

Two More Sleeps

(a toddler's tale in three voices)

The little boy's eyes were wide. His mouth half-open, ready for a question when she had finished speaking, he sat silent, attentive, an expression of solemnity fixed firm on his face.

'It's only two more sleeps till Holidays,' she was saying. 'One-two.' And she held up two fingers to demonstrate.

Yes. He understood that. When she'd said ten or even seven sleeps till Holidays, regardless of the number of fingers involved, it hadn't meant much. It all seemed too complicated for a brain already full to bursting with so much new information, daily, even hourly at times. But now it seemed real. Only two more times would he need to go to bed and wake up again before this thing called Holidays happened.

He held up a chubby hand. One-two, he mimicked with his fingers.

'That's right,' she said, as she sat on the end of his bed absently stroking a smooth-skinned leg with hairs so fine, they were barely existent. One-two.

'You're two,' she reminded.

'Three-four-five,' he countered.

She laughed. This had been a game ever since the birthday party when he had blown out two small lit candles on a cake Daddy had made. Such a big cake – bigger than his head! Mummy needed to help him hold the knife. He remembered everyone clapping; his rosy cheeks had flushed full with delight.

Now she laughed as she always did in their game of numbers. 'You can be three-four-five next year,' she said as she always said.

He showed her again how he had blown out the birthday candles. 'Phewwww,' his breath went, long and damp. She patted his bottom in reply.

'Come on, now. Time for sleep,' and she yawned as if on cue.

'Body tired,' his little voice sang. 'Mummy body tired.'

She nodded. 'Yes. When body yawns, it's telling you body is tired and it's time for sleep.'

The little boy yawned in response. 'Doo body tired,' he said, because the name Mummy and Daddy called him always seemed too big and busy for his little mouth.

'Doo tired too,' he repeated, and seemed surprised that his body knew when to sleep. A marvel, this life, so much to learn. And now Holidays too! What would that joy involve?

'Two sleeps to go,' she said again, 'but we need to sleep now, otherwise Holidays will never come.'

The light was turned low, and with that, Sandman came to sprinkle fairy dust in his eyes, the lids heavy now and closing while small fingers held on tight to Maya-Teddy's scarf.

Next morning the little boy awoke to the news that it was now only one sleep till Holidays. Mummy told him the same story as she had told ever since the story began at ten sleeps with the fingers on both hands required. The story about the long car drive, and Car needing to rest and have drinks of petrol along the way, plus the Very Important information that Maya-Teddy and Grandma-Teddy and Bananas-in-Pyjamas pillow would all come on Holidays too, sitting beside him in the car's back seat.

He knew the story so well he could continue it by himself. The part about a special Dominic bedroom at Maya's house, and the swimming pool with plastic ducks bobbing around on its pale blue surface. They would pack toys to play with in Maya's garden, like Dump Truck, and Spade and Bucket for digging in the vege patch, and also Chalk for drawing roads on the paving bricks for his cars to drive along. But Maya wouldn't be there, and he shook his head at this serious part of the story. It was only Maya's house during Holidays, and he nodded when Mummy said that Maya didn't have Holidays right now, but that Dominic could have Holidays instead ... just as long as Maya-Teddy went along for company.

The day passed quickly with the packing and the chatting. That night, Moon peeked in through the shutters to bathe his room in white shafts of liquid light. Buggy Lamp sat quiet in its socket in the corner by his bed and he held tight to Maya-Teddy's scarf again as he felt Sandman come to dust his eyes with the magic of Sleep ...

'Dominic,' Mummy whispered into a shroud of blonde curls. 'Today is Holidays.'

The little boy sat bolt upright, still groggy with dreams, but had heard the magic words – Today and Holidays – clearly enough.

'Doo ready!' he squeaked, all a-fluster. There was a sudden frenzy of activity – kicking Blankie back off stubby toes and reaching round to grab Bananas pillow and hold it close to a fast-beating heart.

'There's still a few things left to do before we can go' Mummy was saying as his eyes widened fit to burst. 'First is Brekky and then Daddy needs to put all our things into Car. Where's Backpack?' she asked and he crawled out of bed and retrieved same from the rug on the floor.

'What goes in this pocket?'

'Books,' he said.

'And your ...?'

'Lunch!' he yelled.

'Good boy, and what about in here?' pointing to the small front zipper.

'Doo Money and Ticket.' (He knew they were only for Play, not like the Money Mummy and Daddy gave to shopkeepers, but it was still Very Important to have all his things with him on Holidays.)

The pitch of his voice grew exponentially with each new excitement. He'd practised the answers with her each day a finger had dropped from view till now, where there were no more fingers left standing in a row, no more sleeps to be slept. Only Holidays.

