

Mommy

Jimmy went out without asking again. Jimmy always goes out without asking. Mommy always yells when he comes back but Jimmy doesn't care. He uses the words Mommy says not to say and slams his door so loud I can hear it from under my bed where I play hide and seek with Teddy and sometimes with Lee, but Lee doesn't come over very much anymore.

Lee says his mommy said that he wasn't aa-loud to come over anymore because Lee's daddy told his mommy that *my* daddy is bad and *my* mommy is sick, (but I know she's not; why does he think that?), and then they talked for a long time, super-quiet so Lee couldn't hear even though he tried real hard. Sometimes it's hard to unnerstan' when grownups talk too quiet and use grownup words. After that, Lee's mommy told Lee I can come over to their house if we want to play! I like Lee's house! I am going there when Jimmy comes home.

The big numbers on the clock say two-five-five. Mommy said we would go when they say three-zero-zero, so Jimmy needs to come back soon. I watch the clock, waiting for the numbers to change. Teddy smells yucky 'cause we dropped him in a puddle yesterday so I put him in the hamper with my clothes. I open my drawer and look for new pants. Last time I went to Lee's, my pants were dirty and Mommy was mad. She says if I wear dirty clothes then Lee's mommy will think we're dirty people. So this time, Mommy won't be mad as long as Jimmy comes back.

The numbers say two-five-nine by the time I put on a new pair of corduroys and button them up right. Teddy is staring at me from the top of the stack, and his little black eyes look like they're filled with tears.

“Sorry,” I tell him. “If I was still little I would take you. But you smell bad. And now I’m a big boy! I got dressed all by myself!”

I show Teddy my new pants so he’ll be happy again.

The clock says three-zero-zero! It’s time to go!

I tiptoe out into the hallway and walk to Mommy’s closed door. No sound comes from the other side, so I push it open. It smells funny. Mommy is sleeping still, just like she was when I looked this morning.

“Mommy?” I ask, “Mommy? Are you awake?”

She doesn’t answer and I close the door quickly. Jimmy says if Mommy doesn’t answer don’t bother her. When Daddy isn’t home and Mommy’s sleeping, I’m supposed to tell Jimmy to help me, but Jimmy isn’t here because he left without asking. I walk to the kitchen.

The milk is out on the counter from where Jimmy put it this morning when he dumped some on my cereal. Since Mommy isn’t up yet, I reach up and lug the bottle to the fridge to put it away. The fridge is almost empty so I put it next to the ketchup bottle and move the mustard so he can sit next to them too. It must be sad to be a ketchup bottle in the fridge when people forget to put the milk away.

I close the door. The clock says three-zero-five; I’m going to be late! Lee will be mad at me tomorrow and I won’t have anyone to sit next to in circle time!

Suddenly I’m angry. My mommy should be like Lee’s mommy. She should make cookies and tell stories and take me to my friend’s houses. She should smell like flowers, not funny like she does, funny the same way Jimmy does when he sneaks in through my window in

the middle of the night sometimes. She should wake up in the morning and make eggs and toast and smile.

But that doesn't matter. I don't need her to take me. I'm a big boy and I can take myself. I pull my coat down from where Jimmy hung it up and struggle with the zipper. My mittens hang from the sleeves, attached by a piece of yarn so they don't fall off. I take Jimmy's black hat and put it on so I look older and it falls over my eyes, but I push it back. My Spiderman light-up sneakers are sitting on the mat and I Velcro them tightly so they don't fall off in the slush. I am ready!

The big front door creaks open and harsh winter sunlight makes it hard to see for a minute until my eyes are add-just-ed. Lee lives on Maple Street, right next to the supermarket where Mommy buys candy and ice cream when she's happy. I start off down the street with big grown-up steps.

When I get to the corner, I stop and look both ways the way Lee's mommy taught us to last summer when we walked to the pool together. Next year, Lee is getting swimming lessons so he can swim in the big pool! I asked Mommy for swimming lessons too, and she said maybe, but I don't know if she still remembers. I cross the street and splash in the puddles on the sidewalk as I walk down the next street, stopping to make a big wave in the one on the corner.

I turn left onto a street where the sign says B-I-R-C-H and I see the hugest puddle ever! It must be three feet deep! I leap forward to make the biggest splash ever made in the history of kindergarten, but suddenly, big grownup legs appear right in front of me. I try to jump around them but it's too late; I crash right into them and fall backwards into the slush behind me.

"Easy there, young man!" the man says, reaching down to help me up.

