

ROOM

Emma Donoghue

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 *fi ve* 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 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 bring 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."

"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.

“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, under-wears, 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.