Presently all was done and ready. Teletubbies had been watched and when Baby Sun sank beneath the horizon, Mummy had come and put on Shoes and Socks. 'Come on, we can go to Car now,' and he nearly burst down the stairs while she held firm to a pudgy sweat-slippery hand.

'Maya-Teddy!' he squealed, spinning round to head back up the stairs to his room.

'She's already in the car. She's looking forward to going home to Maya's house for Holidays.' And they walked on and past the sleeping cats. 'Oi,' Mummy stopped. 'What about a big kiss for Chocie and Girlie before you leave. Cats don't get to have Holidays.'

'Nup,' he agreed and made a wet smacking sound into both furry behinds as they purred on, hopeful this sign of affection would not be accompanied by the more usual morning ritual of tail-pulling.

They continued on and out the front door to where Car stood in front of the garage. Packed to the gills. ‘Stroller,’ he pointed to the boot. ‘Backpack!’ he announced louder when he spotted that as well.

‘Up. In,’ he insisted, starting to pull at the door handle. ‘Doo door. Up in!’ he repeated.

‘Hold your horses,’ said Mummy. ‘We have to find Daddy first. He has Key.’

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ he called, toddling back into the house and into the kitchen. There he saw his father standing chatting to Grandma about Katze and Futter and Pflanze and drinks of Wasser, none of which sounded Very Important.

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ he called into his father’s behind and grabbed him tight around the legs.

‘Was lauft kleiner?’ said his father, looking down.

‘Daddy Key Daddy Key.’

‘He wants to get in the car,’ Mummy interpreted, having followed the action.

‘Ah – der Schlüssel. Genau,’ and passed same to Mummy.

Mission accomplished, the little boy rushed again out to the car and once again started in on the door handle. ‘Doo door up Doo door up.’

‘OK, OK,’ she said. ‘Here we go now.’

Finally up and into his seat. ‘Seatbelt on!’ he squeaked. Click-clacked into place, he grew calm and settled. Till. ‘Car go!’ he said. ‘Daddy car go. Maya house.’

‘Yep,’ Mummy nodded. ‘Soon we’ll be on our way.’

And now that he was in Car, he started to believe too. There on the seat beside him was Backpack, Maya-Teddy and his other friends were also in place. Stroller was behind him in the boot. All was ready. He looked back to the house where Daddy and Grandma were coming out the door.

‘Key in, Car go!’ he told his father.

‘Ja, sicher – alles bereit, wir fahren, gäll?’

Daddy got in the car, and then Mummy – ‘In there,’ he pointed insistently to her place. Last, Grandma was giving him a big kiss and closing his door.

‘Wave bye-bye Grandma,’ Mummy said and he did so as the engine started. ‘Call out really loud so she can hear you.’

‘Bye bye!’ he shouted at the window glass as Car drove up the street. Suddenly House was gone and Kindy was gone and they went through Tunnel and around Roundabout (‘Round you go,’ Mummy sing-song-said, sounding just like Noni on the Play School video) and then they were at the first set of lights on the way to town.

‘Green car go,’ he told his father.

‘Und was macht das rote Licht?’

‘Red car stop!’ the little boy answered. Very Important information. This he knew and this he shared.

Holidays had started. He looked out the window and took in every image that passed his wide blue eyes. First it was Long Road beside the train line down to the lake and past Tram Depot in town before crossing Big Bridge to take them to the other side of Lake. And Fire Station went past, and Big Cranes went past and it was all gone as they joined a motorway and Daddy started driving Very Fast.

‘Now watch for the signs,’ Mummy said. ‘Blue signs show the way to Maya’s house.’

Blue, Blue, he looked for Blue.

‘Blue, like Thomas train,’ Mummy reminded.

Suddenly. There. Blue! ‘This way Maya’s house!’ The words exploded from his mouth like spurts from a cap-gun.

‘Good boy,’ Mummy told him.

His chest swelled with Big Boy feeling. He smiled wide. Simple happiness showed in his crinkled-up nose and straight new-as-fresh-porcelain white teeth.

He watched his father drive. Presently he commented: ‘Daddy fahrt’.

‘That’s right,’ Mummy agreed.

‘Ja, natürlich!’ Daddy joined in.

‘Daddy fahrt, fast, schnell, nach Maya’s Haus.’

‘But not too fast,’ Mummy said. ‘Otherwise, Police will come and tell us to be careful.’

Dominic nodded. His Police Car had blue flashing lights. The doors opened too. It was Very Special. Another Blue sign. ‘Maybe house this way’, he pointed.

