with three eyes. Wordy Ball doesn’t go as high as Beach Ball did but every time we catch him he makes a loud *scrunch*. Ma’s the best at catching, only it pings her bad wrist sometimes, and I’m the best at throwing.

Because of cake for breakfast we have Sunday pancakes for lunch instead. There isn’t much mix left so they’re thin ones that spread out, I like that. I get to fold them up, some of them crack. There’s not much jelly, so we mix water in that too.

A corner of mine drips, Ma scrubs Floor with Sponge. “The cork’s wearing away,” she says with her teeth shut, “how are we supposed to keep it clean?”

“Where?”

“Here, where our feet rub.”

I get down under Table, there’s a hole in Floor with brown stuff underneath that’s harder on my nail.

“Don’t make it worse, Jack.”

“I’m not, I’m just looking with my finger.” It’s like a tiny crater.

We move Table over to beside Bath so we can sunbathe on Rug right under Skylight where it’s extra warm. I sing “Ain’t No Sunshine,” Ma does “Here Comes the Sun,” I pick “You Are My Sunshine.” Then I want some, the left is extra creamy this afternoon.

God’s yellow face makes red through my lids. When I open it’s too bright to look. My fingers do shadows on Rug, little squished ones.

Ma is snoozing.

I hear a sound so I get up not waking her. Over by Stove, a tiny scritch scratchy sound.

An alive thing, an animal, for really real not TV. It’s on Floor,

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eating something, maybe a crumb of pancake. It's got a tail, I think what it is is, what it is is a mouse.

I go nearer and *whee* it's gone under Stove so I hardly saw it, I never knowed anything could go so fast. "O Mouse," I say in a whisper so he won't be scared. That's how to talk to a mouse, it's in *Alice*, only she talks about her cat Dinah by mistake and the mouse gets nervous and swims away. I put my hands praying now, "O Mouse, come on back, please, please, please..."

I wait for hours but he doesn't come.

Ma's definitely asleep.

I open Refrigerator, she doesn't have much inside. Mice like cheese, but we haven't any left. I get out the bread and crumble a bit on a plate and put it down where Mouse was. I crouch down small and wait for more hours and hours.

Then the wonderfulest thing, Mouse puts his mouth out, it's pointy. I nearly jump in the air but I don't, I stay extra still. He comes up to the crumbs and sniffs. I'm only about two feet away, I wish I had Ruler to measure but he's tidied in Box in Under Bed and I don't want to move and scare Mouse. I watch his hands, his whiskers, his tail all curly. He's alive for real, he's the biggest alive thing I ever saw, millions of times bigger than the ants or Spider.

Then something smashes into Stove, *whaaaaaack*. I scream and stand on the plate by accident, Mouse is gone, where's he gone? Did the book break him? She's *Pop-Up Airport*, I look in all her pages but he's not there. The Baggage Claim is all ripped and won't stand up anymore.

Ma's got a weird face. "You made him gone," I shout at her.

She's got BrushPan, she's sweeping up the broken bits of plate. "What was this doing on the floor? Now we're down to two big plates and one small, that's *it*—"

The cook in *Alice* throws plates at the baby and a saucepan that almost takes off his nose.

"Mouse was liking the crumbs."

“Jack!”

“He was real, I saw him.”

She drags Stove out, there’s a little crack at the bottom of Door Wall, she gets the bundle of aluminum foil and starts pushing balls of it into the crack.

“Don’t. Please.”

“I’m sorry. But where there’s one there’s ten.”

That’s crazy math.

Ma puts down the foil and holds me hard by my shoulders. “If we let him stay, we’d soon be overrun with his babies. Stealing our food, bringing in germs on their filthy paws . . .”

“They could have my food, I’m not hungry.”

Ma’s not listening. She shoves Stove back to Door Wall.

After, we use a little bit of tape to make the Hangar page stand up better in *Pop-Up Airport*, but the Baggage Claim is too torn to fix.

We sit curled up in Rocker and Ma reads me *Dylan the Digger* three times, that means she’s sorry. “Let’s ask for a new book for Sundaytreat,” I say.

She twists her mouth. “I did, a few weeks ago; I wanted you to have one for your birthday. But he said to quit bugging him, don’t we have a whole shelf of them already.”

