

Three

He looks up. The TV is on but it's not a cartoon. The grown-ups are down the hall, still in the dining room. When they laugh, they are louder than the TV. There are no cartoons on after dinner, on his TV. He still has some cookie stuck in his teeth. Usually, he puts on a movie after dinner or builds things on the rug or both. His house has smelled like cookies since before dinner. Tonight he cried when Mommy came into the den eating a cookie and offered to put on a movie for him. He wanted a cookie. When there were no cartoons on TV, the news was on every channel. When he left the table, there were some cookies left, but he had left the table a long time ago.

The grown-ups laugh loudly. He has to go to the bathroom, but is a big kid now. There were more than three grown-ups, and before he had left, they'd all had a cookie, but the old evil looking girl grown-up person had only taken one bite of hers and left the rest on her plate, so she wouldn't be taking another. He smiles optimistically. He is a big kid now.

There is a big step to climb to get out of the den, but he climbs it easily, like the superhero on his new big kids underwear, Superman. It occurs to him he might have to poop, too. To pee, and but also to poop. He runs and stumbles. The grown-ups stop laughing. He looks up, from the hardwood floor. They are drinking grape juice out of grown-up cups that look like glass flowers, and they are smiling at him. The old evil girl grown-up is eating something. He really wants a cookie. Once, he asked Daddy why there is no rug in the hall and in the dining room. His Daddy said because then they'd have to vacuum everywhere, and that would be too noisy. He really has to go to the bathroom. There's no rug in there either, he thinks. Just a little mat.

He uses his hands to help himself back onto his feet. Walking in socks on the hardwood floor is like walking on ice, but not as fun. The toe and heel parts on each of his socks are a different color from the rest of it. He wants socks that look more like his big kids underwear. Those kinds of

socks exist. Everyone has them, except for him. Everyone in the world. Even girls. Maybe even God. He farts.

When Mommy looks him in the eye, he feels safe and guilty. He farts again. She's smiling. All the grown-ups are. Mommy pats her lap. It's an invitation. When he's in her lap, he feels powerful, like he is in control. He also feels safe and guilty in her lap, but there, power is such the dominant feeling that none other matters. He knows that if he makes it to Mommy's lap, he will get a cookie. He takes a big boy step.

He thinks about taking off his socks. That would make it easier to walk without slipping. Last night, he went to pee in his dream and in the morning there was a puddle in his bed that smelled like pee. Mommy asked if he had another accident. She'd used the word "another". The bathroom is only a little further than Mommy's lap. If he pees his pants he won't get another cookie. He holds it with his hands.

Looking him in the eye, Mommy smiles and says his name in a way that makes him feel more guilty than anything else, guilty and totally unsafe, because he knows what's coming next. She asks him if he's doing the pee-pee dance. He takes his hands off his pee-pee, shakes his head, and tries to stand still. This isn't the pee-pee dance. He wants her to admit to the rest of the grown-ups that she made a mistake, that this isn't really the pee-pee dance. He wants her to say to him, I'm sorry, honey, here, come sit, we saved you a cookie. He's waiting for her to say these things so he can put his hands back on his pee-pee and stop the pee from coming out. He tries really hard not to pee, intent, until further notice, on using only his brain.

He looks down at the floor and spreads his stance, for balance. He knows it won't hurt. It will even feel kind of good at first, like taking a nap when he needs to, or eating one too many cookies. If he runs towards the bathroom, Mommy will think he's running to her, and pick him up. His Superman underpants are brand new. He got them as a present for no reason a long time ago, but Mommy kept them in her bathroom closet until today. There were a lot of presents in her bathroom closet. There were a lot of boxes of toys, and none of them had wrapping paper on them. But it was still too dark in the closet to see what the toys were, and he couldn't bring the toys outside the closet into the light because then Mommy could catch him and give his presents to someone else or keep

them in her closet forever. If he runs to the bathroom, Mommy will pick him up and he will pee on Mommy. She would make him change into his pajamas and wear diapers under his pajamas, like he did when he was just a little kid. If there were more superhero underwear in her closet, he wouldn't be getting those presents for a very long time. The only other bathroom is upstairs.

He has complex emotions but doesn't have the vocabulary to express them to grown-ups. The guilt he feels, the frustration he feels, the embarrassment, the love... these are all real emotions he has but can't express. The best he can do is laugh, cry, and make all the different kind of faces in between, but most of the time, grown-ups just look at him, smile, and make the same face that he's making. Everything is always so funny to them, because they've figured everything out already. He's wished he were a grown-up from the first time he remembers seeing his father come home. All he wants is to be able to communicate with grown-ups, because he has so many questions, and they, if anybody, have the answers.