And so it went on. Sometimes singing with Mummy the *Swish-Swish-Swish* song, hand movements and all. Sometimes having Apple to eat and watching Buses on the other side of the road. Here’s another one, Mummy would say. What colour is this one? And he’d look closely and think I know I know, and the word Green would suddenly jump from his mouth.

‘That’s right! Oh you’re clever,’ Mummy said.

I know things, the little boy thought. I’m a Big Boy. I’m Two. And he watched the road carefully, looking for Maya house (Mummy had said it was made of rocks and had blue shutters on the outside of the windows). He looked too for the signs and arrows, heralding forthcoming roundabouts with ‘round you go’ the rhythmic mantra. Until weariness set in – the weariness of excitement and keen observation and a head choc-ful of so much information. So much to do to be a big helper! Tired eyes began to close and the gentle hum of the car blanketed him in sleep. Maya house come, he hoped. Maya house come soon ...

Soon seemed to come soon enough. Because he was stirring to the sound of Mummy saying to Daddy: ‘Do you need the map?’

‘No, I’ll just follow my nose,’ was his father’s reply. ‘It’s all so familiar.’ His father sounded happy, relaxed. ‘The olive trees, the vineyards, the avenues of plantains. Look there, that B&B we stayed in once!’

He heard his mother's laugh. 'When they'd only opened a week before and had nothing more than a chalked-up sign out front.' He didn't know what they were saying but it was Happy talk, Holidays talk.

Dominic wriggled and sighed to announce his wakeful presence. Mummy immediately turned around in her seat. 'Did you have a nice sleep?' She smiled and he smiled in return, nodding his head lazily in that half-space between two worlds. 'Are you hungry?' she continued. 'Would you like Biccies?'

No. He shook his head and settled back to look out the window with a comfortable burp. Everything was so different. Where were Mountains? Where was Snow? Lake? Windy Roads? This land wide, and not so green-washed. Its light brighter, its roads straighter, its colours different. What were those little yellow flowers on the bushes hanging down everywhere over fences and rocks? So many little yellow flowers! Like a sky full of stars fallen over each wall in a rush and a tumble of late afternoon light.

'We've come a long way,' Mummy was saying. 'The world changes when you drive a long way. We left our mountains at home, our snow. And our wooden houses. Look Dominic,' she pointed. 'See how all the houses here are made of rocks?'

He suddenly saw blue shutters on windows. 'Maya house, Maya house!' he shouted excitedly.

She laughed. 'Not yet, but you can tell we're getting closer,' she said. 'Now there's no more blue signs, just little white signs that Daddy needs to look for with the name of the village on it. And then, when we find the right village, you have to look out for Little Church,' she said, giving him another Big Boy job to do. 'Because Maya house will be right there, near Little Church.'

He watched keenly, refusing refreshment, so intent was he on this task. Heard his mother's familiar conversational opening: 'What's this I can see?' And knew it must be close.

Yes. There! 'Little Church!' he squealed. 'Little Church!' His whole body strained out of the seat belt to follow a pointing finger to the window glass, eyes fixed on a tower and its single silent bell. 'Little Church ring!' he insisted. 'Little Church. Little Church ring!'

'When big hand gets to the twelve, we'll hear Little Church ring,' she confirmed.

This gave him permission to settle. Soon, very soon now, Maya's house and Holidays.

Now. Here. Now. Here it was. Car stopped with a groan of brakes in front of a big green iron gate. A different Key needed – 'This is Holiday Key,' Mummy said. They crossed the threshold to find a small courtyard with high walls and crunchy stones underfoot before climbing high steps up past one of those huge trailing yellow bushes of spilt stars to a blue front door flanked by windows framed in shutters the same pretty colour.

Now in. To Holidays. Mummy sounding so happy. Daddy sounding so tired. And Dominic taking Maya-Teddy up to find his special bedroom. With its own bathroom, Mummy showed him!

It was time to choose which bed was his out of the two in the bright yellow-painted room. The one in the corner, he decided, which overlooked the pool in the garden and its bobbing toy ducks through a special cross-slit window in its fat stone wall (Mummy said it was because this part of the house had once been a barn, but that didn't make much sense – where were Cows then?). He carefully arranged Maya-Teddy and Grandma-Teddy and Bananas pillow in their special places before going to help Daddy bring Backpack in from the car.

That night, tucked up in Dominic's special bed at Maya's holiday house, in a place called Provence that had no mountains and no snow and no wooden houses, and where they spoke differently to

Mummy and even to Daddy, Mummy said: ‘Dominic, do you know what? There’s no more sleeps till Holidays, because Holidays are here.’

They smiled into each other’s eyes and with lips pressed to his forehead, she whispered a message of love into the space near his ear. Then he held her hand, content and quiet, and drifted off into a no-more-sleeps-till-holidays kind of sleep.