I look up past her head at Shelf, she could fit hundreds more books if we put some of the other things in Under Bed beside Egg-snake. Or on top of Wardrobe . . . but that’s where Fort and Labyrinth live. It’s tricky figuring out where everything’s home is, Ma sometimes says we have to throw things in the trash but I usually find a spot for them.

“He thinks we should just watch TV all the time.”

That sounds fun.

“Then our brains would rot, like his,” says Ma. She leans over to pick up *My Big Book of Nursery Rhymes*. She reads me one I choose from every page. My bests are the Jack ones, like *Jack Sprat* or *Little Jack Horner*.

R O O M

Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick,
Jack jump over the candlestick.

I think he wanted to see if he could not burn his nightshirt. In TV there's pajamas instead, or nighties on girls. My sleep T-shirt is my biggest, it has a hole on the shoulder that I like to put my finger in it and tickle myself when I'm switching off. There's *Jackie Wackie pudding and pie*, but when I figured out to read I saw it's actually *Georgie Porgie*. Ma changed it to fit me, that's not lying, it's just pretending. Same with

Jack, Jack, the piper's son,
Stole a pig and away he run.

It actually says Tom in the book but Jack sounds better. Stealing is when a boy takes what belongs to some boy else, because in books and TV all persons have things that belong just to them, it's complicated.

It's 05:39 so we can have dinner, it's quick noodles. While they're in the hot water, Ma finds hard words to test me from the milk carton like *nutritional* that means food, and *pasteurized* that means laser guns zapped away the germs. I want more cake but Ma says beets chopped all juicy first. Then I have cake that's pretty crispy now and Ma does too, a little bit.

I get up on Rocker to find Games Box at the end of Shelf, tonight I pick Checkers and I'm going to be red. The pieces are like little chocolates, but I've licked them lots of times and they don't taste like anything. They stick to the board by magnetic magic. Ma likes Chess best but it aches my head.

At TV time she chooses the wildlife planet, there's turtles burying their eggs in sand. When Alice gets long with eating the mushroom, the pigeon's mad because she thinks Alice is a nasty serpent

trying to eat her pigeon eggs. Here come the turtle babies out of their shells, but the turtle mothers are gone already, that's weird. I wonder if they meet sometime in the sea, the mothers and the babies, if they know each other or maybe they just swim on by.

The wildlife ends too quick so I switch over to two men only wearing shorts and sneakers and dripping hot. "Uh-oh, hitting's not allowed," I tell them. "Baby Jesus is going to be mad."

The one in yellow shorts bashes the hairy one on the eye.

Ma groans as if she's hurting. "Do we have to watch this?"

I tell her, "In a minute the police are going to come *weee-abhh weee-abhh* and lock those bad guys up in jail."

"Actually, boxing... it's nasty but it's a game, it's kind of allowed if they have those special gloves on. Now time's up."

"One game of Parrot, that's good for vocabulary."

"OK." She goes over and switches to the red couch planet where the puffy-hair woman that's the boss asks the other persons questions and hundreds of other persons clap.

I listen extra hard, she's talking to a man with one leg, I think he lost the other in a war.

"Parrot," shouts Ma and she mutes them with the button.

"*Most poignant aspect, I think for all our viewers that's what's most deeply moving about what you endured—*" I run out of words.

"Good pronunciation," says Ma. "*Poignant* means sad."

"Again."

"The same show?"

"No, a different."

She finds a news one that's even harder. "Parrot." She mutes it again.

"*Ah, with the whole labeling debate coming hard on the heels of health-care reform, and bearing in mind of course the midterms—*"

"Any more?" Ma waits. "Good, again. But it was *labor law*, not *labeling*."

R O O M

“What’s the difference?”

“*Labeling* is stickers on tomatoes, say, and *labor law*—”

I do a huge yawn.

“Never mind.” Ma grins and switches the TV off.

I hate when the pictures disappear and the screen’s just gray again. I always want to cry but just for a second.

I get on Ma’s lap in Rocker with our legs all jumbled up. She’s the wizard transformed into a giant squid and I’m Prince JackerJack and I escape in the end. We do tickles and Bouncy Bouncy and jaggedy shadows on Bed Wall.

Then I ask for JackerJackRabbit, he’s always doing cunning tricks on that Brer Fox. He lies down in the road pretending to be dead and Brer Fox sniffs him and says, “I better not take him home, he’s too stinky . . .” Ma sniffs me all over and makes hideous faces and I try not to laugh so Brer Fox won’t know I’m actually alive but I always do.