I try not to cry, but the slush is cold, seeping through my corduroys and down the backs of my legs. Mommy will be *really* mad this time when I come home. I look up at the man. His face is very far away but he doesn't look mad; I breathe a sigh of relief without realizing it. His pants and jacket are matching with a gold police badge on one pocket and...uh-oh...

"Where are you going?" he asks me, smiling the way Jimmy does when he pretends to be nice to get what he wants from Mommy.

"Home..." I gulp, staring at the Spiderman pictures on my toes, now covered with slush and dirt. My feet are cold now, too.

"Are you alone out here?"

"Yes...sir," I say. Daddy always laughs when I call him 'sir' but this man doesn't, not even a little bit.

"How old are you?" he sounds more serious now. I puff out my chest.

"Five and a quarter, sir. I'm a big boy."

He smiles this time, and puts a hand on my shoulder. This is confusing...

"All right then, son. How about you tell me your name and I'll give you a ride home?"

I freeze, remembering something Jimmy told me a long time ago. He said never bring police home, ever, but especially not when Mommy sleeps all day and Daddy hasn't been home for a long time. He says if Daddy's home it was okay, or if he's home, but not when only Mommy's there... Daddy goes away a lot; he drives a big truck. When Daddy's home, Mommy

never sleeps all day but Daddy hasn't come back in a long time. Sometimes I wonder if he's ever coming back.

But now Jimmy went out without asking and Mommy's sleeping. I can't bring a policeman home now.

"Son? You do have a name, don't you?" he laughs at his own joke.

"Yes, sir....My name is...Lee. Lee Atwater," I say, and look up right into his squinty eyes, "I live on Maple Street by the grocery store."

"That's quite a way from here!" he says, leading me further down the street where his black-and-white car. He opens the side door, behind the bars that are between the front and the back and I slide inside. The bars are solid and black; I wonder if this is how Jimmy felt when they brought him home last month. I smile a little inside. Now I have a story to tell *him*! The policeman drives down the street and turns right.

I lean back into the seat and smile. This is how it should be. I shouldn't have to walk by myself.

Soon, we pull up by Lee's house and suddenly I gulp. In my mind, the ride took up a lot more time, but now, he will find out that this is not my house. Or my mother. What if Lee's mommy tells him the truth?! I hesitate when he opens the door.

"Well, come on! I haven't got all day!" he says, reaching in to unbuckle my seat belt. I jump out onto the street and close the door behind me.

He takes my hand and we walk up the front walk to Lee's big red door where he rings the bell twice. I gulp again and try to look normal, while hiding behind his big legs which really

caused this whole problem in the first place. On the other side of the door, Lee's dog barks and I hear his sister calling to their mommy. The dog quiets and then Lee's mommy opens the door.

"Well, hello, Officer!" she says, wiping her hands on her apron, "What can I do for you?"

"You must have sent him out for something then! I was afraid you'd be out of your mind with worry, Mrs. Atwater."

"What? Who? What on earth---"

"Your son, Lee, ma'am, I found him over on Birch Street, puddle-jumping. Cute as heck, ma'am but it's probably not the safest place for a child to be alone."

"What are you talking about? My son is---"

She breaks off suddenly, catching sight of me shivering behind Officer's legs. A strange expression flits across her round face, so different from Mommy's sharp, bony one, before she hides it behind the mask she always wears when Mommy comes to pick me up. She thinks I don't see it. But I do.

"...right there! Why, Lee," she says to me, "And all this time I thought you were asleep in the living room. Officer, I'm so terribly sorry to bother you. I've been baking for the holidays and all and I thought my daughter was paying attention to where he was. Thank you so much! Jessie!" she calls over her shoulder, lightly scolding, reaching to pull me into the house behind her. "I really can't thank you enough, Officer."

"Not a problem, ma'am, it's all part of the job," he smiles and tips his hat. She shuts the door between us and him and looks down at me with a face I cannot read. I stare back, and try not to shiver. When I move my feet, puddle-water squelches between my toes.

“Oh for the love of God,” Mrs. Atwater mutters under her breath, tugging off my wet coat and pulling Jimmy’s big hat off my head. “Now you just wait right here while I get you something else to wear. You and Lee are the same size, aren’t you, dear?”

She disappears through the kitchen door and returns a few seconds later with Lee’s favorite shirt and a pair of pants.

“Here,” she says, pulling my shirt off and handing me the clothes, “You just put these on and I’ll call Lee down so you can play for while. The dirty ones will be washed and dried before it’s time for you to go home and your mother will never know the difference.”