Ah fuck, he thinks, as the pee warms his pants. It drips down his leg and a little bit gets on the hardwood floor. He cries in frustration; there was nothing he could do. A long time ago, he solved the problem, but could not articulate it, so instead of celebrating, he cried. The solution he lacked the vocabulary to articulate was that if grown-ups just talked to kids like grown-ups, then the kids could become more like grown-ups much faster. In practice, a grown-up would use grown-up words, not kid faces, to respond to their kids' faces. Mommy's smile slowly turns into a sad face. It's the kind of sad face she makes when she wakes him on days he's wet the bed, only redder. For example, a kid would make a frustrated face, and the grown-up would say, are you frustrated? Because a frustrated face is different from a sad face, frustration different from sadness. When he was a little kid, peeing his pants didn't make him frustrated. But now that he is a big kid, it makes him very frustrated. And what makes him even more frustrated now is that he can't be sure any of the grown-ups notice a difference. To them, he either pees his pants or has learned to hold it in. He cries in what he is unable to articulate as indignation. The pee is only a little warm now and getting stickier.

Mommy gets up. All is lost, again. He hates what's coming next, everything about it. Diapers. He wants to tell Mommy that diapers are no

solution and that when he makes a face, it's how he really feels. It's not a joke, like when grown-ups make faces. He feels sad, but an angry kind of sad. The word he's looking for is frustrated. He's crying but doesn't feel sorry and doesn't want to say sorry. It's not his fault that he peed. It's not his fault that they sent him to play in the room furthest from the bathroom, that they sent him away from the table in the first place because they wanted to talk about grown-up things that he wasn't allowed to hear. It wasn't his fault that they made this rule about what he could and couldn't hear, that they made all the rules in the whole world. It wasn't his fault that the reason they'd made so many rules was because they were afraid that if he heard their grown-up words and learned to talk like them, he would become too smart for them.

Mommy is standing low like a frog. He keeps his eyes on the floor because he doesn't want to look at her, even though he knows she is his only hope. She pets his head and tells him that it's okay to cry, which makes him want to stop crying, but makes him cry more instead. He feels like he will be a little kid forever. The end is in sight, but will never be closer. He had it and lost it when he peed, and now it's further than it was before. What face could he make to convince Mommy to trust him with her words, if she can't even trust him to hold it in? She takes him upstairs.

In his room, he plays with the stuffed animals on his bed. He thought his Mommy would make him take a bath again and then put a diaper on him, but instead she just put pajamas on his bed and told him to play in his room until she finished cleaning the kitchen. The whole floor of his room is one big, soft carpet. His pajama shirt is a big t-shirt that the big kid next door used to wear when he played soccer. He has a big bear, two little bears, and a rhinoceros, makes them all talk as a family, and then makes them all fight, just for fun, as a game. Downstairs, the grown-ups continue laughing loudly. Mommy is laughing too. He sneaks out of his room, carrying only the rhinoceros.

He listens to the grown-ups from the top step. They are in the middle of a conversation, but he hears a lot of words he knows already. He sits. There is a lot more laughing than talking. He listens for funny words, but can't hear any. Instead, someone says something about sleeping and everybody laughs. It's mostly very boring. He thinks he might fall asleep. Someone says something about God and everybody laughs. Sometimes,

when adults laugh, he will laugh, too, just because they are laughing, just like how adults make faces at babies making faces. The old evil girl grown-up starts talking. He falls asleep.

In his dream, the old evil girl grown-up is chasing Mommy, Daddy, and him around his house. She corners them in the kitchen. His Mommy asks the old evil girl grown-up what she wants. He tries to tell Mommy that maybe the old evil girl grown-up just wants a cookie. She raises a sword over her head. He screams and tries to tell his Mommy that maybe the old evil girl grown-up didn't finish her cookie before because she knew she wouldn't get another and just wanted to make it last. Mommy doesn't hear him, but the old evil girl grown-up does and gently lowers her sword. Then his Mommy gives her a cookie, and she leaves. Then his Mommy asks him, laughing, if he's doing the pee-pee dance. He runs to the bathroom and stands over the potty. For some reason, the little mat is gone from the bathroom. The voice of God tells him to wake up.

He's still on the top step, and there's still laughter downstairs, but not as much. He doesn't hear the old evil girl grown-up laughing or talking. His Mommy picks him up, and he cries. He pulls at her arms, kicking, wriggling his way out. She puts him down. He runs off for the bathroom and just barely makes it.

Better? Mommy asks him, sitting on his bed, on his new sheets. He wipes his eyes and smiles. "Yes," he says. "Better. I feel better." That's good, she says. "Yes. I feel better." Good, she says again. "I feel better, and also, I feel better."