For a song I want a funny, she starts, “‘The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out—’”

“‘They eat your guts like sauerkraut—,’” I sing.

“‘They eat your eyes, they eat your nose—’”

“‘They eat the dirt between your toes—’”

I have lots on Bed but my mouth is sleepy. Ma carries me into Wardrobe, she tucks Blanket around my neck, I pull her looser again. My fingers go choo-choo along her red line.

Beep beep, that’s Door. Ma jumps up and makes a sound, I think she hit her head. She shuts Wardrobe tight.

The air that comes in is freezing, I think it’s a bit of Outer Space, it smells yum. Door makes his *thump* that means Old Nick’s in now. I’m not sleepy anymore. I get up on my knees and look through the slats, but all I can see is Dresser and Bath and a curve of Table.

“Looks tasty.” Old Nick’s voice is extra deep.

“Oh, it’s just the last of the birthday cake,” says Ma.

“Should have reminded me, I could have brought him something. What’s he now, four?”

I wait for Ma to say, but she doesn't. "Five." I whisper it.
 But she must hear me, because she comes close to Wardrobe and
 says "Jack" in a mad voice.

Old Nick laughs, I didn't know he could. "It speaks."

Why does he say *it* not *he*?

"Want to come out of there and try on your new jeans?"

It's not Ma he's saying that to, it's me. My chest starts to go *dung
 dung dung*.

"He's nearly asleep," says Ma.

No I'm not. I wish I didn't whisper *five* so he heard me, I wish I
 didn't anything.

Something else I can't quite hear—

"OK, OK," Old Nick is saying. "Can I've a slice?"

"It's getting stale. If you really want—"

"No, forget it, you're the boss."

Ma doesn't say anything.

"I'm just the grocery boy, take out your trash, trek around the
 kidswear aisles, up the ladder to deice your skylight, at your service
 ma'am..."

I think he's doing sarcasm, when he says the really opposite with
 a voice that's all twisty.

"Thanks for that." Ma doesn't sound like her. "It makes it much
 brighter."

"There, that didn't hurt, did it?"

"Sorry. Thanks a lot."

"Like pulling teeth sometimes," says Old Nick.

"And thanks for the groceries, and the jeans."

"You're welcome."

"Here, I'll get you a plate, maybe the middle's not too bad."

There's some clinks, I think she's giving him cake. My cake.

After a minute he talks blurry. "Yup, pretty stale."

His mouth is full of my cake.

Lamp goes off *snap*, that makes me jump. I don't mind dark but

R O O M

I don't like when it surprises me. I lie down under Blanket and I wait.

When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do.

What about the nights I'm asleep?

I don't know, maybe Ma does the counting.

After the 217 it's all quiet.

I hear the TV switch on, it's just the news planet, I see bits with tanks through the slats that's not very interesting. I put my head under Blanket. Ma and Old Nick are talking a bit but I don't listen.

• • •

I wake up in Bed and it's raining, that's when Skylight's all blurry. Ma gives me some and she's doing "Singing in the Rain" very quietly.

Right doesn't taste yummy. I sit up remembering. "Why you didn't tell him before that it was my birthday?"

Ma stops smiling. "You're meant to be asleep when he's here."

"But if you told him, he'd brung me something."

"Bring you something," she says. "So he says."

"What kind of something?" I wait. "You should have remembered him."

Ma stretches her arms over her head. "I don't want him bringing you things."

"But Sundaytreat—"

"That's different, Jack, that's stuff we need that I ask him for." She points to Dresser, there's a blue folded up. "There are your new jeans, by the way."

She goes over to pee.

"You could ask him for a present for me. I never got a present in my life."

EMMA DONOGHUE

“Your present was from me, remember? It was the drawing.”

“I don’t want the dumbo drawing.” I’m crying.

Ma dries her hands and comes to hold me. “It’s OK.”

“It might—”

“I can’t hear you. Take a big breath.”

“It might—”

“Tell me what’s the matter.”

“It might be a dog.”

“What might?”

I can’t stop, I have to talk through the crying. “The present. It might be a dog turned to real, and we could call it Lucky.”

Ma wipes my eyes with the flat of her hands. “You know we don’t have room.”

“Yeah we do.”

“Dogs need walks.”

