

Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Ward-robe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to zero. "Was I minus numbers?"

"Humm?" 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 *wboosh*.

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 bing 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 skate-board on Rocker without holding on to her, then I *whee* 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 r in my armpit and lock shut. "I choose—now."

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 Wardro 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.

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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 "Mac-arena" 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?"

"No, on you." I burst out singing the chorus, Ma says she's a dumbbo.

"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 at she says they're dirty but they look like extra-thin silver to me. ~~Ma~~ makes the animals that run around eating each other on the wildlife

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 *mmmm mmmmm* 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 struck 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 r", she tells me.