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Girl with Large Foot Jumping Rope

My kid makes a controlled slide downstairs and stops in between me and the TV. He’s a funny kid. People say he looks a lot like Becky—the slim nose, the oval mouth, the curly blond hair while my hair is straight and black like a well-groomed Indian—but every time I look at him I see my eyes and I see my chin and I know that this is my boy. “Hey, Sport,” I say. I call him Sport, I don’t know why, I just do. I like the way it sounds. “What’s up, Sport?” It makes me feel like a father.

He doesn’t say a word, simply stands there, Pledge-of-Allegiance straight. He’s seven years old and short for his age—I guess it’s a real issue at school, you know, with all the teasing, all the stupid names—and he does this crazy thing with his lips when he’s upset, kind of curls them like a disgusted Frenchman. He’s doing that now. “Everything all right, Sport?” I say.

He nods, but it’s unconvincing.

Then I glance down and notice his feet, his socks really, those white athletic socks that kids wear all the time. Tube socks, we used to call them. Well, these socks are soaking wet, and so are the cuffs of his pants. It looks as if he’s been dancing in some fountain in Paris, like in the movies.

“What’s up, Josh?” I say, dropping Sport and putting a little sternness in my voice, the you-can-tell-me sort of voice, a cop’s voice, the good cop. Becky is the bad cop.
It comes out in one burst, and since he's an emotional boy, he starts to cry, and I can't understand a word the poor guy says, but whatever it is, it breaks my heart. I lean down and take him in my arms and rub the back of his neck and whisper, "It's all right, it's all right," in his ear even though I have no idea what he's done. But he's a good kid. His feet leave wet marks on my lap, and he curls in under my armpit. And Jesus, I almost get weepy.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Josh says after he's mostly controlled himself. He wipes at his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his shirt. But when he breathes, his body shudders. "I just, it just happened," he says.

I brush aside some loose hair and touch his cheek. "Tell me what happened, Sport."

"The toilet's all clogged up." And then he has another fit, this time smaller and probably crafted for my benefit.

"Is that all?" I say. "Is that the whole problem?" And I give him a big, carefree smile. I show him the gap in my front teeth, the gap I can shoot a spray of water through. His face relaxes a bit. He's an oversensitive kid—Becky and I know that—and we try to pass on to him a sense of fun, a joie de vivre. If something breaks, it's broken, no big deal. If a friend calls you a name or throws dirt at you, shake it off. For a month we played that stupid song *Don't Worry, Be Happy*, hoping its groove would sink in. But it's not really working, and anything can set him off. I once had to save Josh from a moth because it was fluttering too close to his face; sure, it was a big hairy moth, but he was sobbing like it was the end of the world. It just shatters me. The boy's seven years old, he should be surrounded by cars and stuffed animals and all those stupid toys those perfect kids advertise on TV. He
shouldn’t be depressed yet.

“Well, Sport,” I say, and I talk like we’re going on an adventure, “why don’t we just go up there and figure this thing out. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says.

I lift him up and then set him on the ground. There are wet blotches all over my pants. “Hey Sport,” I say, pointing to my groin. “Looks like your Dad peed in his pants.” He gawks at me oddly, like he doesn’t know it’s a joke, and then I start to laugh so he’ll get to laughing, and finally he does, and it’s a great laugh, it’s my laugh, opened mouth and joyous—a man’s laugh, my father’s laugh—and we laugh some more when Josh’s socks flap around like soggy clown shoes. Yep, my eyes, my chin, and my laugh; the rest is all Becky.

I was supposed to take Josh to school, actually just walk with him to the bus stop, but I decided that it’d be much more important for him to spend the day with his Dad. I had plans. The zoo was on my list, so was a movie and some ice cream, and then we were going to come home and make dinner for Becky—turkey and sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top. It was going to be a good day. But I got tired, I got tired getting out of bed, I was so tired I couldn’t take a shower and I love taking showers in the morning. Becky says it’s a stage. I don’t know what that means but I’m taking vacation days from work because I know if I go there I’ll do something stupid like toss a computer through a window or fling sharpened pencils at my secretary; I’d probably call Joe Lester a fucking fat-ass drunk and he’d pull that gun he keeps in his bottom drawer. In the end, no doubt about it, I’d get fired. So now I sit at home in my suit because it makes
the boredom seem more productive. "Just wallow," Becky told me before she went to work, "like a duck, quack, quack."

Josh and I walk upstairs. I can see little footprints blurred on the rug. They’re smaller than my hand. I point to them and say, "You’d make a lousy criminal."

Josh is quiet, solemn even. As we get closer to the hall bathroom, he begins to move slower, lingering before each step.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," I say, "the defendant’s footprints lead straight to the bathroom." I tousle Josh’s hair and then reach down and pull his hand out of his pocket so I can hold it in mine. "It’s no big deal, Sport," I say.