“We walk.”

“But a dog—”

“We run a long long way on Track, Lucky could go beside us. I bet he’d be faster than you.”

“Jack. A dog would drive us nuts.”

“No he wouldn’t.”

“He would so. Cooped up, with the barking, the scratching...”

“Lucky wouldn’t be scratching.”

Ma rolls her eyes. She goes over to Cabinet to get out the cereal, she pours it in our bowls not even counting.

I do a roaring lion face. “In the night when you’re asleep, I’m going to be awake, I’ll pull the foil out of the holes so Mouse will come back.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not silly, you’re the silly numbskull.”

“Listen, I understand—”

“Mouse and Lucky are my friends.” I’m crying again.

“There is no Lucky.” Ma’s talking with her teeth shut.

R O O M

“Yeah there is and I love him.”

“You just made him up.”

“Also there’s Mouse, he’s my real friend and you made him gone—”

“Yeah,” shouts Ma, “so he won’t run over your face in the night and bite you.”

I’m crying so much my breath’s all whoopy. I never knowed Mouse would bite my face, I thought that was only vampires.

Ma drops down on Duvet and doesn’t move.

After a minute I go beside her and lie down. I lift her T-shirt to have some, I have to keep stopping to wipe my nose. The left is good but there’s not much.

Later I try on my new jeans. They keep falling down.

Ma pulls at a sticking-out thread.

“Don’t.”

“It was loose already. Cheap piece of—” She doesn’t say what.

“Denim,” I tell her, “that’s what jeans are made of.” I put the thread in Cabinet in Crafts Tub.

Ma gets down Kit to sew some stitches in the waist, after that my jeans stay up.

We have a pretty busy morning. First we undo Pirate Ship that we made last week and turn it into Tank. Balloon is the driver, she used to be as big as Ma’s head and pink and fat, now she’s small like my fist only red and wrinkly. We only blow up one when it’s the first of a month, so we can’t make Balloon a sister till it’s April. Ma plays with Tank too but not as long. She gets sick of things fast, it’s from being an adult.

Monday is a laundry day, we get into Bath with socks, underwears, my gray pants that ketchup squirted on, the sheets and dish towels, and we squish all the dirt out. Ma hots Thermostat way up for the drying, she pulls Clothes Horse out from beside Door and stands him open and I tell him to be strong. I would love to ride him like when I was a baby but I’m so huge now I might break his back.

It would be cool to sometimes go smaller again and sometimes bigger like Alice. When we've twisted the water out of everything and hanged them up, Ma and me have to rip off our T-shirts and take turns pushing ourselves into Refrigerator to cool down.

Lunch is bean salad, my second worst favorite. After nap we do Scream every day but not Saturdays or Sundays. We clear our throats and climb up on Table to be nearer Skylight, holding hands not to fall. We say "On your mark, get set, go," then we open wide our teeth and shout holler howl yowl shriek screech scream the loudest possible. Today I'm the most loudest ever because my lungs are stretching from being five.

Then we shush with fingers on lips. I asked Ma once what we're listening for and she said just in case, you never know.

Then I do rubbings of a fork and Comb and jar lids and the sides of my jeans. Ruled paper is smoothest for rubbings, but toilet paper is good for a drawing that goes on forever, like today I do me with a cat and a parrot and an iguana and a raccoon and Santa and an ant and Lucky and all my TV friends in a procession and I'm King Jack. When I'm all done I roll it again so we can use it for our butts. I take a fresh bit from the next roll for a letter to Dora, I have to sharpen the red pencil with Smooth Knife. I squeeze the pencil hard because it's so short it's nearly gone, I write perfectly only sometimes my letters go back to front. *I am five the day before yesterday, you can have the last bit of cake but there is no candles, bye love Jack.* It only tears a little on the *of*. "When will she get it?"

"Well," says Ma, "I'd imagine it'll take a few hours to reach the sea, then it'll wash up on a beach..."

She sounds funny from sucking an ice cube for Bad Tooth. Beaches and sea are TV but I think when we send a letter it turns them real for a bit. The poos sink and the letters float on the waves. "Who'll find it? Diego?"

"Probably. And he'll take it to his cousin Dora—"

"In his safari jeep. *Zoom zoom* through the jungle."

R O O M

“So tomorrow morning, I’d say. Lunchtime at the latest.”

