

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 *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 put it 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 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 Meltdy Spoon with the white all blobby on his handle when he leaned on the pan of boiling pasta by accident. Ma doesn't like Meltdy 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?"

"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 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 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 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 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—

- *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 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.