He looks up at me. We’re in front of the bathroom door. It’s closed. Taped to the door is one of his colorful drawings of a military airdrop. Stick figure paratroopers hang in a flak-filled sky. They’re huge, much bigger than the plane they’ve jumped from, and this lack of perspective seems to have cost them their lives. Death comes with a red crayon.

"I’m not going to be mad," I say to Josh, "and I love you." I grab for the doorknob, and I must admit this feeling of suspense settles in my gut. Turds, I’m thinking, are there going to be turds? I imagine them floating near the lip of the toilet bowl, my son’s turds, and I even have an awful image of a few that have slipped over the side like barrels over Niagara Falls. And this strange thought comes to me: I haven’t seen my son’s shit in a long time. When he was a baby, then a toddler, Becky and I seemed to be always dealing with it, the diapers, the potty training; but now that he’s a middle-aged boy, shit, like so many other things, has snuck into his private world.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”

Josh makes a gesture with his head, a small tilt, I’ve seen Becky do the same thing a thousand times, and I realize that I’m just standing there.

“Right,” I say.

I open the door. We both pause in the doorway as if we’re waiting out an earthquake. There is water on the floor, about a half-inch, and it smells dank, like mop water. I look over to the toilet—the red shag seat cover is closed—and I see no traces of shit on the linoleum. To lighten things up, to take the worry out of Josh’s face, I stride in and do my best version of Gene Kelly. I belt out “I’m singing in the rain, just singing in the rain, what a glorious feeling, I’m happy again,” and dance around the bathroom making delightful splashes with my shoes. But Josh seems even more troubled, his wonderful chin lowered so that a crescent of soft flesh appears. “C’mon,” I say, and I make a face. I go over to the toilet, lift the seat and peer down inside. There are no wads of toilet paper, no floating turds; the water is clear and only slightly higher than average.

“This is nothing, Sport,” I say. Josh steps into the bathroom. His socks are now gray. “Were you going number two?” I ask.

“Uh...no,” he says.

“Well, what happened?”

Josh is not a good liar; he’s like Becky that way. You can see it in their eyes—too many scenarios whirl around their heads. For them, lying is like trying to pick a good peach. “Nothing,” Josh says.

“Then how’d it clog?”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No, don’t worry about it. I’m just curious.”

“I don’t know.”
“Well,” I say. And we both stand there. I feel like we’re flushing his soon-to-be-dead goldfish down the toilet, saying a few words before Raphael and Leonardo swirl away to the great beyond. “Well,” I say again, and I reach over and push down the metal handle.

Josh looks up at me.
“It’s a test,” I explain.

The water rises with incredible speed. I think of those sub movies when a depth charge hits its mark and men rush for the closing hatch. Josh steps back as the water swells over the side—it’s almost lovely—and spreads across the floor. A stray Q-tip floats by. Flotsam or jetsam? I never can remember which is which.

“Oh,” Josh says.
“I guess it’s still clogged.”
He nods.
“Well, Sport,” I say, “why don’t you hustle downstairs and get us a mop.” Josh turns and scoots down the hall. Fresh footprints appear on the rug. I survey the scene then reach over and grab the plunger from the corner. There is something satisfying about a plunger, something constant—that after all these years of evolution, of technology, the plunger has stayed the same, has retained its simple design of slim wooden rod pushed into rubber suction cup. You buy one plunger and it will last you your entire life; it will, in fact, outlast you. Those are things you don’t think about in a hardware store.

I slowly lower the plunger into the top-full toilet, but no matter how slow I go, the displaced water overflows and makes more of a mess on the bathroom floor. I position the plunger over the suck hole—I don’t know what you call it but it looks like a heel stamped
into the porcelain—and I start to pump in a poking motion, the kind of motion you use to bring a lame fire back to life. The water churns. It sounds like someone is running through mud. I give it about six good thrusts, stop for a second, then give it four more thrusts. There is no release of whatever it is that’s caught down there. “Jesus,” I say. And then I do something really stupid, I flush the toilet again. The water rises. I slam shut the toilet seat and sit on the shag cozy.