The ice cube is making less bulge in Ma’s face now. “Let’s see?”

She puts it out on her tongue.

“I think I have a bad tooth too.”

Ma wails, “Oh, Jack.”

“Really real for real. Ow, ow, ow.”

Her face changes. “You can suck an ice cube if you want, you don’t have to have a toothache.”

“Cool.”

“Don’t scare me like that.”

I didn’t know I could scare her. “Maybe it’ll hurt when I’m six.”

She puffs her breath when she’s getting the cubes out of Freezer.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

But I wasn’t lying, only pretending.

It’s rainy all the afternoon, God doesn’t look in at all. We sing “Stormy Weather” and “It’s Raining Men” and the one about the desert missing the rain.

Dinner is fish sticks and rice, I get to squirt the lemon that’s not an actual but a plastic. We had a real lemon once but it shriveled up too fast. Ma puts a bit of her fish stick under Plant in the soil.

The cartoon planet’s not in evenings, maybe because it’s dark and they don’t have lamps there. I choose a cooking tonight, it’s not like real food, they don’t have any cans. The she and the he smile at each other and do a meat with a pie on top and green things around other green things in bunches. Then I switch over to the fitness planet where persons in underwear with all machines have to keep doing things over and over, I think they’re locked in. That’s over soon and it’s the knockerdowners, they make houses into different shapes and also millions of colors with paint, not just on a picture but all over everything. Houses are like lots of Rooms stuck together, TV persons stay in them mostly but sometimes they go in their outsides and weather happens to them.

“What if we put the bed over there?” says Ma.

I stare at her, then I look where she's pointing. "That's TV Wall."

"That's just what we call it," she says, "but the bed could probably fit there, between the toilet and... we'd have to shift the wardrobe over a bit. Then the dresser would be right here instead of the bed, with the TV on top of it."

I'm shaking my head a lot. "Then we couldn't see."

"We could, we'd be sitting right here in the rocker."

"Bad idea."

"OK, forget it." Ma folds her arms tight.

The TV woman is crying because her house is yellow now. "Did she like it brown better?" I ask.

"No," says Ma, "she's so happy it's making her cry."

That's weird. "Is she happysad, like you get when there's lovely music on TV?"

"No, she's just an idiot. Let's switch the TV off now."

"Five more minutes? Please?"

She shakes her head.

"I'll do Parrot, I'm getting even better." I listen hard to the TV woman. I say, "*Dream come to life, I have to tell you Darren it's just beyond my very wildest imaginings, the cornices—*"

Ma hits the off. I want to ask her what a cornices is but I think she's still cranky about moving the furniture, that was a crazy plan.

In Wardrobe I should be going to sleep but I'm counting fights. That's three we had in three days, one about the candles and one about Mouse and one about Lucky. I'd rather be four again if five means fighting all the days.

"Good night, Room," I say very quiet. "Good night, Lamp and Balloon."

"Good night, stove," says Ma, "and good night, table."

I'm grinning. "Good night, Wordy Ball. Good night, Fort. Good night, Rug."

"Good night, air," says Ma.

R O O M

“Good night, noises everywhere.”

“Good night, Jack.”

“Good night, Ma. And Bugs, don’t forget the Bugs.”

“Night-night,” she says, “sleep tight, don’t let the bugs bite.”

• • •

When I wake up, Skylight’s all blue in her glass, there’s no snow left even in the corners. Ma’s sitting in her chair holding her face, that means hurting. She’s looking at something on Table, two things.

I jump up and grab. “It’s a jeep. A remote-control jeep!” I’m zooming it in the air, it’s red, as big as my hand. The remote is silver and a rectangle, when I wiggle one of the switches with my thumb the jeep’s wheels spin *zhhhung*.

“It’s a late birthday present.”

I know who brung it, it’s Old Nick but she won’t say.

I don’t want to eat my cereal but Ma says I can play with the jeep again right after. I eat twenty-nine of them, then I’m not hungry anymore. Ma says that’s waste, so she eats the rest.

I figure out to move Jeep just with Remote. The thin silver antenna, I can make it really long or really short. One switch makes Jeep go forward and backward, the other does side to side. If I flip both the same time, Jeep gets paralyzed like by a poison dart, he says *arghhhhh*.

Ma says she’d better start cleaning because it’s Tuesday. “Gently,” she says, “remember it’s breakable.”

