

Excerpted from:

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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 *wbee* 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 masterpiece 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.

EMMA DONOGHUE

“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 Josc.”

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

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