While I’m waiting for Josh, I notice a bulge underneath the drenched bath mat. I lift up a corner and find this book that my brother Bruce gave me for my birthday. It’s a bizarre book filled with medical photographs from late in the last century. When I got it in the mail Becky shook her head and said, “Typical.” Bruce lives in Virginia, and during the summer weekends he re-enacts Civil War battles. He really looks the part, long beard, bad teeth, and he has the rebel yell down pat. “It’s our history,” he always tells me, and every Saturday he gets killed in the first wave of the first battle of Bull Run. Poor Josh is very scared of him—I don’t blame him—and I tell him that if his grandfather were alive today, he’d be just like Uncle Bruce. So I start to leaf through this book. The pages are wet and some of them tear, but the pictures are still incredible. Civil war veterans, young guys, barely in their twenties, coldly display their amputations, their stumps, and the awful infections that sometimes resulted. Their eyes are so proud, unflinching; I can almost hear them say, Look at this shit. And then there are other horrendous photographs of tumors run amok, of dermatolysis, of elephantiasis, of people savaged by their own bodies. Some of it is hard to take, and sitting
there I can’t believe my Josh looks at this stuff. I come across one picture that’s earmarked. It’s titled *Girl With Large Foot Jumping Rope*, and it’s a picture of precisely that. This bonneted girl, a very normal looking kid, wears a lovely dress which has an intricate collar and a pinned rose. She could be going to church. In her raised hands she holds a jump rope. But something is very wrong with her foot, her left foot; it’s huge, about six times the size of her other foot. A special boot—it looks like a prizewinning eggplant—has been crafted by some miracle cobbler. And she stands there, ready to jump rope even though you know there’s no way she’s going to be able to do it with that foot of hers, and her face, a sweet face with close-cropped bangs, looks at you with slightly arched eyebrows. It’s sad, but it’s beyond sad; it’s so sad it seems to slip into the hopeful.

“You tired, Dad?”

I lift my head and look over and see Josh. He stands there holding the mop tight across his chest like it’s an old rifle.

“Tired?”

“Yeah.”

“No.” I get up and put the book back down on the toilet seat. Water has seeped through my shoes and my socks are now wet. I want to ask Josh about the book, but I don’t. “No,” I tell him, “I’m fine.”

Then Josh breaks down again—it’s like his face is made of clay, the way it can crease and sag and fall apart—and while he sobs he tries to talk. It sounds Arabic. “It’s all right, Josh.” I take him in my arms; we must look pinned together by that mop. I make out a word. “Leaking,” he says.

“What?”

“It’s leaking downstairs.”
I take the mop, lean it against the wall, and carry Josh downstairs. “What was it you flushed down the toilet?” I ask him.

“Nothing,” and then he adds, “I swear, Daddy.”

We walk into the living room and Josh points towards the back wall. There is a dark stain on the carpet. I look up and see a slight seam that the water works along. It drips about every fifteen seconds.

“Oops,” I say. The two of us stand below it. With Josh in my arms, I feel like I’m showing him the moon for the first time. Josh reaches up and touches the ceiling. Water slides down his finger. “We’re making a mess,” I say. Josh presses his palm against the ceiling. “That’s dirty water,” I tell him, and we go into the kitchen and grab a bucket from the closet.

Josh sits on the sink and watches me mop up the bathroom floor. His head rests against the medicine cabinet mirror; it makes him look like a Siamese twin. That’d be a tough way to go through life, especially if you had to share a skull. But today they can separate you; they can fix you, but I wonder if you’d look at your brother or your sister and try to see where you once fit—kneecap to kneecap, spine to spine—if to you your body was nothing but a piece of a puzzle.

I have to wring out the mop with my hands. “Ugh,” I say. When I turn around to soak up some more water, the yellow handle knocks over some shampoo. “I’m a spaz,” I say.

“A spaz?” Josh has his toothbrush in his mouth even though he’s not brushing his teeth.

“Someone who’s uncoordinated, clumsy.”

“Oh.”

I finish mopping the floor, then I clean the
bathtub by running the shower for a bit. "Now the toilet," I say. I turn to Josh. "What's in here?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

I let him get away with lying. I guess it doesn't matter. He seems to be calm at this moment and I don't want to spoil it; I don't want to spoil anything. I pick him up—he splits from the mirror—and I tell him to go downstairs and watch TV. "The afternoon is the good time, Sport," I tell him, "when all the best shows are on."

I pick up the book from the toilet and rest it in the curve of the sink, then I grab the plunger and lift up the seat cover. I'm determined to clear whatever's down there.

I hear that sound again, the sound of the person running through mud. He's running faster now because something is chasing him, and it scares the shit out of him. The person glances back. He can't see a thing, but he knows it's close behind. The man loses one shoe, then another, then he trips and falls but quickly gets back up. The mud starts to dry and cake on his skin. It's slowing him down.

I begin to sweat all over—I'm in pitiful shape—and my shirt sticks to my back. So much water everywhere. But my adrenaline is really moving. I look over toward the doorway and see Becky. She's holding Josh's hand. They both watch me, and I smile. I must look crazy, the way I'm trying to churn this water into something, anything, but I don't stop.