I know that already, everything’s breakable.

“And if you keep it turned on for a long time the batteries will get used up, and we don’t have any spares.”

I can make Jeep go all around Room, it’s easy except at the edge of Rug, she gets curled up under his wheels. Remote is the boss, he says, “Off you go now, you slowcoach Jeep. Twice around that Table leg, lickety-split. Keep those wheels turning.” Sometimes Jeep is tired, Remote turns his wheels *grrrrrrrrr*. That naughty Jeep hides

in Wardrobe but Remote finds him by magic and makes him zoom back and forward crashing into the slats.

Tuesdays and Fridays always smell of vinegar. Ma's scrubbing under Table with the rag that used to be one of my diapers I wore till I was one. I bet she's wiping Spider's web away but I don't care much. Then she picks up Vacuum who makes it all noisy dusty *wah wah wah*.

Jeep sneaks way off in Under Bed. "Come back, my little baby Jeepy," says Remote. "If you become a fish in the river, I will be a fisherman and catch you in my net." But that tricky Jeep stays quiet till Remote is having a nap with his antenna all the way down, then Jeep sneaks up behind him and takes out his batteries ha ha ha.

I play with Jeep and Remote all day except when I'm in Bath they have to park on Table not to get rusty. When we do Scream I push them up really near Skylight and Jeep *vrums* his wheels as loud as he can.

Ma lies down again holding her teeth. Sometimes she does a big breath out out out.

"Why are you hissing so long?"

"Trying to get on top of it."

I go sit by her head and stroke her hair out of her eyes, her forehead is slippery. She grabs my hand and holds it tight. "It's OK."

It doesn't look OK. "You want to play with Jeep and Remote and me?"

"Maybe later."

"If you play you won't mind and you won't matter."

She smiles a bit but the next breath comes out louder like a moan.

At 05:57 I say, "Ma, it's nearly six," so she gets up to make dinner but she doesn't eat any. Jeep and Remote wait in Bath because it's dry now, it's their secret cave. "Actually Jeep died and went to Heaven," I say, eating my chicken slices really fast.

"Oh, yeah?"

R O O M

“But then in the night when God was asleep, Jeep snuck out and slid down the Beanstalk to Room to visit me.”

“That was cunning of him.”

I eat three green beans and have a big drink of milk and another three, they go down a bit faster in threes. Five would be fasterer but I can't manage that, my throat would shut. One time I was four, Ma wrote *Green beans / other froz green veg* on the shopping list and I scribbled out *Green beans* with the orange pencil, she thought it was funny. At the end I have the soft bread because I like to keep it in my mouth like a cushion. “Thanks, Baby Jesus, especially for the chicken slices,” I say, “and please no more green beans for a long time. Hey, why do we thank Baby Jesus and not him?”

“Him?”

I nod at Door.

Her face gets flat even though I didn't say his name. “Why should we thank him?”

“You did the other night, for the groceries and the snow offing and the pants.”

“You shouldn't listen.” Sometimes when she's really mad her mouth doesn't really open. “It was a fake thank.”

“Why it—?”

She butts in. “He's only the bringer. He doesn't actually make the wheat grow in the field.”

“Which field?”

“He can't make the sun shine on it, or the rain fall, or anything.”

“But Ma, bread doesn't come out of fields.”

She presses on her mouth.

“Why you said—?”

“It must be time for TV,” she says fast.

It's videos, I love them. Ma does the moves with me most times but not tonight. I jump on Bed and teach Jeep and Remote to shake their booties. It's Rihanna and T.I. and Lady Gaga and Kanye West.

“Why do rappers wear shades even in the night,” I ask Ma, “are their eyeballs sore?”

“No, they just want to look cool. And not have fans staring into their faces all the time because they’re so famous.”

I’m confused. “Why the fans are famous?”

“No, the stars are.”

“And they don’t want to be?”

“Well, I guess they do,” says Ma, getting up to switch off the TV, “but they want to stay a bit private as well.”

When I’m having some, Ma won’t let me bring Jeep and Remote into Bed even though they’re my friends. And then she says they have to go up on Shelf while I’m sleeping. “Otherwise they’ll poke you in the night.”

“No they won’t, they promise.”

“Listen, let’s put your jeep away, then you can sleep with the remote because it’s smaller, as long as the antenna’s right down. Deal?”

“Deal.”

When I’m in Wardrobe, we talk through the slats. “God bless Jack,” she says.

“God bless Ma and magic her teeth better. God bless Jeep and Remote.”

“God bless books.”

“God bless everything here and Outer Space and Jeep as well. Ma?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are we when we’re asleep?”

I can hear her yawn. “Right here.”

“But dreams.” I wait. “Are they TV?” She still doesn’t answer. “Do we go into TV for dreaming?”

“No. We’re never anywhere but here.” Her voice sounds a long way away.

I lie curled up touching the switches with my fingers. I whisper,

R O O M

“Can’t you sleep, little switches? It’s OK, have some.” I put them at my nipples, they take turns. I’m sort of asleep but only nearly.

Beep beep. That’s Door.

I listen very hard. In comes the cold air. If I had my head out of Wardrobe, there’d be Door opening, I bet I could see right into the stars and the spaceships and the planets and the aliens zooming around in UFOs. I wish I wish I wish I could see it.

Boom, that’s Door shutting and Old Nick is telling Ma how there wasn’t any of something and something else was a ridiculous price anyway.

I wonder if he looked up on Shelf and saw Jeep. Yeah he brung him for me, but he never played with him I don’t think. He won’t know how Jeep suddenly goes when I switch Remote on, *vrummmmm*.

Ma and him only talk for a bit tonight. Lamp goes off *click* and Old Nick creaks the bed. I count in ones sometimes instead of fives just for different. But I start losing count so I switch to fives that go faster, I count to 378.

All quiet. I think he must be asleep. Does Ma switch off when he’s off or does she stay awake waiting for him to be gone? Maybe they’re both off and me on, that’s weird. I could sit up and crawl out of Wardrobe, they wouldn’t even know. I could draw a picture of them in Bed or something. I wonder are they beside each other or opposite sides.

Then I have a terrible idea, what if he’s having some? Would Ma let him have some or would she say, *No way Jose, that’s only for Jack?*

If he had some he might start getting realer.

I want to jump up and scream.

I find Remote’s on switch, I make it green. Wouldn’t it be funny if his superpowers started Jeep’s wheels spinning up there on Shelf? Old Nick might wake up all surprised ha ha.

I try the forward switch, nothing happens. Doh, I forgot to put

up the antenna. I make it all the way long and try again but Remote still doesn't work. I poke his antenna through the slats, it's outside and I'm inside all at the same time. I flick the switch. I hear a tiny sound that must be Jeep's wheels coming alive and then—

SMASHSHSHSHSH.

Old Nick roaring like I never heard him, something about Jesus but it wasn't Baby Jesus that did it, it was me. Lamp's on, light's banging in the slats at me, my eyes squeeze shut. I wriggle back and pull Blanket over my face.

He's shouting, "What are you trying to pull?"

Ma sounds all wobbly, she says, "What, what? Did you have a bad dream?"

I'm biting Blanket, soft like gray bread in my mouth.

"Did you try something? Did you?" His voice goes downer. "Because I told you before, it's on your head if—"

"I was asleep." Ma's talking in a squashed tiny voice. "Please— look, look, it was the stupid jeep that rolled off the shelf."

Jeep's not a stupid.

"I'm sorry," Ma's saying, "I'm so sorry, I should have put it somewhere it wouldn't fall. I'm really really totally—"

"OK."

"Look, let's turn the light off—"

"Nah," says Old Nick, "I'm done."

Nobody says anything, I count one hippopotamus two hippopotamus three hippopotamus—

Beep beep, Door opens and shuts *boom*. He's gone.

Lamp clicks off again.

I feel around on the floor of Wardrobe for Remote, I find a terrible thing. His antenna all short and sharp, it must have snapped in the slats.

"Ma," I whisper.

No answer.

"Remote got broke."

R O O M

“Go to sleep.” Her voice is so hoarse and scary I think it’s not her.

I count my teeth five times, I get twenty every time but I still have to do it again. None of them hurt yet but they might when I’m six.

I must be asleep but I don’t know it, because then I wake up.

I’m still in Wardrobe, it’s all dark. Ma didn’t bring me into Bed yet. Why she didn’t bring me in?

I push the doors and listen for her breath. She’s asleep, she can’t be mad in her sleep, can she?

I crawl under Duvet. I lie near Ma not touching, there’s all heat around her.